

Let's
Keep It
Simple

By
Bob Hickle

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PREFACE

What, then, is counseling?

I had spent the better part of two hours talking to a class of counselor trainees. I had spent a lot of time explaining what counseling is not. It is not giving advice. It is not "fixing people." It is not being wiser than your client. It is not being a puppeteer. It is not enabling.

Finally, when the time was about gone, one trainee brought me up short. "You have spent a lot of time telling us what counseling is not," he said. "Now tell us what counseling is."

The answer was there, ready, even though I had not thought it through. "Counseling," I said, "Is a process of mutual change." I'll stick with that.

Other books by Bob Hickle

Responsible Drinking and Other Myths

Through A Glass Darkly

The Mosaic of Sobriety

A Pearl of Great Price

About the Title

There is a tradition in Alcoholics Anonymous that among the last words that Dr. Bob spoke to the other ender of A.A., Bill W, were these: "Let's don't louse this thing up. Let's keep it simple." Whether these words were actually spoken or not, I don't know. I do know that they sum up a great deal of the wisdom of A.A. Let's keep it simple!

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A Non-Alcoholic at an A.A. Meeting

I was once at an open A.A. meeting at a treatment center where a long-term friend of mine was seeking sobriety. I was sitting with the patients rather than the visitors, and was comfortably slouched down in my seat. The person chairing the meeting took me to task for sleeping, and when I told her I had slept through more A.A. meetings than she had attended, challenged me to get up and speak. I did so, and while I don't remember what I said, the occasion made an impression on my mind.

It was obvious that the chairperson mistook me for an alcoholic, and very likely a patient. I have always been very careful not to sail under false colors at A.A. meetings, and to make sure everyone knows that I am not an alcoholic. The longer I thought about it, the greater my responsibility seemed to be to make my status as a noncombatant clear. Alcoholics and their families are special people. They have paid a tremendous price before they accept the label "alcoholic," and to slide into their fellowship without having paid the dues strikes me as a rather cheap way to travel. An A.A. club once made me an "honorary" alcoholic, but it was all in fun and we all knew it didn't really mean anything.

I have attended many A.A. meetings, a privilege for which I am most grateful. When the "group conscience" has allowed me to do so, I have spoken to A.A. groups. I must keep in mind at all times, however, that it is only through the gracious kindness of A.A. that I am there at all. Any phoniness is soon detected, and if I don't play by the rules, I will soon lose what I consider one of my most precious gifts—the acceptance of recovering alcoholics.

Doing the Right Thing for the Wrong Reason

I have found myself from time to time in a somewhat abstruse discussion with my son over whether it is better to ~ the right thing for the wrong reason than it is not to do at thing at all.

I like to use the example of sending blankets to earthquake victims in some remote areas of the world. If I send blankets because it helps my income tax, and you send blankets because you genuinely care about the suffering people, the results are the same—for the recipients of the blankets. Both my blankets and your blankets keep the recipients equally warm. The difference seems to be that when I fill out my income tax form, I have my reward. Your rewards are undoubtedly much greater.

How does this relate to the illness of alcoholism? It is very simple. We often hear that people shouldn't be going A.A. unless they are doing it for the right reason. They shouldn't go unless they are genuinely seeking sobriety. I submit that very few people begin to go to A.A. because they want sobriety. The reasons range from laying the ultimate con on one's loved ones, to simply going rather in going to jail. The longer we study the matter, the more convinced we are that the recovery rate of alcoholics is about the same no matter what they feel the reason is for going to A.A.

I guess it all boils down to this: I would much rather have alcoholic in treatment or in A.A. for any reason at all, than to have him out there in a gin mill, seeking truth in a bottle. Sobriety is more likely to be found in A.A. than in a gin mill.

Why is it so Important?

There is a large segment of the group which deals with alcohol problems which seems to be firmly convinced that alcohol is a necessary part of our existence. They deplore the "abuse" of alcohol, and wish that everyone could drink "responsibly," i.e., like they do. They see nothing wrong with showing up for a counseling session with an alcoholic with martinis on their breath, and they think it appropriate that a meeting of alcohol counselors open with an "attitude adjustment hour," which is the latest euphemism for getting smashed.

They think it would be wonderful if everyone could take just enough of this drug to lose some of their inhibitions, reservations and critical self-judgement, and not go on to "abuse." One doesn't have to be a heavy thinker to occasionally ask oneself, "Why is it so important to drink?"

Is the world so ugly and are our associates so threatening that we must dull our perceptions just a little bit before we can enjoy ourselves? Are our joys so few and our sorrows so great that we must use a drug to deal with them? Are our resources so limited and our feelings so frightening that we must ingest a substance to help us? One would almost believe it is so.

One has only to go to an A.A. party, or to mingle with A.A. members after an A.A. meeting to find out it is not so. These recovering alcoholics are not afraid to love, to share and to care, publicly and with no embarrassment, and without a drug. We have been created complete human beings, and we don't have to add a drug to improve on our creator's work.

Other Definitions

The illness of alcoholism has been defined and refined, and I suppose little will be gained by inventing a definition. I'm going to give it a whirl anyway.

This definition owes a great deal to the A.A. definition of alcoholism: "A physical allergy plus a psychological dependence." The people who wrote it are the experts, but for non-experts, the definition poses a problem. We see an allergy as something that causes sneezing, watery eyes, hives, rashes, gastro-intestinal upsets and all sorts of similar symptoms. I guess alcohol causes some of these symptoms, but it causes the same symptoms in the alcoholics and the non-alcoholic alike.

The symptom I see which is unique to the alcoholic is alcohol does more for the alcoholic, particularly in the early stages, than it does for the non-alcoholic. This is mainly a physical reaction, but it does not fit the lay person's definition of an allergy. I accept the second part of A.A. definition with no hesitation, because alcoholism mainly involves a psychological dependence.

The definition I would like to propose is this: "Alcoholism is a physical over-reaction combined with a psychological dependence."

Then we treat the alcoholic, we treat the psychological dependence. So far, we have found no way to treat the physical over-reaction. If we can remove the dependence, we find that the alcoholic does not need to drink, and the physical reaction is no longer important.

This may sound like over-simplification, but it is hard to over-simplify the illness of alcoholism. One of the founders of A.A. is quoted as saying, "Let's keep this thing simple." The closer we come to that idea, the greater our chances for success.

Making Decisions

I am always impressed with how little we know about how we arrive at decisions, and in particular, how the alcoholic makes the decision to drink or not to drink. The alcoholic makes the decision to stop drinking while he or she is still drinking, and the decision to return to drinking while completely sober. It is obvious that alcohol itself has very little to do with the decision to drink or not to drink.

This was called to my attention by an alcoholic who called me to say he was back on the sauce, and would I come to see him? He had seemed to have a good sobriety going, but I had felt that he really hadn't grasped the spiritual nature of recovery. We talked about such matters.

"I understand what you are saying," he said. "I have had a spiritual awakening of some kind or another. It has kept me sober quite a while, but now I'm drinking. I'm going to level with you. Do you remember when I was in treatment, I told you there were a number of people there for the second or more time? I asked you if you thought there was a chance that a person could get sober the second time?"

"I remember. What did I answer?"

"You answered that there always was a chance, but it wasn't likely as good a chance the second time around. When I asked that question, I was already thinking of drinking again, although on another level I was serious about sobriety."

"In our conversations, you spoke about praying so you wouldn't drink that day. Didn't it work?"

"Sure it worked! When I prayed, I didn't drink. But then, somehow, I decided to drink. So then, I didn't pray, and I could drink."

What would you tell a person like that?

Incomplete Grieving

I was going to entitle this chapter "Incomplete -recovery," but didn't do so because it implies that recovery is sometimes complete. We know that recovery is never complete, hence the title "Incomplete Grieving."

To start with, let's look at the whole matter of grieving. Grieving is necessary if a person is going to recover from a loss. Over and over in counseling, we see the results of complete grieving. The reasons for grieving are many, it the process must be completed if a person is going to cover. We see a lot of miserable people with unhealed psychic wounds, who have not completed the grieving process.

Now, let's turn to the alcoholic. Giving up booze or other drugs involves a real loss. It is no less than the loss of a complete system of dealing with life. A way of rejoicing, and a way of sorrowing. A way of ending pain, a way of evoking pain. A way of dealing with human relationships, and a way of not dealing with such relationships. Suddenly, it's all gone, and as with any other loss, grieving becomes necessary for healing.

Often the recovering alcoholic does not experience instant joy. The void left by the sauce is still there. The alcoholic hurts, and we have taken away his or her best medicine for dealing with pain. We must be patient.

Many of the drunk-a-logs, much of the extravagant behavior, many of the destructive relationships are ways of dealing with the pain. We must let the alcoholic grieve, in fact, we must encourage the grieving. We must be there with love and patience and caring, so the alcoholic feels safe while the feelings of loss are replaced by the feelings of gain. An alcoholic who is stalled in the middle of the grieving process is hurting indeed, and may very well turn to drinking to ease the pain, if for no other reason.

Saying it Right

At one time a bunch of us were sitting around with the inevitable cup of coffee, and the conversation turned to a certain individual, and someone wondered how long he had been sober.

"I remember very well," I said, "because I was the one who got him sober."

A tough old recovering alcoholic wasn't going to let me get away with that.

"You didn't get him sober, and you know it!"

"Well, let me reword my statement," I said. "I helped him get sober."

"You still haven't got it right."

"I'll try again. I was around when he got sober." "Now you're getting the hang of it," was his final word on the matter.

The lesson is so obvious that it doesn't need to be drawn. No one knows how a person gets sober. No one knows why some get sober and some don't. We can be sure of only one thing—more will get sober if we are "around" than will if we aren't.

Old Timers

We are starting to see some 40th anniversaries among the old timers in A.A., and a few are well into their fifth decade of sobriety. "The person here tonight who has been the longest sober is the person who got up earliest this morning," is one of the statements you hear from the old timers when they are recognized. That's good. That reflects the humility that keeps and has kept the old timers sober all these years.

I would, however, like to pay tribute to those old timers. Tribute not because of their special virtue for staying sober, for the fact that they kept the program going. A lot of them sat in meetings where only two or three were gathered ether (where have we heard that before?) and have seen se meetings grow and divide into groups until one can to an A.A. meeting any day of the week, and almost any it of the day or night.

They were the ones who swept the shabby halls, turned the lights, made the coffee, and most of all, attended every meeting. They kept the torch burning, though at yes it must have seemed that the torch was pretty dim.

They were the ones who remembered the admonition "principles before personalities" and kept A.A. from becoming a cult. They were the ones who carried the message of spirituality, and kept A.A. from becoming a poker-playing club where people hung out between drunks.

Anyone who has seen a loved one recover through A.A. owes these old timers a debt of gratitude—not because they've been around so long, but because they bridged the gap between the founders of A.A. and the present recovering generation. Let's give them the credit they are due.

Alcohol is not the Problem. .

Insight seems to come slowly to me, but I once heard some wisdom at an A.A. meeting that opened some new vistas. I can't remember just how it was worded, but the alcoholic who was speaking led me down an interesting road. He said that for many years he had seen alcohol as the solution of his problems, and not the cause.

When one examines this idea closely, a lot of things become clear. We are all familiar with the litany of denial: "If you were married to my wife, you'd drink too." "My job is so difficult that I must unwind at night, and a couple of drinks do that for me." "My childhood was so rotten that I have very low self-esteem, and when I drink, I feel better about myself."

Most anyone in the field can add to the list endlessly. These statements all have one thing in common—they see the alcohol as the solution, and not as the cause. When we tell the alcoholics that we are going to take away their habitual solution for their problems, they become very frightened. Not only have they been using alcohol to deal with the usual problems of life, but they have been using it to deal with problems brought on by drinking. They see themselves as being left with lots of problems, and with no solutions.

We often see a person who is thoroughly disappointed after a period of sobriety. The problems of drinking are gone, but the problems of living remain. We have taken their time-tested solution from them, and now they have to find new ways to deal with the problems of living. Their change is painful, as is all change, and they need a lot of support. They need to learn other, more permanent and more adult ways of dealing with problems. It is no wonder that recovery takes so long!

Sponsorship

One of the most important facets of recovery seems to be neglected recently, to the damage of the program and to the individual alcoholic. One of the first things I observed when I first became aware of A.A. many years ago was sponsorship." Most every alcoholic seemed to have a sponsor, and the sponsor, too, had a sponsor. Some alcoholics had several sponsors.

I believe the sponsor relationship first came about cause of the discovery by the founders of A.A. that only way they could keep sobriety was by giving it away. We often see "12th Step" work as "giving away" program. It is an important part

of the program, but there is more to this concept than just showing up when someone calls for help.

Sponsorship is a program of mutual change. It is not one-way street. It is not only a means whereby a new member draws sustenance from the older member, it is also the way the older member insures his or her own sobriety. I have had the privilege of being considered by several alcoholics as their sponsor, although technically, I can't be a sponsor. I can speak from my in experience that it was a learning, strengthening experience for me, regardless of what it did for the alcoholic.

I could go a step further, and say that counseling is a process of mutual growth. I don't believe I ever counseled a person but what I profited. Often, when I was unable to help the person, I learned some humility, and some things that I shouldn't do or say. When we're successful, we grew together, and I found myself stronger and wiser because of it.

Sponsoring or counseling, we don't do something to the alcoholic. We and the alcoholic do something together—we grow.

One Man's Progression

The smoke had just about done me in, and I was about to leave the A.A. meeting for a breath of fresh air, when a new speaker stood up. He was obviously troubled, having been hit with divorce papers during the week, and was struggling to find a way to deal with his feelings other than drinking. I stayed.

He talked briefly about how he was feeling, and then instead of going into a drunk-a-log, he talked about the progression of alcoholism in his life.

First, there was the "fun" phase. This didn't last very long, since the progression of his disease was very rapid. He had, however, discovered during the "fun" phase, that this magic substance called "alcohol" helped him solve, temporarily, the problems of living and to deal with the cuts and nicks of everyday living. Gradually, he came to use alcohol in all his affairs.

During the "problem solving phase," he gradually discovered that not only was the problem solving only temporary, but that he was creating a whole new set of problems with his drinking. This led to the next phase, that of guilt.

He drank to deal with the guilt that came from his drinking to solve both the problems of living, and the problems of drinking, which caused more problems, more guilt, more drinking. A truly tangled web.

His final phase before he found sobriety was one of helplessness. He drank because the booze was there, and he wanted to drink. He didn't rationalize, project, evade, deny or manipulate or in any way play games. He just drank.

When he sat down, I could see that he felt better. After the meeting, there were handshakes and hugs, and when I left, he and a couple of guys were talking earnestly in the corner. I left wiser than when I came.

H.A.L.T.

At one time, I dismissed the slogans of A.A. as mere window dressing, but like with so many other things, I have learned there are worlds of truth in them. We see "Take it Easy" on the bumper of a car, and identify the driver as a member of a recovering family. We see "But for the Grace of God" in an A.A. meeting room, and agree. If we take the time, we can find some real thoughts and emotions evoked. We hear a speaker say, "One day at a time," and if we are lucky, we know what it means.

H.A.L.T. is one of the best acronyms we can lay on the recovering alcoholic. Don't get too hungry, too angry, too lonely, or too tired. Each of these situations is an invitation to lower one's guard to where drinking seems like a good idea. Each one brings about a need that has been satisfied in the past by alcohol.

How does one avoid these pitfalls? One very good way is to go to A.A. meetings. It is very difficult to stay angry, lonely or tired at an A.A. meeting, and there are usually plenty of goodies afterwards. Any time an alcoholic finds him or herself hungry, angry, lonely or tired, the door is open for the "impulsive" drink. It is the essence of wisdom not to let this happen.

It's in the Book!

During my un-heroic tenure in the Navy, I managed to attain a position of Aviation Ordnance man, and with it came some rather strange duties. World War II was the first war in which aviation played a decisive role, and many of our problems were new. I got into the service fairly early in the war, and many of our policies and procedures were left over from an unhurried peace time.

Many or those in charge or technical matters were peacetime sailors who hadn't really figured on be forced into positions of responsibility by the hordes eager volunteers which immediately preceded draftees. Whenever a question arose on how something should be done, the answer was the same. "Look it up. It's in the book!" Oddly enough, it usually was in book. Never the reason why, but if you put pin "A" in hole "B" and tightened screw "C," it worked.

Sometimes I feel that we who got into the alcoholism business early were forced into positions about which we knew little, much like the peacetime sailors, learned to fly by the seat of our pants often enough and it wasn't until later that we realized that answers to nearly all of our questions were "in book." The book, of course, was *Alcohol Anonymous*.

Not only is what is in the book important, but what is *not* in the book is equally important. For example I am asked, "What makes you think that as a non-alcoholic you have the right to carry the message to alcoholics?" The answer is in the book. In the 12th Step it says ". . .we carried the message to alcoholics." It doesn't say to "*other* alcoholics." I think the omission is intentional and significant.

To the question "How can you presume to speak at a closed A.A. meeting?" It's in the book. The Second Tradition of A.A. speaks of the group conscience as final authority for matters affecting the groups.

Often, when I am baffled or puzzled, I say to myself, "It's in the book." More often than not, it is.

As a Result of These Steps

The man in front of me was really hurting. We had worked on his problem together for a number of years, and I watched helplessly as he continued down the road of alcoholism. We both saw the loss of job, the loss of family, prison, and loss of self-respect as mile posts which showed how rapidly his illness was progressing.

"I have had a spiritual awakening," he said. "I have a good working relationship with God. My soul is comfortable. There is no doubt in my mind that I have the fight necessary to make the love of a higher power a very real thing in my life. The only problem is that I keep drinking. "

I had watched him for a long time, and I knew him well. I don't believe for a minute that he was conning me. Then the answer came, like so many of my inspirations, from one of 12 suggested Steps of A.A. I knew he had not really "worked" the Steps. He felt that he found a spiritual shortcut that made the Steps unnecessary, and that he could directly to the 12th Step without all the pain and effort required by these Steps.

It may just be that there are many kinds of spiritual awakenings that a person may experience, and that the recovery from alcoholism requires a very special kind of awakening.

He left my door, sorrowing, still unconvinced. I haven't seen him for a while, and I don't know how he is doing. He did teach me, one more time, the lesson that is so hard to learn. There is no excess baggage in the program of Alcoholics Anonymous. To recover, one must travel the full route. The spiritual awakening necessary for continued, happy sobriety comes "as a result of these steps" and no other way.

We've got to go at it Backwards

Once in a while when you go to an A.A. meeting you find wisdom lying around, like diamonds on a beach. There were several speakers on this occasion, and when the chair started out by saying that if you want recovery, you have to do it backwards, I suddenly became more attentive. His first comment was that you have to surrender before you can win. I can think of no other situation where this is true, but it is certainly true with alcoholism. His next comment was equally profound, and reflects one of the mainstays of the A.A. program: "You have to give it away if you are going to keep it." This truth occurred early to the founders of A.A., and is equally true today. The next speaker said that he, too, had had to go at it backwards. It wasn't until he lost all his material possessions that he became rich. This may sound a little like sophistry, but many recovering alcoholics will tell you it is true. While I was listening, another thought came to me. How often I have seen people try to get rid of their assorted problems in order that they might control their drinking! I suppose that a large number of people come to A.A. to get rid of their problems, only to discover that when they stop drinking, most of their problems disappear. Another speaker, a woman this time, said that for many years she had sought the respect of others, only to discover that she must learn to respect herself. Another speaker said that with him, at least, he had to stop going to A.A. before he could go back to drinking, rather than vice versa. Thus he discovered that he probably needed A.A. worse when he was not on a downer, than when he was feeling badly. As I left the meeting, impressed by what I had heard, one more thing occurred to me. So very often when I had seen an alcoholic approaching sobriety, I had seen another reversal take place. For a long time, the alcoholic had seen alcohol as the solution to the problem, rather than seeing it the problem. When alcohol is seen as the problem, we are on our way to recovery.

Just as I believe that alcoholics and non-alcoholics drink for the same reason, I believe we have pretty much the same character defects in common. I may be the first person in his-

tory to call a shot glass a magnifying glass, but that's what it is.

Character Defects

Recovering alcoholics who are members of A.A. spend a lot of time discussing "character defects," or more properly, defects of character. Being willing to have them removed is one of the keys of the 12 suggested Steps of A.A., and many alcoholics find that this task occupies them for most of their sober lives.

I propose that alcoholics do not have any more defects of character than do we "civilians," as the Little Judge used to call us. I propose further that when the alcoholic is not drinking, those defects are no worse than those of the nonalcoholic.

When under the influence of alcohol, those run-of-the-mill character defects expand immeasurably. Alcohol is to be a magnifying glass through which we view the character defects of the alcoholic. Lies become "damned lies" as Mark Twain would say. Thoughtlessness becomes cruelty. Self-centeredness becomes selfishness. Just plain orneriness becomes savagery.

A person who wastes money can do it with others' approval in a bar. Phoniness is never so rife as during the happy hour. One of the saddest things I have ever seen is the of cheap gifts at a high price for sale on the back bar gin mill, so a person can buy his way back into the house when his character defects have gotten blown up too big by alcohol.

Just as I believe that alcoholics and non-alcoholics drink for the same reason, I believe we have pretty much the same character defects in common. I may be the first person in history to call a shot glass a magnifying glass, but that's what it is.

"Lonely" is a Sad Word

The scene was in a bowling alley in a large city. It was ten o'clock in the morning, and already a tournament was in full swing. Dozens of people were coming and going, bowling, laughing when they got a strike, complaining when they got a split, talking while they waited for their turn. There was a bar in the building, which was constantly surrounded by a swirl of people. A man sat at the bar, with a shot and a beer in front of him. He couldn't have been more alone if he were on a desert island. His eyes were fixed on his drink, and he obviously had been there for a while. He was as lonely as anyone I have ever seen.

If someone were to ask me what the saddest word in our language is, my answer would be "lonely." Not "alone," because it is possible to be alone without being lonely. We have often heard alcoholism called the "lonely illness," and those of us who have been around alcoholics for a while know what it means.

No one is more estranged than the alcoholic. It seems to the alcoholic that no one really understands what is going on. The alcoholic didn't get into this situation through choice. There is no solution that the alcoholic has not tried, and none of them have worked. The alcoholic lives in a society that is saturated by alcohol, and is doing just exactly what that society recommends—drinking. There seems to be no way out except suicide, but it isn't quite time

for that yet. There is, however, a substance available which solve the problem temporarily, and just maybe, this, he or she can use that substance constructively rather than destructively. One more time.

That that lonely alcoholic needs more than anything else for someone to sit down next to him or her and say, "Don't be lonely. I love you, and God loves you. This is a wonderful world, and I know a way for you to return to it. with me." We don't say it, and we can't say it, fuse our society simply isn't constructed that way. Wouldn't it be great if we could?

Tough Love

It wasn't too long ago that it was fashionable in the les of professional alcoholism counselors to talk about "tough love." As this phrase was and is commonly used, it means that we must love the alcoholic enough to be of help, that we must also be tough enough on him or her not to fall for the multitudinous manipulations that often make us a part of the problem rather than part of the solution.

I would like to propose a little different interpretation to the phrase. We begin at the same place—we must truly love the alcoholic, or this sensitive, introspective, troubled person will simply snap the switch and turn us off. We cannot con a person who has made a career of conning. The tough part, however, should apply to we who would help alcoholic find sobriety. We are the ones who must be tough. Of course, we must also be tough on the alcoholic to keep from joining the structure of enabling, and ourselves become part of the problem.

We ourselves must be tough. When the alcoholic gets drunk despite our efforts, when we are rejected, scorned and dismissed, we must be tough. When our counseling is interrupted by a suicide or a murder or a fatal car accident, we must be tough. The next day, there will be another alcoholic knocking at our door, seeking our care.

It is no surprise that there is such a turnover among counselors. We have even invented a name for it: "counselor burnout." The solution, however, is right under our noses. The program of Alcoholics Anonymous will serve us well, whether or not we are alcoholics. There is room in the program for everybody. The program of A.A., lived to the best of our ability, can make us tough enough so we can handle the risks that go with loving alcoholics.

The Right to Choose

One of the insights that seems so very useful to recovering alcoholics is that every morning when they arise, they have a choice. They can drink that day, or they can choose not to. They seem to surrender their choice only when they choose to drink, because then they seem to be unable to decide how much they are going to drink.

It seems to me that the right to make choices is one of the key differences between humans and other animals. When that robin shows up in the Spring, I know in advance what kind of a nest she is going to build. She will build a robin's nest, and not a sparrow's nest—she has no choice in the matter. Not only will she build a robin's nest, but it will be the right nest for her. Barring disasters over which she has no control, the nest will be just right for raising her young and perpetuating the species.

In understanding the right of choice, one must always be aware that the right to choose of necessity includes the right to make the wrong choice. If humans always made the right choices, then in effect, they would not have the right to choose. I will say it again—the right to choose must include the right to make the wrong choice.

We are constantly angered with ourselves and with others because we often discover that we have made the wrong choices, again and again. In fact, it seems sometimes that we are almost driven to make the wrong choices. We dwell on it so much that we tend to forget that make far more right choices than wrong choices, else could not survive.

If the robin built the wrong nest, it wouldn't be long until there were no more robins. We are still here, individually and collectively, so we must have made a lot of right choices. I would hate to give up the right to choose. The certainty of making all the right choices would be a poor substitute for the right to choose, right or wrong.

The Right Word at the Right Time

I think most of us who are in the business of trying to help the alcoholic find sobriety have had this experience. Someone will come bustling up with stars in their eyes and say, "Do you remember what you said on March 17, 1964?" Usually, I don't even remember what state I was in, alone the circumstances 'under which I might have said something, and I tell the person so.

"Well, you were a replacement speaker at my treatment center, and you said exactly what I needed to hear. It made a difference in my life." Then the person goes on to tell you what you said on this auspicious occasion, and more times than not, it was something very ordinary and something that the alcoholic had undoubtedly heard many times before.

This time, however, the time was right. I have -long since discovered that if the time is right, almost any simple thing

can be the catalyst that brings together all the factors that are necessary for the individual to find sobriety. If the time isn't right, there is very little we can say or do that will help. The problem, of course, is that we never know when the time is right, nor does anyone else.

The lesson is obvious. We must avail ourselves of every opportunity to carry the message, and that message is whatever we are moved to say or do at that time. There is no person who has the infinite wisdom to know what to say upon every occasion—the important thing is to say something. It may not seem like much to us, but it may be exactly the right thing.

We all know what momentous occurrences grow out of small events, occurrences that none could predict. If we carry the message, our Higher Power will use it, if the time is right.

The Serenity Prayer

For anyone who might have missed it, here is the prayer which has become sort of the unofficial prayer of A.A.: "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference." Not only does one hear it at almost any A.A. meeting, but it has become a sort of a talisman by which many A.A. members deal with crises which might lead them to drink.

I am not sure we are correct in calling it simply the "serenity" prayer, because serenity often comes only after we have achieved the courage and wisdom for which we pray. It's such a great prayer, that we can profit by looking a little more closely.

It is probably the wisdom which comes first, because if we don't have that wisdom, we find ourselves fighting and wasting our strength on something that simply cannot be changed, like getting older. As a quote from the Old Testament says, "The word from the Lord was rare in those days," and I often feel that way in seeking wisdom. Solomon, before he was led down the primrose path by his foreign wives, had asked only for wisdom. Once he had the wisdom, everything else fell into place. So we might very well call it the "wisdom" prayer.

We could also call it the "courage" prayer, for unless we have the courage, it does no good to decide that something be changed. But it is a great prayer, for if we have serenity, courage and wisdom, everything will be solved eventually.

I don't know who wrote this prayer originally, but I think whoever wrote it probably had all three—wisdom, courage and serenity.

Patience is Faith

Never before have I had such a struggle with the title of something I wanted to write. Once the title came, then the chapter wrote itself. One might even say that the title is all one needs.

I tried "Patience is faith in action," but that didn't seem to do it. I tried, "Patience is one of the best manifestations of faith," but somehow that is too scholarly. "Patience is a form of faith" seems empty. Finally the answer came, "Patience is faith." How simple, how perfect. Just that. Patience is faith. What more is there to say? That says it all.

I have never thought of myself as a particularly patient person, but several of my associates have told me that was one of the best lessons they learned from me—to be patient with the alcoholic. I guess our difficulty with being patient is that we see the alcoholic and those close to the alcoholic suffering terribly, and we want to fix them. We have the tools, the magic. All we want them to do is to hold still long enough so we can do our thing. We overlook the fact that what happens is not our thing. When the alcoholic recovers it is through the grace of a Higher Power, working through whatever conduits are available.

How often do we say, "Here am I, Lord, send me," and then don't wait to be sent, but take off on our own? We must carry the message, then wait. Patience is faith.

The Loaves and Fishes

When I, as a non-alcoholic, or as a "civilian" as the Little Judge likes to say, attended my first A.A. meeting many, many years ago, I was impressed. I was not impressed by the spiritual insights that I heard, I wasn't impressed that here was a group of people doing something together that they couldn't do alone, and I wasn't impressed by the smoke and bad coffee and the simple "ordinariness" of the people I met—all those things came later, some of them much later.

What impressed me was that when they passed the hat it actually was a hat—an old derby. The guy that took to the meeting told me not to put anything in. They didn't want my money, and I guess that was the first organization in my memory that didn't want my money!

As the years passed, I was impressed to see people drop a dollar in that hat from what I knew was an already slim bankroll. I was impressed that A.A. steadfastly refused outside money, particularly mine. I was impressed that dollar in the hat seemed to finance A.A. very nicely.

What has finally impressed me is that most A.A. members still drop a dollar in the hat, and it still seems to enough. It is just as though there never has been any inflation, although I am under the impression that a dollar is considerably less than it did in 1948 when I attended first meeting. Unless someone can explain it otherwise, less I'll just accept this as another of the many miracles we see in A.A.

Miracle or Coincidence—Take Your Pick

There was a time when I risked a considerable stake to become a full-time counselor. I left the job I had been on 21 years, and went to work for a company which asked to design, implement and administer an employee assistance program for ten thousand employees scattered over 14 states. The chief emphasis was to be on alcohol problems, but there were no other guidelines.

Since there had never been such a program in this company, and the whole idea was very new, there was considerable skepticism. The clients I got in the beginning were real basket cases, but it was necessary to establish early that even these people could be helped if the program were to survive.

I was having little success with one of my earliest clients, and since I had nothing to do that evening, I asked him and his family to go to a sports show with me. I thought if we became better acquainted in a non-clinical setting, we might make some progress.

The day came, and just as we were leaving the office, the phone rang. It was a prospective client, and my assurances that I would see him the next day were not enough. He had to see me that night. I wrote his address on a slip of paper, and assured him that I would see him that evening somehow. He had no car, so it was up to me.

I hung up the receiver, and waited for an inspiration. No parting of the waters, no handwriting on the wall. Nothing. Since we had planned to eat dinner together, I asked the other client where he wanted to eat. Since I didn't know the city, he navigated and I drove.

We went about eight blocks west, then four blocks north, then three miles east on the freeway, then a mile north on another freeway, and then about ten blocks west again on a city street. He indicated where he wanted to eat, so I pulled into the parking lot.

I walked to the front of the building and pulled the slip of paper from my pocket. The apartment of the man who called was upstairs from the restaurant. I was stunned!

This was in a city of 710,000 people, and neither of my clients knew the other. The odds on this happening must be incalculable! I ordered my dinner, went upstairs to see the caller, and returned to spend the evening with the original client. The last I knew, they were both sober.

The First and the Last

All of us heavy thinkers like to come up with esoteric is to identify alcoholics. I have a way that is more esoteric than most. I sort of stumbled on to it accidentally when I was doing a little research to try to determine if early drinking conditions had anything to do with alcoholism.

There was nothing formal about this particular research. I asked a number of alcoholics under what conditions they started drinking. The results didn't get me anywhere, but I impressed that with almost no exceptions, they could describe their first drink—where it took place, how it tasted, what happened afterwards, and how they felt about it. Since the purpose of my research was to discover whether the first drink took place at home with the family or away from home, whether it was open or surreptitious, and who gave it to them, it took a while for the message to *sink* in.

Even if the drink had been forty years before, they remembered it. It was very important to them. It did special things for them. They remembered every detail. Few non-alcoholics have such vivid memories of their first drink.

Another fact that emerged during our talks was that they remembered their last drink with the same clarity—not always the last *drink*, because it was often hidden by a blackout. Alcohol was still very special to them, not as rewarding toward the end of their drinking careers, but still special.

I am not presenting this as the final word in identifying alcoholics, but I find that it supports my theory that alcohol does more both to and for the alcoholic than the non-alcoholic. It is very special.

What Kind of an Illness?

In the considerable time that I have been privileged to be around alcoholics, I have seen countless new people come into the field. Each has a different set of misconceptions about alcoholism, and each is resolved to make a name for him/herself by solving this seemingly insolvable problem. It is dangerous to generalize in the alcoholism business, so I will discuss only one particular breed of cats, the behavioral scientists, and of course, what I say will apply to only some of them.

Upon observing the alcoholic, they see the symptoms of alcoholism which are behavioral, and then reach the conclusion that some kind of behavior modification will solve the problem. If the illness is behavioral, then a change of behavior will solve the problem.

As a matter of fact, the illness of alcoholism is physical, psychological, and spiritual, and yet the symptoms we see are behavioral. There have been attempts to come to grips with this strange state of affairs by taking liver biopsies, blood samples, studies of liver function, endocrine gland function and all the rest, but none seem to yield any satisfactory results. There seems no way to come to grips with this illness through physical channels.

The only practical approach for a counselor of alcoholics is to ask one question, "What happens when you drink?" In other words, "What are your behavioral symptoms?"

It is easy to see how a newcomer to the field can be misled, and how simple the solution seems to be. Of course, if the solution were simple, the problem would have been solved long ago. The newcomers enter the field, cut out a chosen group of alcoholics from the herd and practice their particular theory, find it doesn't work, and move on to bigger and better things, preferably in another field.

The only problem is that they leave the field strewn with bodies. We have a professional obligation to use the best techniques available to us in helping alcoholics, and do not have

the right to test out some theory which, if it fails, results in death or worse for the alcoholic. We lose enough of them using the best techniques as it is!

A Cane and a Bottle

One day I was walking along Jackson Boulevard in Chicago. It was a bright, sunny fall day, and one could almost ignore the broken sidewalk, the shattered bottles and the shambling derelicts, and pretend that all was well with the world.

I came upon a tableau that caught my eye, and the longer I thought about it, the more important it became. I was on a noon break from a seminar attended by industry leaders who were meeting to address problems posed by employees drinking on the job. The still-life that caught my eye was in stark contrast to the well-fed, well-dressed, affluent gathering at the hotel.

The setting was poignant in its simplicity. There was a recessed doorway in a boarded-up building. In the doorway were two things—an empty wine bottle and a beat-up cane.

It was easy to imagine the scenario. One could see the wino limping down the street, barely able to make it with the use of the cane. In a paper sack was his bottle of wine. He found the doorway, made himself comfortable, and entered the world of alcohol.

Gradually, he felt the warmth of the alcohol steal through him. His aches and pains were gone, and his mind drifted. Finally, the bottle empty, he wandered away, using the booze to walk, and leaving his cane behind. Some time, some place, the alcohol wore off, and he found he was helpless.

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kind of adjustment which enables him or her to function in some manner. Alcohol may be a cane or a crutch, a brace or a prop, but it works after a fashion.

Someplace along the line, the alcohol no longer solves those problems, and the alcoholic is helpless. I'm glad that the

wino left his cane behind in the Fall. If it had been winter, he likely would be in another doorway, just another statistic.

Too Much, Too Long

Often I have heard an alcoholic say, "I became an alcoholic because I drank too much, too long." It sounds great. No one denies that the alcoholic drank too much for too long, but that isn't why they are alcoholic. They are alcoholics first, and that is the reason they drank too much, too long.

I am one of the few in this business, I guess, who believes the alcoholic is an alcoholic from the first drink, and even prior to the first drink. There is a genetic predisposition to become an alcoholic, and if that condition exists, there is only one prevention possible—complete abstinence. We must forget completely the idea that there is some way to prevent alcoholism by training people to drink productively. Millions have tried it, and died trying.

Another example of how we must change our thinking is to forget about the theory that the alcoholic crosses the line from social drinking to alcoholism. They so cross a line, but not that one. The line they cross is when alcohol stops doing things for them, and starts doing things to them.

My revered guru once told me that if I would understand people, I must stop thinking logically and start thinking psychologically. He was right. Also, to understand the alcoholic, I must stop thinking logically and start thinking alcoholicly. It's a challenge.

Is the Alcoholic an Addict?

My answer to this question is quite simple. I don't know. We often hear the alcoholic referred to as an "addict," particularly in the literature, but the writer usually doesn't define addiction, so we really don't know.

A consensus of definitions as to what addiction is goes something like this: a person has (1) a compulsion to use the substance (2) loss of control (3) continued use in spite of consequences and (4) serious trauma upon withdrawal. In my observations of alcoholics I don't have any trouble with the first three, nor does most anyone in the business. It is number (4) that gives me difficulty.

We all know the shakes and agitation that follow a serious drinking bout, and visual and auditory hallucinations that we call "D.T.s" that come when a heavy, long-term drinker stops drinking, but I'm not sure this is the trauma we have in mind. Most every heavy drinker has hangovers, and would likely argue convincingly that that constitutes "trauma," but we should look into the matters a little further.

Most treatment centers have something they call "detox," which usually lasts about three days. This is long enough to provide support that will in most cases prevent "D.T.s," and usually gives the jumpy nerves and upset stomach time to settle down. However, we have all seen people who were really serious boozers simply quit drinking, and after a period of "toughing it out" seem as normal as most counselors.

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"addicts," but I have seen a few. I guess my definition of "physical over-reaction plus psychological dependence" works better for me than addiction. We can be thankful that we don't have to decide if the alcoholic is an addict before we can get on with the healing.

"The Nevers"

I got this title from the A. A. Grapevine, but I'm going to use it in a much different way than their author did. While the original author used to say that he never was able to share in his family's life completely while he was drinking, he never felt good about anything, he never made the adjustment to growing up because of his drinking, and so on, I want to turn the "nevers" around and show how they become a strong instrument of denial.

How often the counselor listens to the "nevers!" "I have never lost a job because of drinking." "I never beat up on my family." "I never spent more on booze than I could afford." "I never got into a fight while drinking." "I was never arrested for drunk driving." "I never had a hangover." I guess most any alcoholic, by being selective, can lay a considerable number of the "nevers" on us. Like some other things in counseling, we can use it productively by turning the whole thing around, and ask about the "evers. "

"Did you ever drink more than you intended to?" "Did you ever get into trouble from drinking?" "Did anyone ever tell you, you were drinking too much?" "Did you ever try to cut down on your drinking?" "Did you ever do anything you were sorry for when you were drinking?"

In this backwards, mixed-up world of alcoholism, we find nuggets of the purest gold in the most unlikely places. Who would think that by dropping an "n" we could change a clever mechanism of denial into a very useful counseling tool?

Accept, or Be

I am not much on reading self-help books other than Alcoholics Anonymous, but I recently did read one that makes more sense than most. Since it is unlikely that the author will ever read this, or that the idea was his in the first place, I will plagiarize his work. Imitation is the best form of flattery, you know.

This writer was telling how he decided he didn't have to control the world around him when someone told him, "You either have to accept God, or be God." I like the thought.

I have often said that alcohol is simply a magnifying glass that shows up the character defects of the alcoholic more clearly, and that most of us have those same defects. We just do a better job of hiding them. Include me in that group.

One of the character defects that can cause us endless trouble is the feeling that we have to be in charge of everything that goes on around us. It takes most of our time and energy to keep other people straightened out, and there is little time for anything else. One gets the feeling that living is a giant chess game, and all the pieces are alive. No sooner are all the pieces on the correct squares than someone calls "Fruit basket upset!" and everyone changes squares, leaving us with all our work to do over.

We really aren't responsible for keeping the world orderly. We can leave that up to God, and spend our time on something we can change — ourselves. The most comforting prayer I can pray when I go to bed at night is this: "God, since you are going to be up all night anyway, take charge of my world, and I'll go to sleep."

Roots

Sooner or later, everyone who is a student of Alcoholics Anonymous is puzzled by its seeming emergence from thin air. That is not the case, of course, and better students than I have written of the antecedents of A.A. I have been impressed, however, by the importance of the Oxford Group (which was later known as "Moral Rearmament") in the forming of A.A.

The Four Absolutes of the Oxford Group tell us a lot. Absolute honesty, absolute unselfishness, absolute purity and absolute love are the Four. Somewhere along the line, the wise founders of A.A. decided to drop the "absolute." "Spiritual growth rather than spiritual perfection" seems much more attainable than any absolute.

Let's look at the Principles of the Oxford Group. (1) Surrender. (2) Self-examination (3) Confession to another human being (4) Making restitution and (5) Giving without thought of return. Now we're getting somewhere! Put these side-by-side with the "suggested" 12 Steps of A.A., and you can see where many of the Steps came from.

The five "Cs" of the Oxford Group give us a pretty good outline of the program of A.A. "Confidence, confession, conviction, conversion and continuance."

There were many people and institutions that had an input into the formation of A.A., but it isn't hard to see how important the Oxford Groups were in its genesis.

Research

It is with a great deal of sadness and a feeling that I have been there before when I pick up a professional alcoholism journal and read of one more bit of research which purports to show that by whatever means, the alcoholic can be trained to return to controlled drinking.

Usually those who do the research are new to the field, and are anxious to make a name for themselves by applying their particular discipline to the alcoholism field. They intend to discover truths that have escaped us who have labored so long in the trenches. They want to show us that the weary, foot-slogging techniques we use are really a waste of time, and that their particular short cut is the way to go.

What is most troubling is that these are usually bright, well-trained people who have the very best intentions. They understand research and statistics, and they understand their professions. They are not dishonest, and they seem to believe their conclusions.

All of these studies seem to have the same fatal flaw—they rely on self-reporting by practicing alcoholics and the alcoholics' families for their data. Now if there is any less reliable source of data than a practicing alcoholic, it has not come to my attention. Since alcoholism is a family illness, those close to the alcoholic reflect the same behavior. Our researchers go blithely ahead, compiling and collating this data, and arrive at a new scientific truth.

Usually, the conclusions are accepted by the scientific community, and become imbedded in the literature. A few thousand alcoholics return to drinking after having read the study, and some of them die drunk. Fortunately, most of them discover that there is not "an easier, softer way," and return to the time-tested goal of complete abstinence.

The researchers don't stay in the alcoholism field too long, but move on to greener pastures. They build on their professional reputations founded with this new truth, and leave disarray behind them. The ones who really suffer are the ones who die drunk, because of this research.

Stranger and Stranger!

At regular intervals some newcomer to the business of helping alcoholics find sobriety gives an old idea a new name, and promptly announces a new and brilliant method by which the alcoholic can return to "social drinking." Aside from the fact that these things never work, and that the alcoholic has already tried them all, a strange fact emerges to bemuse the observer—alcoholics don't want to return to social drinking.

I suppose about here we should define "social drinking." One usually describes "social drinking" as the way he or she drinks! I guess we can say that social drinking is having two or three drinks at a party, once in a while. However one defines it, this isn't what the alcoholic wants. Most alcoholics will tell you they never wanted a few drinks, but they wanted to reach the twilight zone as quickly as possible, and to stay there as long as possible.

As an exercise in curiosity if for no other reason, sit down with a recovering alcoholic, and describe this hypothetical situation. "We now have a pill or an implant or a method of behavior modification which will allow you to take a maximum of only two or three drinks on any given occasion. Any more will turn you green or put you to sleep, or simply will not have any effect on you. Would you like to return to drinking under these circumstances?"

Most alcoholics would laugh at the idea. One answered me this way: "Why would anyone want just two or three drinks? All that would do would be to stir you up. If I knew that was all I could have, I would tell you to forget it!"

Offer the alcoholic a way to get really wiped out with no physical, social, moral or financial consequences, and you may have yourself a customer. Offer him or her a way to have just two drinks and quit, and you have just lost a listener.

Use, Misuse and Abuse

This is a tough one to get a handle on, but there seems to be something wrong with our use of the word "abuse" in relation to alcohol and other drugs. A trip to the dictionary doesn't seem to help, because it says that one meaning of "abuse" is to "use wrongfully," and this seems to imply that there is a way to use alcohol and illegal drugs "rightfully."

The world is full of people who will fly to defend the issue. They will argue forever that there is a way to use these drugs "rightfully." This position seems to make sense, but let's look at it more closely. Heroin was invented to treat the "soldiers' disease" after the Civil War, that is, morphine addiction. It has been discovered to be more addictive than morphine, and is rarely used for medicine. While there are a few diehards that will disagree, let's say that all use of heroin is abuse. I would like to extrapolate this to all other illegal drugs and to alcohol. One of my favorite quotes is from the doctor who said, "All nonmedical use of drugs is abuse." Strong talk! Alcohol is a drug. If he is right, then the non-medical use of alcohol is abuse.

There are still a few doctors who prescribe alcohol for their patients, but most have come to the conclusion that there are much safer drugs to do the same thing. No longer do they prescribe "a little wine for your stomach's sake."

Another curious phrase used in our society is "recreational use" of drugs. Alcohol comes to mind as the most commonly used drug for recreational purposes, but the thought freezes one's blood. Recreation—re-creation. How can a toxic substance which alters one's perceptions and damages one's body re-create anything? Or restore anything? One wonders.

Diagnosis

In the wonderful world of the alcoholic, many things are upside down and backwards, and in diagnosing this illness, we are faced with one of the strangest things of all. It is much easier to diagnose alcoholism than it is to define it.

I can imagine the reaction of the heavy thinkers in this business. "How in the world can one diagnose an illness that hasn't been described?" To be perfectly honest, I don't know! Those of us who have spent a lifetime in the trenches have pretty well given up trying to use "reasons for drinking" as a tool, because non-alcoholics and alcoholics drink for the same reasons. We can't use quantity, ambiance, time of day, price of the booze, solitary drinking or anything relating to drinking itself as a diagnostic tool. When an alcoholic drinks to deal with the results of drinking, we have a useful tool, but when this happens, the illness is pretty well advanced.

Recently, in preparation for a court appearance, I have been reading the records of an alcoholic. I never met the person in question, but there is no doubt in my mind that this person is an alcoholic. Eight hospitalizations for drinking, arrests, fights, injuries, family problems, misunderstandings, lawsuits—all associated with alcohol. I can diagnose this person as an alcoholic, but I'm sure I couldn't define it to his satisfaction. All we know is that if certain things happen when a person is drinking, he or she is an alcoholic.

There is a bright side, however, to the picture. We don't have to describe alcoholism to treat it. All we need to know is what happens when a person drinks. If problems occur, we can call it anything we wish, and get on with the recovery. If our problem drinker finds sobriety, down the road someplace this person will stand up and say, "I'm an alcoholic!" Often this is after a considerable period of recovery. Let's get on with the recovery and forget about the description!

We Had to Quit Because We Couldn't Stop

I have heard these words many times, but like so many things, it took a long time for the real meaning to soak in. I used to mistrust many of the slogans of A.A. as trite, but as I finally began to understand each one, I discovered that they are not trite or banal at all, but real, solid nuggets of wisdom.

It would seem superficially that "quit" and "stop" mean the same thing, but in this case, they most assuredly do not. The difference to the alcoholic is so real and obvious that one feels patronizing to mention it all. Maybe we should go farther, however, for the non-alcoholics who might read this.

The more I am around this business, it seems that we oversimplify or overcomplicate most matters. Maybe we can avoid both by defining alcoholism in this matter. "An alcoholic is a person who cannot predict how much he or she will drink, once they have begun." In other words, once they start, they can't stop.

But they can quit. Almost every alcoholic can point out a period in their drinking career when they did quit, for a week or a month or a year. Unfortunately, just "quitting" is so unsatisfactory that the alcoholic resumes drinking for whatever reason.

Of course alcoholics can quit. If this were not possible, all our efforts would be in vain. It doesn't take much wisdom to understand that the alcoholic must first quit before all the other steps in recovery are possible. All those steps together will not enable alcoholics to stop once they have begun. They must quit, because they can't stop. I know of no way to say it better.

A Moment of Truth

Sometimes we have to go far afield for insights into the disease of alcoholism. In the instance of which I shall speak, my source was a recovering alcoholic who, in addition to regular attendance at A.A. and a splendid effort to live the 12 Steps of A.A., was a regular worker in the hospice at his town. I was impressed that he was able to deal repeatedly with the deaths of those he came to care for, and how he returned again and again to the situation he knew would end in a loss.

When I remarked that it must take more spiritual maturity than I had been able to achieve, he answered that the emotion he had to learn to deal with was fear. The way to deal with fear, he discovered, was to replace it with love.

I have often felt that we cannot deal with or feel two emotions at the same time, if one is negative and the other is positive. If we experience anger, we cannot feel joy. If we experience jealousy, we cannot feel caring. If we feel greed, we cannot experience generosity. The Bible speaks clearly on the subject, "Perfect loves casts out fear."

Despite the fact that I have never been a practicing alcoholic, I seem to have the same character defects of which alcoholics speak. Most of these defects seem to be based on negative emotions. I have often made an effort to replace them with positive emotions, sometimes with success. Once I found it very difficult to deal with a person who had wronged me repeatedly, and I shared my problem with a recovering alcoholic.

"Pray for him!" "I can't pray for him—it would be phoney!" "Pray for him anyway. How do you know God will see your prayer as phoney?" You know something? It worked! When that man died, I didn't like him very well, but I loved him!

Which Came First?

The alcoholic was describing problems he had had before he found sobriety. He was telling how important it was for him to realize that he was still a pretty sick person, although he had over four years of sobriety.

Then came the bombshell! "I was an alcoholic long before I took the first drink." I wanted to stop him and ask him to say it again, but no one at the meeting seemed particularly impressed except I. As I listened as hard as I could, I wished for a tape recorder.

"I had a problem when they closed my country school and I had to go to a larger school. I had problems with other people. I had problems in not being what I wanted to be." Then he discovered alcohol, and later, other drugs.

"Here was the solution to my problems. Alcohol let me be what I wanted to be." (Emphasis mine, RCH) As happens so often, alcohol worked very well for him in the beginning.

The rest of the story was familiar. His problems didn't go away, but were solved only temporarily. His ability to solve his problems didn't develop, and his need for alcohol grew. At some point, alcohol became counter-productive and added to the problems, rather than solving them even on a temporary basis. Since alcohol had always worked before, it must either be that those around him were not behaving properly, or that somehow he had changed the way he used this magic substance.

Those around him decided to leave, so when the problems continued, he decided if he would modify his alcohol-using techniques, he could solve his problems. When that, too, failed, he surrendered, and began to solve his problems like an adult.

He was an alcoholic long before he began drinking, and will be an alcoholic all his life, even though he never takes another drink.

Immaturity

Those of us who have known many alcoholics are impressed that they often seem extremely immature. They are immature in their way of dealing with people, they are immature in their decision making, and they are immature in the way they feel about themselves.

Our first reaction, of course, is to believe that for some reason these people have failed to mature, and because they are living in an adult world, use alcohol to cope with their immaturity. What is more natural than when a person who finds himself or herself a child in an adult world than to resort to the socially acceptable drug of alcohol as a means of coping? As usual, this answer is simple, obvious and wrong.

As has happened so often, it was an alcoholic, or rather several of them, who gave me the insight I needed. They explained that they had failed to mature because they were alcoholics, rather than the other way around. When you come to know alcoholics well, you discover that their social, spiritual, psychological and emotional growth stopped about the time they started drinking. Rather than facing and solving the adjustments and problems of maturing, they dove headfirst into the bottle.

As a result, they didn't develop the tools necessary for coping with adulthood, and used booze as a solvent for their problems. A complicating factor is one that we discuss so often. The booze not only stopped solving problems, it caused many others, leaving the alcoholic with two sets of unsolved problems—the problems of living, and the problems caused by drinking. With limited living skills, the answer, to them, is to dive more deeply into the bottle.

When the alcoholic finally finds sobriety, we mustn't be surprised that we are dealing with a case of arrested development. The change is not to take place overnight. We must be patient. To the admonition from the Big Book of A.A., "Spiritual growth, rather than spiritual perfection should be our goal," we must add social, psychological and emotional growth. It will come.

Psychotic or Alcoholic?

If one stays in this business long enough, there arises at times a situation which is frightening, to say the least. As we watch the sufferer withdraw from alcohol, something goes wrong. The "honeymoon" stage of recovery doesn't set in, and a careful observer will discover that the alcoholic is scared to death.

Often at this stage, the alcoholic goes back to drinking, and the emerging signs that something else is wrong seem to disappear. But when the alcoholic doesn't go back to drinking, we note some strange things. He or she may become withdrawn, may spend long periods of time alone, may exhibit hostile or disruptive behavior, may show signs of paranoia and talk about suicide, and in general doesn't seem to be progressing toward a comfortable sobriety.

I don't believe even the most experienced counselor should try to make a diagnosis other than that something is most assuredly wrong. At this juncture, every effort should be made to obtain a psychiatric evaluation by a competent psychiatrist or psychologist. One should continue the efforts to help the sufferer recover from alcoholism, but should also cooperate in every way possible with whatever recovery the other professionals may suggest.

What is going on? I'm not sure. I have noticed that this condition happens most often when the alcoholic quits drinking on his/her own, and does not attend A.A. or other support groups. I suspect that one of two things may have happened. Either the person has been psychotic, and was using alcohol as a tranquilizer to treat the illness, or the stress of withdrawal without support precipitates the psychosis.

I'll let the experts sort this out, but I know we counselors have to do something. We must be as supportive as possible, and continue to do our job while the other professionals do theirs. Too often, this condition leads to violence toward others, suicide, or untold suffering to many. We must be aware of what is going on if we would help.

"I Wanted to be Different!"

I have heard it at a number of A. A. meetings, but it didn't really sink in until I heard the same statement by three people at the same meeting. Each told the same story. Each had come to A.A., each had been impressed by what was said. Each thought that what was going on was just fine for the other people attending the meetings, but they didn't want it to apply to them. They wanted to be different. They wanted to be one of those individuals who could do "controlled drinking." They didn't want to give up drinking. They just wanted to get rid of the bad times and to keep the good times.

The time period of continued drinking was different for each of them, but they kept getting into trouble, coming back to A.A., deciding that they were somehow different, and then going out to try it again.

Their periods of sobriety were of different lengths, but the key to their sobriety was the same—they decided they were not different, that they were indeed alcoholics, and that they belonged in A.A.

One can imagine how their listening changed. No longer would they say to themselves, "I'm not as bad as that guy." No longer would they search for reasons to prove that they were different. Instead, they would begin what we might call "constructive" listening rather than "defensive" listening. The result was sobriety.

Somebody is Responsible

The alcoholic had been sober for ten years, and was on the verge of a nervous breakdown, which is a lay term for being unable to cope. His face was familiar at many A.A. meetings. He had been instrumental in helping many other alcoholics find sobriety. Now he was disturbed, scared and whipped. Like the Apostle Paul, the things he would not do, he did, and the things that he would do, he did not do.

"I have really come to dislike myself," he said. "I use people, I manipulate people, I play games, I'm phony." His pain was real, and so were his tears. "I guess right now is the first time I have been honest in ten years."

Slowly, painfully, we went through the problem. It wasn't too long until the answer was plain to both of us. He had never gotten past the first Step of Alcoholics Anonymous, and there was considerable doubt that he had ever taken that step.

He was a person to whom things came easily. He was always a winner. He had succeeded at everything he had ever tried, except mastering his alcoholism. He kept a reservation in the back of his mind that somehow, some way, he could work it out in his head, not his heart.

After watching him hurting for a considerable time, I was about to ask him what he was going to do. He answered the question before I asked it. "I guess I'd better get to work on the program," he said. "That's just what the psychologist told me to do the other day after listening for about ten minutes."

Wise psychologist.

Trust Me!

Among the things we used to know for sure that we are not so sure about any more is the truism that only one alcoholic can help another. However, one of my role models was a non-alcoholic doctor who came very early to the field. When asked how he, a non-alcoholic, could help alcoholics to find sobriety, he had a ready answer, "Well," he would growl, "I never had a baby either, but I sure delivered a lot of them!"

There is a germ of truth in this truism—it is easier for one alcoholic to help another than for a non-alcoholic to do so. They are quicker to establish a rapport because the alcoholic cannot take the position that unless you have suffered as he or she has, you don't really understand. It takes away one more tool of denial.

There is more to the matter than this, however. The key seems to be in the picture that hangs in every A.A. clubroom. There is an emaciated man sitting on the edge of a rumpled bed, and two men are talking to him. What are they saying? They are telling him how it was with them. They are not laying a drunkalog on him, they are not telling him what he must do, they are revealing themselves to him. They are letting the still-suffering alcoholic see that they, too, hurt and are afraid. For a moment they are dropping the pretense that we all carry around with us—that we have it all together, and don't need anything from anybody.

The Greek poet Homer is reputed to have said, "If I would see you cry, you must first see me cry." If we expect others to trust us with their hurts and fears, we must first let them know that we too hurt and are afraid.

This exercise in self-revelation does not come easily. It requires a considerable amount of moral and spiritual maturity to feel secure enough to let others know we aren't perfect. It seems to me that the alcoholic who is successful in helping another is often a person who had been through the fire him or herself, and has emerged with much of the dross burned away.

Also, in order to achieve a contented, lasting and productive sobriety, the alcoholic must achieve a working relationship with a Higher Power. It seems to me that having been through the crucible of pain that is alcoholism, and having had a spiritual awakening as a result of the 12 suggested steps of A.A., the recovering alcoholic has the strength to do the self-revelation and hence, is often successful in carrying the message.

There is a lesson here for the non-alcoholic who would help the alcoholic. It is so obvious that it doesn't have to be repeated, just learned.

Born in 1920, Robert C. Hickle is a lifelong resident of Iowa. He is a veteran of both the Army and Navy during World War II, and has a B.A. Degree from Drake University in Psychology, and a M.A. Degree in Personnel Administration for the University of Iowa. He and his wife Evelyn have two married children and three grandchildren.

Bob is currently Director of Employee Assistance Programs for the Northeast Council of Substance Abuse in Waterloo, Iowa. He previously managed an employee assistance Program for the Milwaukee Road, and prior to that, was Personnel Director of a heavy equipment manufacturing company for 21 years. He started the first employee assistance program in Iowa in 1951, served on the Iowa State Commission on Alcoholism for 11 years, the last four as chairman, and has been involved in nearly every phase of the profession of helping alcoholics find sobriety.

He is an ardent outdoorsman and was a Boy Scout leader for 21 years. He is a lay speaker for the United Methodist Church, and together with his wife, Evelyn, has written a curriculum on alcohol problems to be taught at the fifth and sixth grade level throughout the United Methodist Church. He prefers above all to be considered a friend of alcoholics.

This document was transcribed by Milo Schield (March 2012) from an OCR of the original published copy. This document is a searchable copy – not a photocopy – so there may be errors. Bob Hickle was my scoutmaster and my first non-family role model as a young man. Bob was a careful thinker and a wise counselor. I want to see his thoughts live on. 3/16/2016