

A.A. GRAPEVINE HISTORY: CONTINUITIES AND CHANGES

"An alcoholic is a man with two feet firmly planted in mid-air"; "An alcoholic is a person who finds he has nothing in common with himself." Those fillers from the "Heard at Meetings" column of issue #2 of The Grapevine in July 1944 suggest the greatest continuity to be found in 600 issues of the "newsletter" that became "the international monthly journal of Alcoholics Anonymous." From the stale jokes of "BarleyCorn" via "Short Snorts" and "Once Over Lightly" to the even worse jests that even this month grace "Ham on Wry," the comedy that laughs at self, the wit that makes points with a gentle (or not so gentle) twist, the humor that hints humility, has characterized A.A.'s magazine no less than A.A. meetings.

Most outside the fellowship are puzzled by A.A. humor: why do those alkies laugh at stuff that just isn't that funny? Perhaps the May 1950 A.A. Grapevine offered the best answer in another of those wise inserts that editors term "fillers": "Quotes from our own scripture: What profiteth it a man if he has gained sobriety and lost his sense of humor?" A story in the same issue offered this example of the "consideration" typical of drinking drunks: "I was a lot like the guy who shot his wife with a bow and arrow so as not to wake the children."

Some eleven years later, in February 1961, an "editor's note" introducing a new series — "Toper's Tale of the Month" — observed: "'We laugh,' a philosopher once said, 'because if we didn't, we'd cry.' The poignancy of this remark is peculiarly appreciated by the alcoholic whose life has so often been touched by a brush of humor along with the tragedy." The same issue contained an article asking, "How is your D.Q.? (Drunk Quotient)." Noting that the standard questions used to determine alcoholism often fell short of identifying "the real alcoholic" (that is, one like himself), T.W.R. from Alexandria, VA, suggested a new set, including: "Did you even

look through drawn shades to see if it was 3 AM or 3 PM?"; "Did you ever drive a car because you were too drunk to walk?"

As loquacious as pictures are reputed to be ("a thousand words" runs over four typed pages and would take about nine minutes to speak), cartoons can communicate even more powerfully. Long before the advent of "Victor E.", Grapevine caricaturists lampooned tendencies with which they identified. "Alibi Album" afforded a strong pictorial antidote to "stinking thinking" in an era very conscious of "slips." Another early series, "Men of Extinction," parodied an advertisement for intoxicants in offering keen reminders of "what we used to be like" as well as insight into the quirks that could endanger sobriety. Grandiosity even in the act of hitting bottom? The July 1945 issue recorded the reaction of a still-drinking alcoholic on seeing an American Airlines plane, the company's emblematic "AA" painted on its wings, passing over his house: "If they're going to all that trouble to get me, I might just as well give up now."

The laughter that heals is laughter at self. We find such healing in mirrors that reveal our self to ourself. Stories provide the best such mirrors, but cartoons can on occasion skewer even those who resist identifying with stories. Early Grapevine cartoons achieved their effect not merely by clever wording or painfully accurate caricature, but precisely by the lack of fit between words and scene — the kind of lack of fit all too familiar to any alcoholic. The January 1947 "Alky Album," for example, featured a garishly attired female flamboyantly proclaiming, "A few drinks help me get over my shyness." That April's "Men of Extinction" depicted a sloppily dressed vagrant, interrupted in his trash-can rummaging, straining to look dignified as he is introduced as "Eustis Bagley, III, Bon Vivant and Collector of Old Bottles."

The A.A. Grapevine and the Story of A.A. Storytelling

Humor "works" because it encapsulates story, capturing and holding up for view in memorable form the incongruity, the lack of fit, that is the reality of any human life and surely of the life of any alcoholic. And story is of the essence of Alcoholics Anonymous. Let's take a look, then, at what the story of The A.A. Grapevine reveals about the story of storytelling within A.A. itself. For the story of The A.A. Grapevine, which tells the stories of A.A. members, and the story of Alcoholics Anonymous, which is the stories of its members, intertwine in fascinating ways.

In The Grapevine, as within Alcoholics Anonymous itself, the practice of telling stories of "what we used to be like, what happened, and what we are like now" was not planned; it sort of snuck in. The earliest AAs, departing the Oxford Group, wished to avoid the style of "witnessing" used under those auspices. They soon discovered, however, that the only way to answer the questions raised by newcomers was to tell the story of their own "experience, strength and hope." The story of stories in The Grapevine is a little more complex.

The Grapevine began as a local newsletter. It was not the first such publication put out by members of Alcoholics Anonymous. Some of the other early area journals still exist; other colorful titles have ceased: "The Toss Pot" from Charleston, WV; Chattanooga, TN's "The Empty Jug"; "The Screwball" published in "Deep East Texas." These papers were one large impetus to The Grapevine, which began as Metropolitan New York's equivalent -- a newspaper that linked the rapidly spreading groups of a locality by providing news of area events and activities. At least that was the first intention, how The Grapevine began.

Because the earliest Grapevine saw itself as newsletter rather than as "meeting in print," its format consisted of articles and reports far more than of stories. Suggestions for "hospital work";

columns recommending books to be read and hobbies to be engaged in; appeals for "one regular closed meeting for older members only -- people who've been in A.A. at least a month or more"; (The first "Pleasures of Reading" column recommended Boethius's Consolations of Philosophy, the medieval classic The Imitation of Christ, and a biography of actor John Barrymore). Many of the lead articles were by non-A.A. members: Doctors Haggard and Jellinek, writers Philip Wylie and Fulton Oursler, comic S.J. Perelman. Most of the contents reported news, especially of new groups.

Some stories, very brief ones, do peek in around the corners, used to support a point or to offer an example or to set a context. But most stories, as we know them, entered those earliest issues from one very specific circumstance. Following the example of Cleveland's Central Bulletin, The Grapevine's editors sent copies of their paper to all A.A. members serving in the military. June 1944: World War II was beginning to wind down, but at a sometimes frightful cost. News of the progress of the invasion of the European continent and of Pacific island-hopping kept Americans mindful of their soldiers and sailors and marines. In early 1944, A.A. records showed 300 members in the Armed Forces, some 40 of whom had lived in the New York Metropolitan area. Letters on The Grapevine's "Mail Call for All A.A.'s in the Armed Forces" column, which began in issue #1, attest that many groups wrote letters to keep in touch with their members in the military, but that "newsy papers" were most appreciated by those members, who were generally cut off from A.A. life and companionship. [The erroneous apostrophe in the column's title, which recalls the one in the original title of the multilith draft of "Alcoholic's Anonymous," was dropped in issue #2.]

And the servicemen wrote back to those newsy papers. Their letters most frequently detailed the effort to "hang on," often in isolated circumstances. Clearly, a paper that

allowed them to share the experience, strength and hope specific to military life or to living in a foreign land served a valuable function. But more importantly for The Grapevine's — and A.A.'s — larger history, those letters from service people set a style for storytelling. In briefest outline, that style detailed some problem, told of some circumstance or happening that led to its resolution, and then reflected on the gift of a life now enriched by having gone through that experience. Not exactly "what we used to be like, what happened, and what we are like now," but close enough to that outline to cement the relationship between "experience, strength, and hope."

At war's end, promptly in September 1945, "Mail Call for All A.A.s in the Armed Forces" became "Mail Call for All A.A.s at Home or Abroad." For a time, in the new peacetime world, The Grapevine moved away from the stories of personal experience that had been the content of most of the letters from members of the armed forces, printing more descriptions of and comments on the spread of Alcoholics Anonymous and the adaptations that some localities developed to meet that growth.

Although the masthead presenting The Grapevine as "The national monthly journal of Alcoholics Anonymous" did not appear until December of 1945 (the first twelve-page issue in the old 9x12 inch format), already in January of that year, "Along the Metropolitan Circuit" was replaced by "A.A.s Country-Wide News Circuit." (This time, the apostrophe that should have been there finally appeared in the March issue.) Also in December of 1945, attesting to its "national monthly journal" status, each Grapevine issue began to include the "A.A. Digest: Excerpts from Group Publications," a practice continued (with occasional interruption) until May 1948.

Some saw a kind of imperialism in The Grapevine's transition from metropolitan New York

paper to "national monthly journal of Alcoholics Anonymous," and there is some truth in that view. Wary as Bill W. and some other Easterners were of offending fellowship members in Akron, Cleveland, and other mid-West centers, a more pressing consideration impelled to the move. As A.A. grew, some of the local journals, under strong editors, began to go beyond usual A.A. understandings. Chattanooga's The Empty Jug, for example, was blatantly Prohibitionist. In April 1946, Bill W. would publish "Twelve Points to Assure Our Future," the first floating of A.A.'s Twelve Traditions, and the same need to guard against aberrations deemed dangerous to the A.A. fellowship as a whole seems to underlie The A.A. Grapevine's claim to "national journal" status, albeit unofficially. The April 1946 issue is also noteworthy as the one in which The Grapevine become The A.A. Grapevine — a change, according to Bill's later telling, motivated by apparent conflict (though it is difficult to imagine confusion) with a similarly titled internal newsletter of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. That the change ratified The A.A. Grapevine's new national status was at least happy coincidence.

The Development and Concerns of Storytelling

The responsibility of being A.A.'s "national" periodical — and, beginning in January 1949, its "international monthly journal" — reinforced The A.A. Grapevine's commitment to reporting what was going on in the various groups. For a time, that responsibility somewhat stifled the telling of stories of experience, strength and hope as that pattern had begun to emerge in the letters from members of the armed forces during World War II. Most contributors, in the mid-1940s, informed of diverse practices within Alcoholics Anonymous; for example, ways of holding meetings for greater numbers, exchanges of speakers, and especially about procedures

used to "indoctrinate" new members. Diversity of understanding was honored in this period, A.A. members in general showing great tolerance of various understandings of even such basics as the Twelve Steps. Grapevine issue #18 (November 1945), for example, began a second series of articles on the Steps explicitly to give voice to "different views and interpretations."

But if A.A.'s early members accepted differences in interpretation, they showed themselves less open to variances in practice — especially when such deviations seemed to suggest that A.A.'s message was not being carried as effectively as possible to potential new members. Descriptions of experience, especially of what seemed especially helpful or dangerous in "indoctrinating" newcomers and the requirements placed upon them, drew letters of comment and often of disagreement. No sooner did some express disapproval of some practices, however, than others wrote to warn against the dangers of criticizing others.

The climax of this process came in August 1946 with a piece by Bill W., "Who is A Member of Alcoholics Anonymous?" This article achieved two ends. Directly, it suggested extending tolerance of other A.A. groups' practices to tolerance of the differences among individual alcoholic newcomers. Indirectly but more importantly to our story here, Bill's gentle words invited a shift from detailing group practices to telling personal stories -- a shift that took place gradually over the next several years.

No less than Bill himself, A.A. Grapevine editors recognized the tendency of alcoholics, drinking or sober, to resist authority. Issue #1 of volume 2 of The Grapevine (June 1945) had announced its "editorial formula": to "reflect as comprehensively as possible A.A. problems and A.A. principles . . . the voice of A.A.s collectively speaking from the whole of A.A. experience rather than . . . limited to the concepts of any one individual." In December 1946, Bill W. described The A.A. Grapevine as "our principal monthly journal, devoted to the interests of

Alcoholics Anonymous -- and to nothing else. It tries to publish the news and portray the views of A.A.s everywhere. It aims to reflect a cross section of our thought and action . . . bringing us news of each other across great distances, and always describing what can be freshly seen in that vast and lifegiving pool we call 'A.A. experience.'"

But as the articles submitted more and more began to evidence, that "cross section of our thought and action" best served as a "lifegiving pool [of] A.A. experience" if presented in the form of the individual stories of individual A.A. members. Readers wanted to hear about people: on the basis of what they learned about people, they would decide for themselves about practices and the applications of principles. The process began in the "Mail Call" column, in letters describing A.A. practice in some particular place or group. Letter-writers would sometimes offer a brief story excerpt to make or to support their point. Even more often, those writing to comment on or disagree with an earlier letter-writer would illustrate with another story snippet. Meanwhile, "Vino Vignettes: Thumbnail A.A. Biographies" — a feature begun in September 1945 and continued, intermittently, into 1949 — further shaped The A.A. Grapevine's story style.

It thus comes as no surprise that The A.A. Grapevine's most historic contribution to Alcoholics Anonymous may well be "The A.A. Preamble" commonly read at the beginning of most A.A. meetings. That formulation first appeared in the June 1947 issue, devised by the Grapevine's editor to describe A.A. to the journal's non-A.A. readers. Much of the phrasing was borrowed from the foreword to the first edition of the book Alcoholics Anonymous, including the since deleted qualification "honest" before the membership requirement of "a desire to stop drinking," an adjective dropped from The A.A. Grapevine's inside front cover in September 1958. But the phrase "experience, strength, and hope" is original — original not so much as the invention of editor Tom Y. as his encapsulation of what both A.A. and The A.A. Grapevine had

become: a place where alcoholics could both offer and find the "identification," the insight "Yes, that's like me!" that helps in the never-ending task of penetrating the "self-centeredness" that "is the root of our troubles."

Identification: necessarily, its style — its "how" — developed over A.A.'s earliest years, and that development is well reflected in The A.A. Grapevine. In a fairly short time, the "Mail Call" letters and the "Vino Vignette" biographies moved from telling about someone else, to telling how what happened to someone else affected the teller, to telling one's own story. But the process of development did not end there; rather, another even more important shift took place.

The usual theme of the earliest stories told both at meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous and in The Grapevine ran along the line of "I didn't know what was the matter with me, and, whatever it was, I was pretty sure that nothing could be done for it." Earliest A.A. identification, then, consisted in the sheer sense of relief at the discovery that one was "not alone" -- not unique. Sobriety did not change that realization but deepened it, as one discovered in an ever greater variety of other alcoholics similar experiences and patterns. Identification began with breaking through the sense of terrified differentness . . . and that saving identification was reinforced in recovery as going on 12th Step calls led to hearing still others say, often in a wondering astonishment that recalled one's own, "Yes, that's like me."

But that earliest story theme of "I was convinced that no one understood" and the sense of relief that came with the recognition that "there are others like me" -- that basis of identification shifted over time. It inevitably had to change as more people got more sober, as an ever larger number of people heard about A.A. The next generation of stories, then, more often described the motif of having heard of Alcoholics Anonymous, imagining a distorted idea of what it was and rejecting it, and then telling how one came to accept A.A. or give it a chance, and what had

happened since.

At the time this format was developing, members were paying much attention to "slips," which seemed to them to be increasing. (Slips inevitably increased in number as the fellowship grew, but there is no evidence that a larger percentage of members were out doing graduate work.) With greater concern about "stinking thinking," the Big Book story format of "what we used to be like, what happened, and what we are like now" saw its "what happened" segment become not only the turning point at which one stopped drinking, but any significant turning point in one's thinking. In the next stage of development in the style of stories in The A.A. Grapevine, the nature of that significant turning point broadened and developed, and we find a tendency to place more accent on experiences of "the spiritual", and the dawning of humility, consideration, and thoughtfulness in place of the alcoholic's former total self-centeredness.

To read Grapevine stories over time, in other words, is to find a mirror of one's own growth — and lacks of growth — in sobriety.

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Because what we find in the past tends to be shaped by what we know of the present, two topics especially grab the attention of any 1990's reader perusing Grapevines of earlier decades: women in A.A. and those who "use other drugs."

Issue #1 of The Grapevine offered brief descriptions of the "six ink-stained wretches" who brought the publication into existence: "a cashier, a radio script writer, an author, a bookseller, an art director, a wife and mother of two." The article chose not to advert to a more significant fact. Unlike Alcoholics Anonymous itself, which was saved from titling its Big Book "One

Hundred Men" mainly by the timely arrival of Florence R., The A.A. Grapevine came into being primarily as a result of the dedication and effort of some early A.A. women.

Not only were four of the "ink-stained wretches" — Lois K., Marty M., Pricilla P., and Grace O. — of the female persuasion, but Felicia G., Maeve S., and Astrid L. soon also became very active in the journal's writing and production. And so it does not surprise that, although unannounced as such, Grapevine #12, the May 1945 issue that marked the completion of a year's success, quietly celebrated with five articles devoted to women's experience. The lead article, by Marty M., acknowledged that "Women Alcoholics Have a Tougher Fight." "Women alcoholics do have special problems," Marty noted, "But we women can get there as well as the men -- witness the number of us, good A.A. members (one in ten of our total membership)." Other titles were "One Woman Alcoholic Writes to Another," "A Daughter is Proud of Her A.A. Mother," "A Wife Takes Pleasure in A.A.," and "Credo for an A.A. Wife."

As the latter titles hint, a related topic, also still relevant in the 1990s, graced Grapevine pages forty-nine years ago. We speak today of "family issues"; the usual phrase then was "wives of alcoholics" — although as early as April 1947 we find an article titled "Husband Sees Rich Rewards for Non-Alcoholics," in which a writer from San Diego presented himself as "affiliated with AA as a 'dry-mate.'" His terminology may not meet today's standards of sensitivity to gender language, but "E.L." offered at least one observation that can still hit home: "At the first dry-mate meetings I attended, we were all in agreement that our mates had outgrown us. . . ."

"Dry-mate meetings": the term, fortunately, did not stick. But the idea was of course more important than the name. In the earliest-described A.A. meetings, spouses participated on an equal footing with ex-drunks. Early on, however, Grapevine articles as well as letters attest,

some of the male alcoholics' wives intuited that some female alcoholic members seemed to understand their spouses better than did they. That realization brought some pain, but it also engendered deeper understanding of "identification" — one more fascinating story to follow within the pages of the longest running story in Alcoholics Anonymous, the story of Alcoholics Anonymous, that The A.A. Grapevine makes available.

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"Identification" also holds the key to the second "new" problem that may surprise readers of "old" Grapevines — the long history within Alcoholics Anonymous of attention to "problems of other drugs." As early as August 1944, Grapevine issue #3 printed a letter from "Doc N.": "I'm sure there are other A.A.s who, like myself, are finding in A.A. the highway to freedom from narcotics." Suggesting "a 'hophead's corner' in The Grapevine," the writer noted that "Even if mine is essentially the same problem of all alcoholics, I occasionally wish that there were just one other narcotics victim in my A.A. group with whom I might share experiences."

A month later, another physician, "Doc M.," wrote in "to assure him that his experience is one that is beginning to be shared by quite a few. We have in our club five men who have had many years of drug addiction but who are finding complete freedom from drugs and are well on the highway to successful and happy living. . . . These men, with one exception, were all primary alcoholics, and I believe this is largely true of all 'hopheads.'"

"Hopheads?!"

The Grapevine's second year, 1945, saw articles by Bill W. as well as by "an M.D. who also is an A.A." cautioning on "the sleeping-pill menace." "Those Goof-Balls," Bill termed them, in a

passage perhaps intentionally murky enough that the phrase could apply to the pills' takers or prescribers as well as to the drugs themselves. Another side of the question was tackled by a member writing from Greenwich Village in February 1948, whose article asked: "Does a Pill Jag Count as a Slip?" J.T. expressed his view strongly: "The A.A. who takes to pills is trading the devil for the witch." "If you are using pills, openly or secretly, don't try to convince anyone that you're still sober or living the A.A. way of life. It just ain't so."

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The early "difficulties," then, were not that difficult. In fact, the most critical period for Alcoholics Anonymous, if that can be judged from the pages of The A.A. Grapevine, occurred in the early 1960s. January of 1961 witnessed an explicit rejection of the journal's "meeting in print" self-image, that understanding being replaced by the addition of the phrase "in all our affairs" to the masthead. In April of that year, Bill W. published the first of a series of articles originally intended to be part of a book on the topic of "A.A. spirituality." That book was never completed, but Bill's idea later became the inspiration for The A.A. Grapevine's publication of all of his Grapevine articles under the title, The Language of the Heart.

Also in 1960 and 1961 we find much concern about oldtimers' attendance at A.A. meetings. Articles on the importance of honesty and the treacherous traps leading to slips begin to appear with an almost frightening consistency. And a new series on the Twelve Steps begins, unusual both in that the whole series was by a single writer and that the series would later be published as a pamphlet, "Twelve Steps and the Older Member." (**only such?)

What was going on at this point, some fifteen years into The A.A. Grapevine's existence,

around the time of A.A.'s twenty-fifth birthday? One hint may be found in the stories that appeared around this era. Although Grapevine editors would title a series "Is A.A. Changing?" only decades later, and although Alcoholics Anonymous itself both earlier had experienced and later would experience greater bursts of growth, early 1960's letters to and articles in The A.A. Grapevine reveal a tug-of-war between those promoting and those denying change. This was not a new phenomenon in Alcoholics Anonymous: Bill W. had observed in the 1940s that "A.A. will always have both its fundamentalists and its liberals," a comment on precisely this point. What distinguishes the 1960s is that it seems to be the decade in which the membership as a whole discovered that truth. And although much of the new awareness derived from the greater mobility of Americans, including alcoholic Americans, The A.A. Grapevine was also a vehicle of that discovery.

Some 1960's issues may still arouse interest. In the January 1961 issue, one member reminded that "AA is a Fellowship not a Friendship Club," suggesting that "the only reason for being in AA is to learn how to live without alcohol." The same issue contained another of the many answers to an article that had appeared in July 1960, "I Don't Go to Meetings Any More." In February, a member offered, under the title "AA Is Getting Too Organized," the thoughts of "a conservative old-timer" who had passed through that stage of thinking. Meanwhile, as a spur to the complacent, Bill W. quietly observed in the first article of his new series, "God As We Understand Him": "Though three hundred thousand did recover in the last twenty-five years, maybe half a million more have walked into our midst, and then out again."

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For at least the last forty years, Grapevine writers have tended not to make suggestions but instead to share their "experience, strength, and hope." In that spirit, for it is a large source shaping my experience and strength, I hope that others will dig around the backrooms of clubhouses and ask old-timers about possible caches of old A.A. Grapevines. To find such a treasure-trove is to pass absorbing hours noting changes and continuities -- in humor, about "other drugs" and "other problems," about wives, husbands, family, and more . . . even about "sobriety."

"Those who have no memory, have no hope," a wise person once observed. That is probably one reason why we tell stories of "what we used to be like, what happened, and what we are like now." A.A.'s "Remember When" has to do with more than drinking, and The A.A. Grapevine is a unique link with our fascinating past.