

MARKINGS

YOUR ARCHIVES INTERCHANGE

VOL. XXIII • No. 2 — Winter 2003

c/o G.S.O., 475 Riverside Drive, New York, NY 10115

Back in 1986, a Warning Against Rigidity in A.A.

Bob P., who served A.A.'s General Service Office over the years in various capacities, delivered this closing talk at the 1986 Conference.

This is my 18th General Service Conference, the first two as a director of the Grapevine and A.A.W.S., followed by four as a general service trustee. In 1972 I rotated out completely — only to be called back two years later as general manager of G.S.O., the service job I held until late 1984. Since the International Convention last year, of course, I have been senior advisor. This is also my last Conference, so this is a special moment for me, an emotionally charged experience, so I have taken the liberty of writing out this talk.

Since this is listed on your agenda as a closing talk, you might reasonably expect it to relate to what has taken place at this Conference. But it won't. I'm not even going to refer to this fine Conference theme [Our Singleness of Purpose — Key to Unity], except to say it is very appropriate, and I will express my personal thoughts on A.A.'s future in a few minutes.

I wish I had time to express my thanks to everyone — in this room and elsewhere — to whom I am indebted for my sobriety and for the joyous life with which I have been blessed for the past nearly 25 years. But since this is obviously impossible, I will fall back on the Arab saying that Bill quoted in his last message, "I thank you for your life." For without your lives, I most certainly would have no life at all, much less the incredibly rich life I have enjoyed.

I came into A.A. in 1961, so I have lived through nearly half of our Fellowship's history. And with each passing year, I feel more and more blessed to have come in when many of the early giants of A.A. were still around. I knew Bill, of course, and literally sat at his feet as he spun his famous "bedtime story." I heard Bernard Smith deliver his last talk at the Miami International Convention. Brilliant and articulate, his contributions were tremendous. Marty M. helped me in my early sobriety and I even lunched frequently at the ANSA Club with "Popsie" M. who took Marty to her first meeting at 182 Clinton Street. Also with Bert T. whose loan from his mortgaged shop enabled the Big Book to be published. It was Dr. Harry Tiebout who sent me to A.A.

They are all gone now and legions more like them. The memories bring tears to my eyes. But there is one remarkable A.A. pioneer still with us today — Dr. Jack Norris. He has been a tower of strength for over 36 years. He has lived more A.A. history than the rest of us put together; indeed he not only lived it, he helped make it. Cherish him. We will not see his like again.

The other person here I must thank by name is John B. He came on board at G.S.O. in May 1984 and in due course succeeded me. Thanks to his tolerance and understanding, the succession has been effected without a harsh word or an uncomfortable situation between us. John has a fine mind and a wealth of management know-how, and he is a very active and faithful member of A.A. We are fortunate to have him in this period of some serious problems. G.S.O.'s affairs are in good hands.

Some years ago, the Conference had as its theme "Service — the Heart of A.A." If service is indeed the heart of A.A., then truly our staff members are the heart of service. Working with them these past 12 years has been not only a unique privilege, but one of richest pleasures of my A.A. life. I will always be grateful to them for having taught me so much — and for giving me so much support and love. And when I speak of the staff, I am, of course, including those devoted and able people at the Grapevine.

Nor can I let this opportunity pass without thanking another group of people: our nonalcoholic friends and co-workers at G.S.O., Dennis Manders and Nell Wing, with both of whom I have just been spending considerable time in connection with my current and continuing project of writing the in-depth history of our Fellowship. Ed Gordon and Madeline Whitlock Jordan and Shirley Grant and Dotty McGinity. Yes, and Tony and Elizabeth and Lynda (whom you all know!) and all the others to whom we all owe so much. For the rest of my life, when I refer to these extraordinary, dedicated friends, I'll write "Nonalcoholic" with a capital "N." They, too, have given me the great gift of their friendship and love.

Tomorrow we will say good-bye to our rotating trustees — an occasion that almost always breaks me up, because we at G.S.O. get to know the trustees so well. I have worked with literally scores of trustees over the years, and some of them are my dearest personal friends today. I am

particularly grateful to have worked with such legendary Class A trustees as the great Austin McCormick, Archie Roosevelt, Travis Dancy, Arthur Miles, Mike Alexander and Jim Estelle. I had the unique opportunity to report to three chairmen of the General Service Board: Dr. Jack; Milton Maxwell, a dear man who advanced immeasurably the understanding of A.A. by professionals; and our present able, sensitive and dedicated chairman, Gordon Patrick. All three have given me generous support, have helped me grow and have enriched my life.

Now, what of you, the delegates? During my time on the boards and at G.S.O., I've known and worked with about 1,700 of you. You, of course, are what service is all about. You're the cornerstone of the whole service structure — not just here in this room, but back in your areas where the day-to-day work is done. Two past delegates — delegates who never went on to trusteeship and are, in fact, junior to me in sobriety — are today my valued and beloved A.A. sponsors: one in the East and one out West.

Actually, neither credit nor gratitude can be apportioned among the different kinds of service workers — so much to this group, so much to that. All are essential, regardless of title. In fact, the most important title in Alcoholics Anonymous — the only one that really counts — is "A.A. member." As they say, "The highest you can get in A.A. is sober."

What is true throughout A.A. is that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Just as in an A.A. group, a bunch of sick people are transformed into a healing force that has electrified the world, and a bunch of society's losers are transformed into winners — so all of us in this room — delegates, trustees, staff and directors — are more than just the sum of ourselves. We are transformed into the group conscience of A.A. as a whole. We are also the torchbearers for those who have gone before. Just as they passed the torch to us, so shall we pass it on to service workers yet to come.

What we have done here this week rests solidly on the actions of the 35 other Conferences that went before us. Likewise, what we did here will surely affect what future Conferences will do. Thus, all of us are part of the continuum of A.A. history. To some small degree then — as stated in our Conference theme — each of us is responsible for A.A.'s future.

Those last remarks are a direct quote from the closing talk* which my predecessor, Bob H., delivered nine years ago. Some indication of his remarkable prescience and wisdom! Indeed, there are a handful of people in this room who may have realized by now what a sneaky trick I have pulled here: I have lifted Bob H.'s own closing talk almost in its entirety, adapting it as my own, with my own experiences and my own feelings. Bob was only the third paid manager of G.S.O. after Bill turned the job over (Hank G. and Herb M. went before him); I was the fourth and you, John, are the fifth. Bob was also my service sponsor and

my friend, whom I loved very much and to whom I owe probably the largest debt of gratitude of all. When I heard him deliver his talk to the 1977 Conference, I knew through my tears, what my own closing talk would be. Isn't that the way A.A. works?

But now let me conclude by offering my own thoughts about A.A.'s future. I have no truck with those bleeding deacons who decry every change and view the state of the Fellowship with pessimism and alarm. On the contrary, from my nearly quarter century's perspective, I see Alcoholics Anonymous as larger, healthier, more dynamic, faster growing, more global, more service-minded, more back-to-basics, and more spiritual — by far — than when I came through the doors of my first meeting in Greenwich, Connecticut, just one year after the famous Long Beach Convention. A.A. has flourished beyond the wildest dreams of founding members — though perhaps not of Bill himself, for he was truly visionary.

I echo those who feel that if this Fellowship ever falters or fails, it will not be because of any outside cause. No, it will not be because of treatment centers or professionals in the field or non-Conference-approved literature, or young people or the dually-addicted or even the druggies trying to come to our closed meetings. If we stick close to our Traditions and our Concepts and our Warranties — and if we keep an open mind and an open heart — we can deal with these and any other problems that we have or ever will have. If we ever falter and fail, it will be simply because of us. It will be because we can't control our own egos, nor get along well enough with each other. It will be because we have too much fear and rigidity and not enough trust and common sense.

I mentioned rigidity. If you were to ask me what is the greatest danger facing Alcoholics Anonymous today, I would have to answer: the growing rigidity that is so apparent to me and many others. The increasing demand for absolute answers to nit-picking questions. Pressure for G.S.O. to "enforce" our Traditions. Screening alcoholics at closed meetings. Prohibiting non-Conference-approved literature, i.e., "banning books." Laying more and more rules on groups and members. The decline of the church at the end of the Middle Ages was symbolized by their neglect of human suffering and the souls of sinners to argue in their conclaves over "how many angels can stand on the head of a pin." My friends, at our conclave this week, I heard some arguments over "how many angels can stand on the head of a pin."

And in this trend toward rigidity, we are drifting farther and farther away from our co-founders. Bill, in particular, must be spinning in his grave, for I remind you that he was perhaps the most permissive person I ever met. One of his favorite sayings was, "Every group has the right to be wrong;" he was maddeningly tolerant of his critics; and he had absolute faith that faults in A.A. were self-correcting.

And I believe this too, so in the final analysis, we're not

* Bob H.'s closing talk was reprinted in the 2003. No. 1. Vol. XXIII issue of *Markings*.

going to fall apart. We won't falter or fail. At the 1970 International Convention in Miami, I was in the audience on that Sunday morning when Bill made his last brief public appearance — only a few minutes, really. He was too ill to take his scheduled part in any other Convention event, but now, unannounced, on Sunday morning, he was wheeled up from the back of the stage in a wheelchair, attached with tubes to an oxygen tank. Wearing a ridiculous bright orange host committee blazer, he heaved his angular body to his feet and grasped the podium — and all pandemonium broke loose. I thought the thunderous applause and the cheering would never stop, tears streaming down every cheek. Finally, in a firm voice like his old self, Bill spoke a few gracious sentences about the huge crowd (about one-fifth the number who were in Montreal) and the outpouring of love and the many members there from overseas and (as I remember) with these words: "As I look out over this crowd, I know that Alcoholics Anonymous will live a thousand years — if it is God's will."

That's precisely how I feel as we part this afternoon. A.A. will indeed and surely live a thousand years. If it is God's will!

Where the Bowery Meets Sobriety

The Alpha Group, a long-time A.A. outpost on the Bowery in New York City, got its start in 1965. Alpha met at the Men's Municipal Lodging House (now called the Men's Shelter), a city-run institution for the homeless that occupies a building on East Third Street.

The A.A. members who founded the group included one named Skull and another who came into the program at the time the Big Book was published in 1939. I started attending meetings at the Alpha Group in 1968. Over the years, many of the thousands who passed through the shelter got to hear the A.A. message thanks to the Alpha Group and those founding members.

These same men later started a second meeting at the Men's Shelter, The Last Chance Group. Beginning in 1982, though, the shelter system in New York came under intense scrutiny as the number of homeless exploded. Previously all but ignored, the Men's Shelter on the Bowery became the focal point of a city-wide effort to serve the homeless.

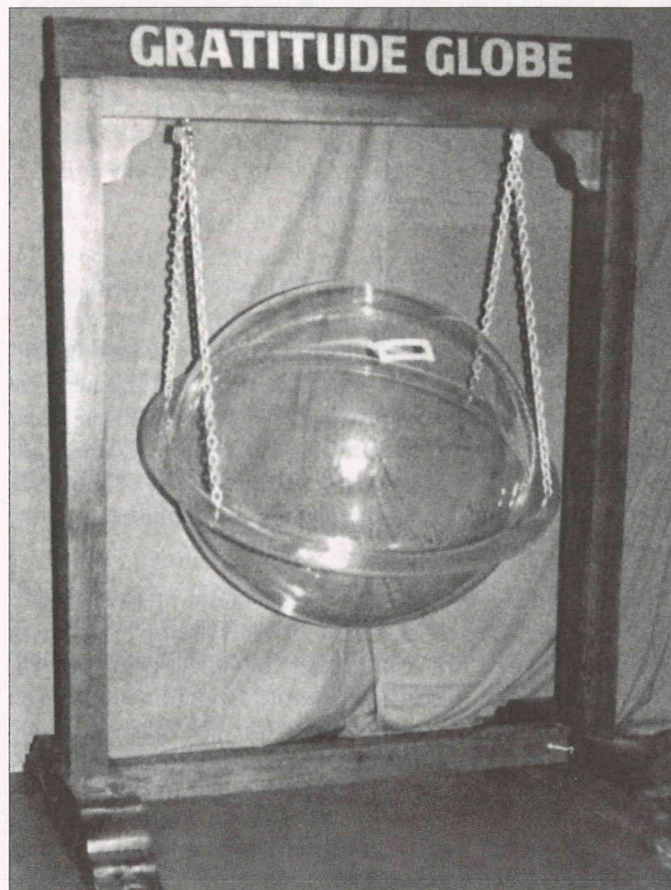
A casualty of this focus by city administrators was The Last Chance Group, which ceased to meet. The Alpha Group, however, survived and continued to meet at the shelter on East Third Street.

At one time, Alpha was listed by Intergroup as an open meeting, with many people from the neighborhood attending. Starting in 1987, though, the city decided that A.A. meetings in homeless shelters would no longer be open to anyone except those living in the shelters. Henceforth,

homeless shelter meetings would be run by the A.A. Institutions Committee.

The Alpha Group was sponsored by a shelter program for recovering alcoholics, the Supported Work Program, which is now on Skilman Avenue in Brooklyn. The group is independent of the program and brings in outside speakers, and in 2003 the Alpha Group celebrates 38 years of service.

Phil P., New York



Organizers of the Calgary Gratitude Roundup came up with the idea for a globe as a symbol of A.A.'s worldwide presence and as a handy reciprocal for donations.

A Gratitude Globe For a Global A.A.

It was more than 20 years ago that organizers of the Calgary Gratitude Roundup were wondering what they could do to make it easy for attendees to contribute financially to the A.A. Fellowship worldwide. The organizers were aware that many groups, through oversight or lack of organization, never acquired the habit of sending contributions to the General Service Office in New York. What was

wanted was something eye-catching that would also symbolize the worldwide appeal of the A.A. program. The organizers hit upon the idea of a globe, and then found a company that could manufacture a hollow sphere of quarter-inch Plexiglas with a slot at the top. The Gratitude Globe, which is three feet in diameter and hangs suspended from a wooden frame, made its debut at the 1982 Roundup. That year attendees dropped \$2,170 into the Globe. The Gratitude Globe has made its appearance at the Calgary Gratitude Roundup every year since, and all the money donated goes to G.S.O. This Calgary tradition has taken firm root, with some groups collecting during the year and making an annual contribution at the Roundup.

Pennsylvania A.A. Takes a Look Back

The Multi-District History and Archives Gathering took place this past April at Central Pennsylvania College in Summerdale. The one-day event, which was hosted by District 36, began with an address by Chet H. of Hummelstown, who talked about his service going back to the 1940s. At that time the District (it was called an Area back then) ran from the Maryland border to Olean and Elmira, N.Y., and from just east of Altoona to Reading and Pottsville — a time when the nearest available facility for detox might be 100 miles away.

Chet was followed by Traynor H., now of Brigantine, N.J., who told of getting sober in Harrisburg more than 56 years ago, and about his sober life in A.A. in Eastern Pennsylvania since then (he moved to Brigantine in 2002). Traynor left Harrisburg for the Philadelphia area in 1949-50, and this was his first time back. His talk was one of the high points of the Gathering.

Following Chet and Traynor, there was a break for conversation, for looking at the Archives exhibits, and for lunch. There were exhibits from individual districts, from Philadelphia Intergroup (officially South Eastern Pennsylvania Intergroup Association or SEPIA), from Eastern Pennsylvania (Area 59), from North Jersey (Area 44), from Maryland (Area 29), and from Mitchell K. of Washingtonville and Middletown, N.Y.

Philadelphia Intergroup exhibited a copy of the scrapbook kept by Jimmy B. in Philadelphia from 1940 to 1946. Maryland exhibited copies of letters from Jimmy B. and Fitz M. (who was a co-founder of Philadelphia A.A., as Jimmy B. was of Baltimore A.A.).

Copies of other early documents were in the Eastern Pennsylvania and North Jersey exhibits. The Maryland exhibit included a first-edition (11th printing) Big Book, with Bill W.'s autograph and those of all the delegates in Panels

1 and 2, and apparently some in Panel 3. Holding that first edition, leafing through it, and looking at the signatures was a remarkable experience.

After lunch, three presenters spoke briefly of how they did A.A. history and how they used archives, and then answered questions. Mel B. of Toledo, Ohio, spoke of his experience writing the life of Ebby T.

Nancy O. of Wilkes-Barre, Pa., who has recently written a history of the Hughes Act, spoke. Mitchell K. spoke of putting together the Clarence S. Archive (now in the John Hay Library at Brown University) and writing the biography of Clarence S.

Following the historians' panel, Tom J. of the General Service Office spoke on the history and purposes of the G.S.O. Archives in New York, with which he has been associated for more than 20 years. Tom's presentation, we believe, was another high point of the Gathering, giving those in attendance a clear idea of how the New York Archives were put together. He emphasized the paramount importance of the preservation efforts being undertaken, noting that each of the three archivists, Nell Wing, Frank M., and Judit S. has contributed in turn to the work. Tom answered questions for about 20 minutes.

After a break, there was a panel on Archives and History, with B. J. F., the archivist of Eastern Pennsylvania (Area 59), Bill H. of the Maryland Archives Committee (Area 29), and Mike G. of the Philadelphia Intergroup [SEPIA] Archives. B.J. talked about what he looks for from the local level in building the Area Archives, and how he encourages use by local A.A. historians; Bill talked about finding out what was in the Maryland Archives and bringing it to the attention of the A.A. community, how best to present the Archives and who they hoped would be using them — once again concentrating on the links between Maryland and Eastern Pennsylvania; Mike talked about Philadelphia Intergroup's efforts in collecting materials to write their history of the Intergroup and of A.A. in Philadelphia, including talking to Jimmy B.'s niece. After the presentations, the members of the panel answered questions.

To quote Dr. Bob in his talk at an A.A. anniversary meeting, "In my mind, the spirit of service was of prime importance, but I found out that it had to be bulked up with some knowledge of our subject." We did a lot of bulking up in Summerdale on April 5th.

Our prayer, in Bill's words at the 1953 Conference: "May the great service heart of Alcoholics Anonymous, which beats in the center of this gathering, continue to beat for so long as God shall need us."

For us, it was a great day.

— Jane S.L. and Jared L.,
District 36, Eastern Pennsylvania