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**William G. Borchert. *The Lois Wilson Story: When Love is Not Enough*. Center City, MN: Hazelden, 2005. 381 pages. \$24.95 (hardcover), ISBN 1-5285-328-5**

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Interest continues to grow in the history of Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.) as evidenced by a deluge of new biographies of A.A. co-founder Bill Wilson and a just-released biography of his wife Lois Wilson. The critical role Lois Wilson played in the history of A.A. and Al-Anon assures that *The Lois Wilson Story* will be widely read and reviewed. William Borchert provides his readers an engaging account of the life of Lois Wilson and, through her story, the founding and early history of A.A. and Al-Anon.

Although covering much ground already presented in the multiple Bill Wilson biographies, A.A.'s three history texts (*Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, *Pass it On: The story of Bill Wilson and How the A.A. Message Reached the Word*, and *Dr. Bob and the Good Oldtimers*), the most definitive and scholarly history of A.A. (*Not-God: A History of Alcoholics Anonymous* by Ernest Kurtz), and Lois Wilson's own previously published memoir (*Lois Remembers*), Borchert does offer new details about the life of Lois and Bill Wilson

drawn from interviews with Lois Wilson and her close associates. These details make up for occasional factual errors (i.e., portraying Marty Mann as the first female alcoholic to join AA, mistaking the date of Bill Wilson's admission to Towns Hospital [December 11, 1934] as the date of his spiritual awakening [December 14, 1934]) [See Wilson, 1979] and the author's effort to gloss over some of the more embarrassing details of the Wilsons' lives (e.g., underreporting the extent and duration of Bill Wilson's experiments with LSD [see Kurtz, 1999], attempting to frame Bill Wilson's relationship with Helen Wynn as platonic in nature[See Hartigan, 2000 & Raphael, 2000]). In spite of these minor drawbacks, *The Lois Wilson Story* provides an insider's account of A.A. and Al-Anon, devoid of the exaggerations (e.g., early AA membership figures) that crept into Bill Wilson's speeches and writings, and including details not found in Lois Wilson's earlier (1979) memoir.

Of greater interest to the readers of *Alcoholism Treatment Quarterly* is the

question of whether this new book offers any new historical insights into the perception of alcoholism, the impact of alcoholism on the family, the treatment of alcoholism and the experience of family recovery from alcoholism. The Lois Wilson Story does offer some contributions in these areas and those will be the focus of this review. A window into the cultural attitudes toward alcoholism is revealed in the advice that family members and friends gave to Lois Wilson in response to her husband's progressive loss of control over his drinking in the 1920s and early 1930s. That view was one of drunkenness as the curse of the devil—a curse that could only be removed by God Himself. In this view, the only recourse for the family member was a posture of resignation, patience and prayer. Brief, hospital detoxification was sometimes available for the more affluent, but did not alter the progressive trajectory of alcoholism. Specialized alcoholism treatment was rarely available and, where available, quite expensive in the 1920s and 1930s. When both drying out and focused treatment failed, as they did for Bill Wilson in his many admissions before the fall of 1934, families were told that they should legally commit the alcoholic for custodial care at a state psychiatric hospital.

Borchert vividly portrays the emotional roller coaster and wretchedness that family members experience in the years before recovery or death rescues them. Particularly poignant are the constant fears that the alcoholic is going to die, the hope generated from fleeting episodes of abstinence or moderated drinking, the devastation of repeated broken promises (In Lois Wilson's case, promises written in her Bible, e.g. "To my beloved wife that has endured so much, let this stand as evidence of my pledge to you that I have finished with drink forever."), and the prolonged guilt and self-recrimination. Lois Wilson's story vividly portrays the duality of the alcoholic family experience: beautiful moments of peacefulness, love and shared dreams intermixed with the chaos of personal devastation (hallucinations, brawls, drunk tanks, drying out hospitals) and family devastation (relationship turmoil, social

isolation, economic disaster). The book also portrays the emotions that spouses and family members bring to the early stages of the alcoholic's recovery: frustration, anger, resentment, fear, guilt, and jealousy that something other than their own efforts got their husbands sober). The admission of these feelings, the recognition that the spouse had become as sick as the alcoholic and the discovery that there were parallel paths of recovery open to family members constituted the core discoveries upon which family recovery and the birth of Al-Anon were built.

There are insights contained in The Lois Wilson Story that somehow got lost on the modern professionalization of addiction treatment. The first of these insights is the potential role of a sudden, unplanned experience of transformative change in the process of recovery initiation. We have become so enamored with our professional interventions and staged recovery theories that we have forgotten the power and legitimacy of such life-defining moments. Bill Wilson's experience in Towns Hospital and his physician Dr. William Silkworth's admirable response to it provides a professional role model of how we can be with someone through such an experience and frame that experience in ways that strengthen the recovery process.

A second insight that comes through the experiences of Lois Wilson and the other wives of early alcoholics in A.A. is the chronicity and complexity of alcoholism. Today those characteristics are being reaffirmed in models that contrast severe alcohol and other drug problems as chronic diseases comparable to other chronic disorders (McLellan, O'Brien, Lewis & Kleber, 2000). Lois Wilson and early Al-Anon members lived and suffered through this chronicity and compared alcoholism to diabetes, cancer and heart disease decades before treatment professionals began to emphasize such analogies. If addiction treatment shifts from its current acute care intervention model to a model of sustained recovery management, Lois Wilson and other early members of Al-Anon should be offered a historical footnote for their early

conceptualization of alcoholism as a chronic illness (Borchert, 2005, p. 290).

The portrayal of Bill Wilson's recidivism (at least one drying out episode at Kings County and three prior admissions to The Towns Hospital before the final admission that would mark the beginning of his lifelong sobriety) also has particular relevance to the contemporary treatment story. Somewhere in the history of the professionalization of treatment, A.A.'s message "keep coming back" mutated into "one man, one treatment"-a philosophy through which those seeking admission for more than one treatment episode became castigated as "retreads" and "frequent flyers." Perhaps most egregious was a philosophy through which prior treatment became grounds for denial of admission to treatment. It gives one pause to wonder how the modern history of addiction recovery would have been different if Bill Wilson would have been denied admission to treatment in December 1934 because of his prior admissions. It is time we fundamentally reexamined the practice of denying admission for those with prior treatment, shaming those seeking treatment who have prior treatments and throwing those out of treatment who present with problems of greatest severity and complexity. History will judge us very harshly for these practices, and the history of recovery in American in the past century would have been very different if those practices were present in the 1930s.

The Lois Wilson Story also experientially confirms much of what is being revealed by modern research on family recovery from addiction. Stephanie Brown and Virginia Lewis (1994), in their studies of the impact of recovery on the family, speak of the "trauma of recovery." We witness in Lois Wilson's story and the stories of other early Al-Anon members just how fragile the family is during the early years of recovery, and how essential it is that family members initiate their own parallel healing processes. In an era where the "family program" at most treatment centers have been abandoned or diluted in intensity and duration, this is an important reassertion.

The essential message at the core of Lois Wilson's experience-a message that emerged as the central Al-Anon message-is that we can never change another person; we can only change ourselves (Borchert, 2005, p. 295). When I entered the field of addiction treatment in the 1960s, we "paraprofessional" counselors-those with and without personal recovery backgrounds-were expected to attend Al-Anon meetings to regularly remind ourselves of that proposition and to infuse that understanding into our helping relationships. Perhaps it's time that ritual was rebirthed. In the interim, read this and other lessons from the life of Lois Wilson.

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