

About AA

A.A.'s 'Basic Text' Hits Another Milestone: 75 Years and Counting

The year was 1939. Hedy Lamarr, Rita Hayworth, Lana Turner and Greta Garbo were the country's pin-up queens. "There's no place like home" and "Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn" were the best-known quotes from the most popular films released that year, *The Wizard of Oz* and *Gone With the Wind*, which won the Oscar for Best Film. Germany invaded Poland, signaling the official start of World War II. The World's Fair opened in New York City, featuring the theme, "Building for the World of Tomorrow," with a buried time capsule not to be opened until the year 6939. Robert May, an employee of the Montgomery Ward department store, created the story of Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer as a Christmas promotional gimmick. Batman made his comic book debut. *The Grapes of Wrath*, by John Steinbeck, was published. And the Yankees won the World Series.

But, to a hardy band of 100 or so alcoholics, trying against all odds to hold onto their sobriety, doubtless the most important thing to happen in 1939 for them and for the countless alcoholics to come, was the appearance, in print, of *Alcoholics Anonymous*, the book that bore the name of the society of recovering alcoholics it represented.

Codifying the Program

The desire of this group to write and publish a book of their own experiences came out of a recognition by A.A. co-founders Bill W. and Dr. Bob S. that in order to keep the message of hope and recovery that they had developed intact and to effectively pass it on to other alcoholics who were waiting for some kind of help, they needed to codify what they and the early members had done and to explain the program in specific terms.

Bill W. recalled how it all came about: "On a late fall afternoon in 1937, Smithy [Dr. Bob] and I were talking together in his living room." By then, the groups in Akron and New York were firmly established. "But it was still flying blind — a flickering candle indeed, because it might at any minute be snuffed out. So we began counting noses. How many people had stayed dry in Akron, in New York, maybe a few in Cleveland? And when we added up that score, it was a handful, 35 to 40 maybe. But enough time had elapsed on enough really fatal cases of alcoholism that Bob and I foresaw for the first time that this thing was going to succeed.

"I can never forget the elation and ecstasy that seized us both. It had taken three years to sober up the handful, and there had been an immense amount of failure. How could this handful carry its message to all those who still didn't know? Not all the drunks in the world could come to Akron or to New York. How could we transmit our message to them?" The two began mulling over the possibilities. "We'd have to get some kind of literature," they concluded, as "Up to this moment, not a syllable of this

program was in writing. It was a kind of word-of-mouth deal, with variations according to each man's or woman's standing...

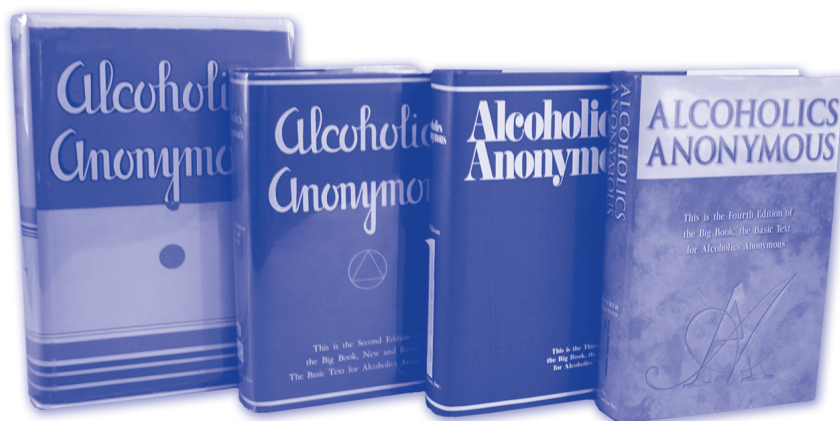
"How could we unify this thing?" Bill asked. "Could we, out of our experience, describe certain methods that had done the trick for us? Obviously, if this movement was to propagate, it had to have literature so its message would not be garbled, either by the drunk or by the general public."

The Book Is Born

Following a period of several years in which Bill W. and the early members set about putting their experiences into print, the book finally appeared in April 1939, published by Works Publishing Company and spanning 400 pages.

Widely distributed, both among alcoholics seeking help and those professionals who dealt with alcoholics and their families on a regular basis, many in the medical and religious communities contributed their thoughts on its contents. A 1939 review of the book by the *Journal of the American Osteopathic Association* called the stories "gripping," and the *New England Journal of Medicine* urged all who at some time had to deal with the problem of alcoholism to read "this stimulating account." And, while a review in *The New York Times* referred to it as "a strange book" and "unlike any other book before published," the reviewer, Percy Hutchison, noted that "the general thesis of *Alcoholics Anonymous* is more soundly based psychologically than any other treatment of the subject I have ever come upon."

From the world of religion, Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick, the founding minister of Riverside Church in New York and a professor at Union Theological Seminary, wrote, "This extraordinary book deserves the careful attention of anyone interested in the problem of alcoholism. Whether as victims, friends of victims, physicians, clergymen, psychiatrists or social workers ... this book will give them, as no other treatise known to this reviewer will, an inside view of the problem which the alcoholic faces.... The book is not in the least sensational," he continued. "It is notable for its sanity, restraint, and free-



dom from over-emphasis and fanaticism. It is a sober, careful, tolerant, sympathetic treatment of the alcoholic's problem and the successful techniques by which its co-authors have won their freedom."

As the book began to take hold, selling over 300,000 copies in its first 15 years, it continued reaching an ever broader audience. Following publication of the book's second edition in 1955, a reviewer in the *Quarterly Journal of Studies on Alcohol* wrote, "When I first heard about A.A. more than two decades ago, the original *Alcoholics Anonymous* book had not yet been published. The story was that a few alcoholics had gotten together and formed a club or society to help one another overcome their problems of drunkenness. Later it became known that they had written a book describing their method, and they believed they had found the golden key, the solution to the problem of alcoholism. It sounded like another crackpot scheme, like so many other 'cures' for alcoholism, many with 'books' to explain them; it was bound to fail in wide application. Years after, when the movement persisted, it was unavoidable to read the book. It became possible to recognize that here was an exception. Indeed, it was impossible not to recognize that this book was a phenomenon, that in spite of the disadvantages of collective authorship it spoke from and to the heart and carried something rare in literature: a positive therapeutic potential."

Still later, with publication of the third edition in 1976, Dr. Abraham Twerski, Director of the Gateway Rehabilitation Center, wrote in the *Employee Assistance Quarterly*, "The Twelve Steps are a protocol for personality, for growth, and for self-realization, a process of value to even the non-alcoholic or non-addicted individual. Thus, even if science should someday discover a physiologic solution to the destructive effects of alcohol, the personality enhancing value of the Big Book will continue."

Now in its fourth edition and 75th year of continuous publication, it is expected that sometime in 2014 the 40 millionth copy of the book *Alcoholics Anonymous* will be sold. Available in 70 languages, plus American Sign Language and Braille, with multiple print, audio and electronic formats, A.A.'s basic text has provided a blueprint for recovery from alcoholism that has been followed successfully by millions of alcoholics worldwide.

To commemorate this milestone, A.A. World Services, Inc. will make available a facsimile edition of the book's first printing, with paper similar to the original and with the same binding, content and book jacket. For more information contact the General Service Office or visit www.aa.org.

Anonymity — Then and Now

"In the beginning," wrote A.A. co-founder Bill W., "anonymity was not born of confidence; it was the child of our early fears. Our first nameless groups of alcoholics were secret societies. New prospects could find us only through a few trusted friends. The bare hint of publicity, even for our work, shocked us. Though ex-drinkers, we still thought we had to hide from public distrust and contempt."

Over the years, however, as the Fellowship matured and the general public learned more about alcoholism, the concept of anonymity came to mean a great deal more to A.A. and to its individual members, such that when A.A.'s Twelve Traditions were first presented to the Fellowship in 1946, Tradition Twelve clearly articulated anonymity as "the spiritual foundation of all our Traditions, ever reminding us to place principles before personalities."

"Anonymity is real humility at work," noted Bill W. some years later in the book *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, which spelled out the fundamental building blocks of the A.A. program. "It is an

all-pervading spiritual quality which today keynotes A.A. life everywhere. Moved by the spirit of anonymity, we try to give up our natural desires for personal distinction as A.A. members both among fellow alcoholics and before the general public. As we lay aside these very human aspirations, we believe that each of us takes part in the weaving of a protective mantle which covers our whole Society and under which we may grow and work in unity."

Anonymity and New Media Technologies

This evolution of anonymity, while providing support and guidance on a daily basis to alcoholics around the world, takes on a special importance in today's fast-paced, high-tech world, a world in which A.A. members and others are accessing the Internet in ever-growing numbers and in ways that couldn't have been imagined even ten years ago. Chatting online with members halfway around the globe has become commonplace, and a tremendous amount of information about A.A. and alcoholism is often just a click away. Yet, with the incredible reach and scope of the Internet come challenges, and while the Internet and new technology clearly have changed the ways in which some A.A. members interact, the importance of anonymity has not dimmed.

"If we look at the history of A.A., from its beginning in 1935 until now," says the A.A. pamphlet "Understanding Anonymity," "it is clear that anonymity serves two different yet equally vital functions:

"At the personal level, anonymity provides protection for all members from identification as alcoholics, a safeguard often of special importance to newcomers.

"At the level of press, radio, TV, films and new media technologies such as the Internet, anonymity stresses the equality in the Fellowship of all members by putting the brake on those who might otherwise exploit their A.A. affiliation to achieve recognition, power, or personal gain."

Regarding the question, "What about anonymity online?" the pamphlet "Understanding Anonymity" suggests that "When we use digital media, we are responsible for our own anonymity and that of others. When we post, text, or blog, we should assume that we are publishing at the public level. When we break our anonymity in these forums, we may inadvertently break the anonymity of others."

Expanding this question further, the pamphlet adds that "Publicly accessible aspects of the Internet such as Web sites featuring text, graphics, audio and video can be considered the same as publishing or broadcasting. Unless password-protected, a Web site requires the same safeguards that we use at the level of press, radio and film. Simply put, this means that A.A.s do not identify themselves as A.A. members using their full names and/or full-face photos."

(More on this subject in the next issue.)

How Can A.A. Help You?

Would you be interested in having an A.A. presentation at one of your professional gatherings? Or would you like information about recovery from alcoholism in A.A.? If so, please contact the C.P.C. desk at the General Service Office, P.O. Box 459, Grand Central Station, New York, NY 10163, or cpc@aa.org. We welcome your questions, comments and requests.

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