

William James and Alcoholics Anonymous

The Fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous owes its existence to a wide selection of persons and movements. As Bill W. wrote in *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, “many streams of influence and many people, some of them nonalcoholics, had helped, by the grace of God, to achieve A.A.’s purpose.” The fields of psychiatry and psychology were particularly important to the development of A.A. and contributed much to its foundation.

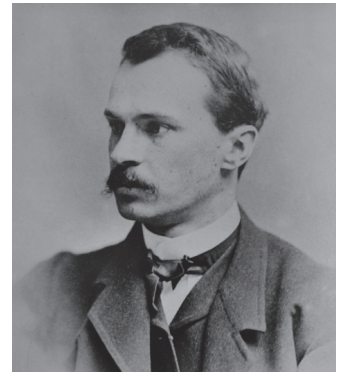
The next several issues of *Markings* will detail the life and works of prominent psychiatric or psychological professionals who helped A.A. begin and grow. This issue will highlight William James, a founder of psychology in the United States, and the author of *Varieties of Religious Experience*, which was read by Bill W. after his spiritual experience in Towns Hospital.

William James was born in 1842 into a wealthy and well-connected family. He received a good education and earned a medical degree from Harvard University in 1869. Fascinated with psychology and philosophy, he would write and teach on both subjects throughout his career as a professor at Harvard. His book *Principles of Psychology*, published in 1890, established him as an authority in the field, and served as a standard textbook for some time. He continued his academic and intellectual work, focusing mostly on the philosophic system of pragmatism, until his death in 1910.

James is best known in A.A. for his book *Varieties of Religious Experience*. Published in 1902, the book is comprised of a collection of talks he delivered in Edinburgh, Scotland, in 1901 and 1902 known as the Gifford Lectures on Natural Theology. As the title suggests, James sought to describe and analyze incidents of religious experiences. The main thesis of this work is that religious experiences, which occur to single individuals, can have objective value, and should be the focus of the study of religion. Moreover, James believed that the experiences he examined offered stronger evidence for the existence of God and the supernatural than more intellectual approaches.

James was led by pragmatism when he discussed the value of religious experiences. He believed it was not the origin but the effects of the experience which determined their worth. The mental or emotional state of the individual who had a religious experience was less important to James than the ultimate effect it had on the person. In the cases of conversion James studied, people tended to report feelings of confidence, peace, and contentedness after their religious experience, and felt less fear.

This led James to believe that religious experiences were objectively valuable and practically useful, contributing in concrete ways to the well-being of the individual. A person could be “raised up” by such an experience and be drastically improved. This was certainly true in Bill W.’s case, and it reassured Bill that he was not crazy or hallucinating, but had genuinely undergone some sort of transformation.

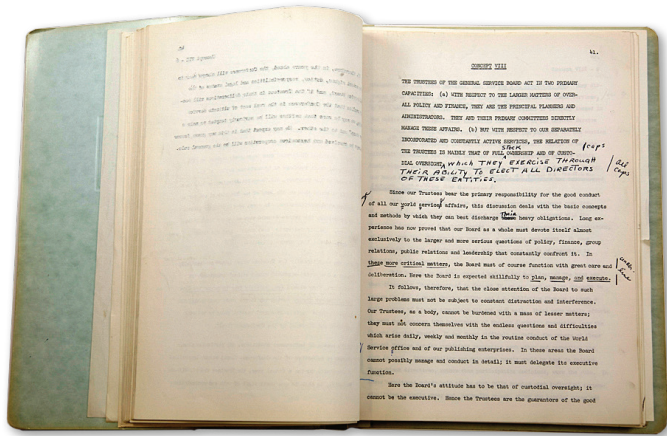


There are a large number of correlations between the A.A. program and the text of *Varieties of Religious Experiences*. Perhaps James’s most important contribution in this regard was the indirect influence he had on the first three of the Twelve Steps. When reading through *Varieties*, Bill W. noticed that the experiences which were documented all had similar traits. In particular, he saw that immediately prior to a religious or conversion experience, individuals reported significant reduction in their ego, usually due to some overwhelming burden or difficulty in their life. As a consequence, they became willing to seek help from any potential source, even an unseen but Higher Power. Bill saw that the admission of defeat, coupled with a willingness to accept outside help from a superior force, could leave an alcoholic open to a life-altering spiritual experience.

It is important to note that *Varieties* was not interested primarily in the study of theology or dogma, but rather in the relationship between individuals and what they considered to be divine. In other words, James sought to analyze each case as a unique individual, and did not seek to make their experiences fit into an existing creed. Later, A.A. would adopt the idea of “God as we understood Him,” suggesting that each member was encouraged to use whatever concept of a Higher Power they found useful. James’s flexible definition of religion and spirituality is clearly evident in this development in A.A.

Varieties of Religious Experience played a key role in the foundation of A.A. by validating Bill W.’s spiritual experience. It helped Bill realize that deflating the ego of an alcoholic was a basic component in bringing about a change in their life. It is for this reason that Bill W. considered William James to be one of the founders of Alcoholics Anonymous.

Historic Development of The Twelve Concepts



Bill W. first introduced the Concepts as “principles” at the 1956 General Service Conference. Although undefined as “concepts,” he suggested that these principles had already been unconsciously practiced in the Fellowship. In his address to the Conference Bill said:

So I now offer you four principles that might someday permeate all of A.A.'s services, principles which express tolerance, patience and love of each other; principles which could do much to avert friction, indecision and power-driving. These are not really new principles; unconsciously we have been making use of them right along. I simply propose to name them, and if you like them, their scope and application can, over coming years, be fully defined. Here are the words for them: petition, appeal, participation and decision.

In the following year, he further elaborated on other aspects of these principles, and eventually all were incorporated into what became our Twelve Concepts. As he said:

When it comes to the matter of service, the services within themselves obviously have to be organized or they won't work... Then see at what point [the service structure] may possibly need refinement and improvement... In a traditional and psychological sense, the trustees' relations to the groups and to you has been profoundly altered, not because Delegates have legal power but because Trustees know that Delegates are their linkage to A.A. as a whole.

In 1960, Bill introduced the Twelve Concepts to the General Service Conference for the first time. In a letter to Dr. Jack Norris, chairman of the General Service Board, dated November 28, 1960, Bill noted that he discussed the Twelve Concepts with Hank P., an early member, a great deal over the last year. Hank approved all of it, noting that although minor corrections should be made, the Twelve Concepts should be presented to the 1961 Conference for study purposes.

Bill also disclosed his plans to publish the Twelve Concepts, following adequate trustee and Conference approval. He wrote, “...they should be published as a paperback reference manual, with the Third Legacy Manual included in the book. We both

thought, however, that the Third Legacy Manual should continue to be separately issued.”

In a follow-up letter to Dr. Jack, dated December 16, 1960, Bill explicitly expressed his dissatisfaction and frustration at the open differences of opinion by many in respect to the Concepts. Bill wrote to Dr. Jack:

I'm glad you think we may develop but few differences over the Twelve Concepts. In any case, here is a situation that really requires no full agreement at all. The Concepts are merely a record of my service experience and the conclusions I've drawn. Nearly all the material is non-controversial. Only those few recommendations to be seen in the Concepts could afford any basis for difference. Of course these recommendations seem important to me as a means of further assuring the future of our services. Nevertheless, in this quite limited area, there could be perfectly valid differences. I could be mistaken, just as anybody else might be.

Each time I've attempted to codify and sum up our A.A. experience, considerable differences of opinion have always arisen. The Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions were — and to a degree, still are — cases in point. It would be neither surprising nor disturbing if the same thing happened in respect to the Concepts.

Consider, too, how open to change and amendment the Concepts are. I'm making little attempt to freeze these service principles. This is because a functional situation can nearly always be improved upon, and because I realize that future experience will perhaps show that in certain respects my earlier choice of basics was mistaken.

A letter from Bill dated January 1961 reveals that he worked on the Concepts for about three years before finally submitting them to the Conference in 1962. Bill goes on to write:

I found it extremely hard to organize the material. There had to be considerable repetition because often the same operational thing had to be considered from different points of view in different concepts. I guess I must have worked over these concepts from five to ten times each.

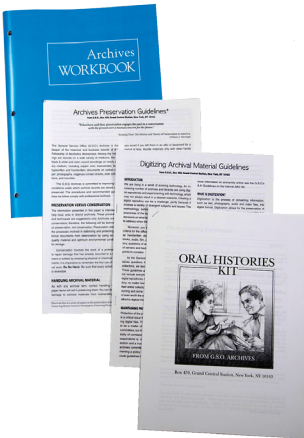
The Twelve Concepts were eventually accepted in 1962 after several hours of “vigorous and frequently impassioned discussion.” The 1962 *Conference Report* noted that the delegates accepted “Bill’s long-awaited manuscript on ‘Twelve Concepts for World Service’ and recommended that it be distributed initially as a supplement to, and eventually as an integral part of, the Third Legacy Manual.”

In his 1965 talk delivered to the Conference Bill reviewed a number of critical points in our history that could have endangered our existence.

I can vividly remember the heavy opposition to the creation of our world trusteeship in 1938, to the publication of our text book ‘Alcoholics Anonymous’ in 1939; and I can still tremble when I recall the truly fierce resistance that arouse when, in 1946, the General Service Conference of Alcoholics Anonymous was first projected.

His 1965 talk signals the final acceptance of the *Twelve Concepts for World Service* and the restructuring of the General Service Board that, up to 1965, had been heavily debated since their first official introduction in 1960.

Digitizing Archival Material



As the General Service Office Archives regularly receives questions from local A.A. Archives on digitizing collections, we've decided to address some of these issues in the new service piece "Digitizing Archival Material Guidelines." The Archives Digitization Guidelines features information on software and hardware requirements for creating a digital repository, information on how to select which material to digitize, along with information on applying metadata and technical considerations.

The G.S.O. Archives has additional resources for your local A.A. Archivist or Area Archives Committee Chair. These include:

- **Archives Workbook:** A booklet on how to set up an area or district archives. Covers preservation, oral histories, reference information, etc.
- **Archives Preservation Guidelines:** Guidelines addressing basic archival preservation procedures to help local area or district archivists.
- **Oral Histories Kit:** This kit contains tips, instructions, suggested questions, forms and templates, as well as a list of additional resources for conducting oral history interviews with longtimers.

For copies of the above material, please contact the G.S.O. Archives at 212-870-3400, or e-mail: archives@aa.org. All of the above material is also available as a free download in the "Archives and History" portal of the A.A. Web site, www.aa.org.

Anonymity in the Archives

It is the G.S.O. Archives policy to maintain the anonymity of all members, living or deceased, including our co-founders, at the level of public media. The Archives Workbook contains the following passage about Anonymity:

A Word About Anonymity

We are often asked by members if, in collecting and writing up their local or area history, full names should be used of group founders, early members or group officers, regardless of whether the manuscripts are to be retained in the area only, or are also intended for sharing with G.S.O. and other area archives. Development of procedures seems to be a matter of local policy decision by the archives committee, but the necessity for protecting the confidentiality of correspondence and the anonymity of the correspondents is without question an important consideration and a trust that falls upon all A.A. archivists and archives committees. At G.S.O., the group histories and correspondence files (going back to 1939) contain full names and addresses. It is important to remember that many of these letters were shared as

individual opinions and not with the intention of making them public. When new material arrives from groups and individuals, we continue to protect the anonymity of individuals by placing the incoming material in its category of classification, and monitor carefully each occasion when research permission has been granted a person to review the history files. Also, while adhering to the tradition of first name and last initial may be preferable, confusion can occur where two or even three people have the same first name and last initial.

With that passage in mind, you can begin to take into consideration the location of your archival display. You may choose to display more information if your local archives has exhibit space. Conversely, you may choose to limit the amount of information being displayed if material will be accessible to the general public. Each area and district will approach the level of anonymity differently. Some choose to meet as a group, prior to each exhibit or event, to discuss how much information they feel comfortable displaying. Other areas and districts leave the decision to the archivist or have written their own guidelines to be followed for any occasion. Contacting other local archives may give you some ideas on what policy you could adopt or give you other points to discuss before making a decision.

As an archivist, you may be asked to provide information or resources on the origins of A.A. in your area. In the G.S.O. Archives, approximately 100 research questions are answered a month. Questions range from requests for group histories to general information about A.A. In responding to those questions, and as a matter of policy, we do not release copies of personal correspondence. Making photocopies of letters is one of the quickest and easiest ways to break someone's anonymity, as letters contain full names and address, in addition to possible personal information.

Occasionally people do ask for information on individuals who played an important role in early A.A. history. For these requests it is acceptable to provide basic biographical information, such as date and place of birth, sobriety date, and date of death. Every member's anonymity is strictly maintained and we only use first names and last initials.

Additionally, if the letter's author requested that the letter be kept confidential, it is important to respect that wish, regardless of how long ago the letter had been written. The G.S.O. Archives strives to maintain confidentiality to everyone who may write in and ask for information, whether it was in 1940 or 2001.

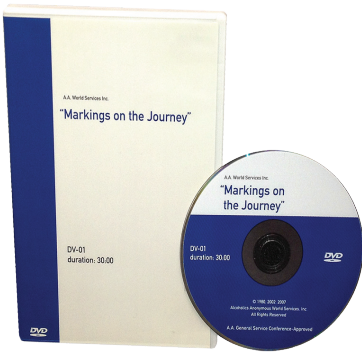
The Archival Guidelines discuss another aspect to keep in mind. It reads, "In addition to the preservation of the anonymity of the author of the correspondence, the writer's private opinions and observations, some of which might be controversial, must be treated with delicacy. In some cases members donate these documents with a trust and expectation that their remarks will be held in confidence. It is essential that the archives committee provide access to these kinds of materials only after great care and consideration to each individual's privacy."

If a researcher is visiting the G.S.O. Archives to conduct their own research, we ask that they abide by our Research Agreement which states, "Anonymity of A.A. members, both alive and deceased, must be strictly maintained. Full names of writers and

correspondents appear in the files; you are respectfully asked, if cited, to quote only the first name and last initial, thus preserving A.A.'s Eleventh Tradition, the anonymity of its members at the public media."

Striking the correct balance between providing information to answer a research question and maintaining anonymity can be complicated. Should you be doubtful regarding what to display or what not to display, you can contact other archivists for advice on how they maintain anonymity in their areas or districts or contact the G.S.O. Archives.

Markings on the Journey



Have you ever wanted to visit G.S.O.'s Archives? We welcome visitors from around the world on a daily basis, but if you cannot travel to New York, let the Archives come to you. *Markings on the Journey* takes you into the G.S.O. Archives and the history of A.A. Hear Bill W., Nell Wing, and others tell the story of A.A., using archival footage,

audio, and photographs in this 30 minute DVD, available in English, French, and Spanish, DV-01, \$16. It is perfect for the A.A. history buff or to introduce newcomers to A.A. history.

Confidential, for A.A. members only. To order, please contact the Order Entry Department. They can be reached by calling (212) 870-3312 or by e-mail at orders@aa.org.

Arizona's Archives Exhibit

For their Founder's Day Celebration, held at the Senior Center in Sunsites, Arizona, Oren A., Area 3, District 2 archivist, created displays with the theme of "Old Buildings in A.A. History." The display featured photographs of Towns Hospital in New York, St.

Thomas Hospital in Cleveland, Ohio, an article on Sister Ignatia and the Sacred Heart Badge, and the lobby of the Mayflower Hotel, where Bill W. made the phone call that would introduce him to Dr. Bob. The display also featured the Jack Alexander *Saturday Evening Post* article, the A.A. Preamble, Archival Guidelines and local Convention flyers.

In addition to the photographs and flyers were a first edition of *The A.A. Service Manual* and a second edition, first printing of the Big Book. A small pocket notebook containing notes on meetings and treasury information from the 1960s was also on display.

However, the item that seemed to draw the most attention was a photo album from Benson, Arizona, with photographs from the 1970s and 1980s. Many oldtimers spent time browsing through the book and trying to remember the names of those in the photos. Moments like these are perfect for impromptu oral histories. Have a pen and paper handy, or even a tape recorder available, to get down the information. Be sure to get consent when recording information or take down their contact information and set up a time to do an oral history elsewhere. The G.S.O. Archives has an Oral Histories Kit available for free download on the Web site.

Oren attended the Area 3 Convention in 2012, not knowing much about archives. He was fascinated by the knowledge of the Area 3 archivist and volunteered to help her. With her encouragement, he sought to become the District 2 archivist. Having knowledge of the archival methods is not a requirement to become an archivist. You only need an interest in A.A. history, and a desire to help preserve and share these important items. He hopes to gather interest in Tucson to help build an Archives Committee, and says, "It is clear to me that a rich history of Arizona A.A. exists here in Southern Arizona."

We look forward to hearing about the progress of the archives in Tucson. We also want to hear from you about the archival happening in your area or district. Send them to us at archives@aa.org or Box 459, Grand Central Station, New York, NY 10163, and they may be featured in an upcoming issue of *Markings*.