

About

A.A. and Nonalcoholic Friends – a Debt of Gratitude

Sixty-five years ago, drunkenness was considered a moral weakness and alcoholics were sinners to be scorned or hidden away in mental institutions. Alcoholics Anonymous, founded in 1935 by two newly sober drunks, might never have survived without the help of nonalcoholic doctors and nurses, clergy, journalists, businessmen, and others who risked their professional reputations to support the struggling Fellowship. A.A. owes an unimaginable debt to these nonalcoholic friends, whose vision and faith not only helped the struggling movement through its painful early years, but were instrumental in shaping the principles that continue to guide it today. Their legacy can be most clearly seen in the nonalcoholics who have served as members of the Fellowship's board of trustees, men and women from a variety of disciplines who willingly share our problems without sharing our disease.

Alcoholics Anonymous is now a widely known and respected movement with more than two million members around the world. And our nonalcoholic friends continue to find that working with A.A. and its members brings them both professional and personal benefits.

Nonalcoholics Helped Shape A.A.

The now-familiar story of Alcoholics Anonymous began in 1934, when Bill W., a stockbroker from New York City with a long history of hopeless drinking, landed in Towns Hospital for one of many stays under the care of Dr. William Silkworth. Bill at long last did sober up and immediately began to look for other alcoholics to work with in order to stay sober himself. He later wrote in A.A.'s magazine, *The Grapevine* (August 1957) about "the benign little doctor who loved drunks, . . . the man who we now realize was very much a founder of A.A. From him we learned the nature of our illness. And he supplied us with the tools with which to puncture the toughest alcoholic ego, . . . *the obsession of the mind* that compels us to drink and *the allergy (sic) of the body* that condemns us to go mad or die." A few years later, Dr. Silkworth put his professional standing on the line by publicly endorsing the budding movement in his "Doctor's Opinion" in the Fellowship's basic text, *Alcoholics Anonymous*.

Some months after Bill's last drink, on a business trip to Akron, Ohio, it was another nonalcoholic, Henrietta Sieberling, who introduced Bill to a prominent local doctor and notorious drunk, Dr. Bob S. A.A.'s birthday is observed on June 10, the day in 1935 that Dr. Bob took his last drink.

The two men, realizing that they needed to help others in order to hang on to their sobriety, began looking for other alcoholics to help. Many of their prospects were in need of hospitalization – but hospitals in the 1930s did not have alcoholic wards. That was when Sister Ignatia, of the Sisters of Charity of St. Augustine, came on the scene. In *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, a history of the first 20 years of A.A., Bill tells "the classic story about the first drunk she and Dr. Bob treated." Dr. Bob had arrived at St. Thomas Hospital with a request for a private room for a very sick prospect. Risking her credibility, to say nothing of her job, "Sister Ignatia said to him, 'Doctor, we do not have any beds,

much less private rooms, but I will do what I can.' And then into the hospital's flower room she slyly bootlegged A.A.'s first jittering candidate for admission."

The story of A.A. is peopled with nonalcoholics such as these, too numerous to mention by name, men and women who, believing the brand-new movement would work, held out their hands. In both Akron and New York City, the early A.A.s attended meetings of the Oxford Group and were greatly influenced by its New York leader, the Episcopal clergyman Samuel Shoemaker. "It was from him that Dr. Bob and I in the beginning had absorbed most of the principles that were afterward embodied in the Twelve Steps. . . . Dr. Silkworth gave us the needed knowledge of our illness, but Sam Shoemaker had given us the concrete knowledge of what we could do about it." (*Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, p 39)

Dr. Harry Tiebout, a prominent psychiatrist, became interested in A.A. when two of his patients joined and got sober; the doctor became a staunch supporter and was instrumental in arranging for Bill to speak to medical societies. Friends in the press got the word out, notably Fulton Oursler in *Liberty* magazine and the *Saturday Evening Post* writer Jack Alexander, whose landmark article sparked the surge of growth that propelled A.A. throughout the U.S.A., Canada, and finally the world.

Businessmen like John D. Rockefeller, Jr. and his associates sowed the seeds of A.A.'s Tradition of self-support, a principle that has enabled the Fellowship to avoid dependence on other organizations and steer clear of the danger that "he who pays the piper calls the tune." And later A.A. welcomed to its board such friends as corporate lawyer Bernard Smith, who was instrumental in the formation of A.A.'s service structure; Dr. John L. Norris ("Dr. Jack"), longtime trustee and board chair; prison administrator Austin MacCormick; and sociologist Dr. Milton Maxwell.

A.A. Establishes a Board of Trustees

The Alcoholic Foundation, now the A.A. General Service Board (of trustees), was established in May 1938, primarily to handle the anticipated surge of money and inquiries that would follow the publication of the Big Book, *Alcoholics Anonymous*. The lawyer who worked on the original foundation trust agreement "had never seen anything like it," Bill wrote in the June 1947 *Grapevine*. "The new foundation should, we insisted, have two classes of trustees – alcoholics and nonalcoholics. . . . That, said our attorney, was unheard of. We explained that we wanted our friends with us. And besides, we urged, suppose all of us alcoholics should get drunk at once, who then would hang on to the money? Surmounting many such obstacles, the Alcoholic Foundation was finally inaugurated. It had four nonalcoholic and three alcoholic trustees."

By 1966 the alcoholics had come to realize that they could handle money and responsibility, and the ratio of trustees was changed. Today, the General Service Board is composed of 14 alcoholics (Class Bs) and 7 nonalcoholics (Class As). Alcoholic trustees are nominated by the membership, and are not required to have specific professional backgrounds. Thus, one important func-

tion of nonalcoholic trustees is to bring balance to the board in terms of business and professional expertise.

Even more basic, however, are the two qualifications spelled out in the bylaws of the General Service Board. "Class A member trustees shall be persons who are not and have not been afflicted by the disease of alcoholism and who express a profound faith in the recovery program upon which the Fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous is founded." Gary A. Glynn, who currently serves as board chair and came to A.A. from a background in finance and business, elaborated on that: "Notice the bylaws don't say 'think it works,' or 'does good for society,' or anything like that. It says 'profound faith.' That means a spiritual dimension that all our Class As are expected to have. Without it, their specialized backgrounds would be of little use to A.A. because they would never be able to understand how important the Steps, Traditions and Concepts are, and they would never really grasp how important A.A. is to its members."

Nonalcoholic trustees over the years have numbered among their ranks medical doctors, psychiatrists, lawyers, social workers, clergy, businessmen and women, journalists, public health executives, law enforcement and prison officials, each bringing a valuable perspective to the work of the board. Bill W. wrote in the November 1951 Grapevine: "Because of their detached position they have often shown better judgment than we mercurial and prejudiced alcoholics. Not only have they stabilized our Headquarters operation; they have definitely saved the Foundation from disaster on several occasions."

Sociologist Joan Jackson, a past trustee, described the various functions of today's seven Class A trustees: "We come to the board without the preconceptions that are so much a part of the thinking of members of A.A. In having to explain everything to us, Class B trustees have to clarify their own thinking about what they may take for granted; to review what they do, think, and stand for; to examine the whys as well as the whats and the hows.

"Coming from the outside world, we bring the outside world's perspective to what we hear and learn and do as board members. . . . Class As can bring perspective to the board when problems of relating to the outside world are under consideration. . . . And we interpret many aspects of A.A. to the outside world. If we are respected in our professions — and, in part, we are chosen because of our background — our nonalcoholic colleagues will listen.

"And last but by no means least, when the board needs someone nonanonymous to represent A.A. to the public — we're it."

Sharing the Experience

Recently, the A.A. General Service Office asked past and present nonalcoholic trustees to share their experience of serving on the board. One theme that ran strongly through the replies was that of gratitude to A.A. Some cited family members or close friends who had been restored to sobriety and sanity through the Fellowship; others had cooperated with A.A. members in the course of their work, and discovered that A.A. has much to give professionals who work with active alcoholics, both professionally and personally; and most had discovered that being associated with the Fellowship had brought new dimensions to their personal lives as well.

Past trustee and board chair W. Jim Estelle, a correctional administrator, became interested in A.A. when he observed members who brought meetings into prisons. "Imagine, if you will, my astonishment when I realized that among those faithful and persevering pilgrims were a few ex-convicts! Smiling and sober, no less. At that point, I realized the potential this Fellowship of alcoholics represented. And as a prison administrator and steward of public monies, it struck me that the prison budget was not even dented by this program; to the contrary, the outside sponsors wanted to know how Alcoholics Anonymous might furnish literature which augmented one drunk talking to another drunk." Jim added that "several of my co-workers and close friends (with drinking problems) have chosen A.A. as a way to safety and sani-

ty. For this reason alone, I have a debt of gratitude which cannot be discharged."

Gary Glynn originally became familiar with A.A. because a close family member found sobriety. He says that, "My debt to A.A. is immeasurable. Originally I got involved in service to try to repay that debt, but my reasons for wanting to serve have gone well beyond just that. A.A. is the most remarkable group of people I know. . . . I always feel better at the end of an A.A. function than I did at the beginning, and love to see how people put their personal desires and ambitions aside in the interests of unity."

Another businessman, current trustee Art Knight, says: "My prior experience taught me one paradigm for conducting business, but my participation on the General Service Board taught me a new, and much better, model. . . . I've learned that one can disagree without being disagreeable. . . . I have discovered a deeper and more meaningful relationship with my higher power that has helped me to change. And the more I practice those Twelve Steps in my own life, the more I change — for the better."

Past trustee Peter Roach, an educator who considers his trusteeship "one of the most rewarding experiences of my life," numbers several alcoholics in his family and was highly critical of them as "stupid" and "irresponsible." He says that "A.A. helped me understand the disease."

Trustee Linda Chezem writes: "When I became a trial judge, I wanted to be a good one. It took me several months of seeing the same defendants, hung over and miserable, charged with public intoxication or disorderly conduct, to realize alcohol was a major factor in a large part of the criminal justice caseload.

"I did not know much about alcoholism. . . . I started to seek resources, only to learn there will never be enough money for every alcoholic to receive hospital care. . . . But I learned that the hand of A.A. is there for any alcoholic who will accept it. I have also learned, on my personal journey, that the Twelve Steps are there for any of us to use."

George Vaillant, M.D., wrote: "I am not a Class A trustee because A.A. helped save my life. I am not a trustee because A.A. saved the life of someone that I loved. I am a trustee because of all the organizations I have ever been involved with, A.A. is the one that has evoked my deepest admiration. I am a trustee of A.A. because A.A. works." Educator and alcoholism counselor Leonard Blumenthal echoed those words: "I saw again and again that the A.A. program works. I realized that if I did nothing more than bring alcoholics looking for recovery to this Fellowship, I would come a very long way." And he adds, "I found out early on that the Twelve Step program of A.A. could be applied to anyone's life."

Corporate lawyer Michael Alexander first came across A.A. when he was a young associate working for Bernard Smith, who helped Bill W. plan A.A.'s service structure. Mike, who served as a trustee for 17 years, five of them as chairman of the board, says that the first alcoholic he ever met was Bill W. In a farewell talk when he rotated off the board, Mike said: "Nothing I had learned at law school prepared me for my first encounter with A.A. But Bill W. and Bernard Smith believed in A.A. and had given their lives over to A.A., and that was good enough for me.

"My term as chairman has been deeply rewarding to me spiritually. I will sorely miss the excitement, challenge and satisfaction that come with the office. Most of all, I will miss the almost boundless opportunity to share views with members of A.A. at all levels of service.

"I am a different person because of A.A., and I believe a better person. I am not an alcoholic. No member of my family is an alcoholic. Until I came to A.A., I had no friends who were alcoholics. It has seemed to me that destiny had to work very hard to bring A.A. and me together. But it happened, and because of it I am a lucky man."

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