

*Preserving A.A.'s history – its story – is our most important task, for whether we be alcoholics or simply lovers of A.A.'s wisdom, it is by telling and hearing their stories that Alcoholics Anonymous heals alcoholics and passes on its wisdom. As its name makes clear, Alcoholics Anonymous is its members, and so its story and its members' stories are one and the same.*

*In my years traveling and speaking, then, I have whenever possible urged A.A.s to investigate and preserve their own local stories. "How did A.A. get to this place?" "When did the second group start; Why?" "Have you had any especially talented sponsors or Twelve-Steppers?" "What kind of meetings do most prefer?" "Has it always been thus?" "Have treatment programs had any impact on local AA?" And on and on and on anon, as they say.*

*It was thus a special privilege to be invited to address a gathering of A.A. archivists at their annual meeting in Akron, Ohio in September of 1997. Historians build on the work of archivists: we learn that in graduate school, but I never knew the depth of that truth until I met Nell Wing while researching Not-God. Nell, now retired, was not able to be in Akron, though AA.'s current archivist, Judit Santon, was there to continue Nell's generous tradition.*

*Over the years, I have had occasion to contact and draw on many other archivists. To all of them, and especially to their successors, I dedicate this previously unpublished talk. My hope in doing this is that it inspire them and their successors to continue their devoted efforts to preserve the real story of Alcoholics Anonymous. Ernest Kurtz, 1997*

### **Varieties of the Alcoholics Anonymous Experience**

Eventually I will get around to the title topic of "Varieties of the Alcoholics Anonymous Experience; but, first, in the setting of this gathering, I wish to point out and pay homage to the reality that archives and archivists also come in varieties: they have different importances to different people.

Archives serve the functions of both shrines and factories. I intend neither of those terms pejoratively. Shrines connect us to our past. People need to feel connected with their past, which is part of the reality of something greater than ourselves. Such shrines less invite worship than they awaken awareness of connection, a connection that *is* a spiritual reality. Such archives honor the past, but they also inform the present. And the future: one theme of this presentation is the understanding, borrowed from Dickens and Goethe, that there exists a profound connection between *memory* and *hope*, that “Those who have no memory have no hope.”

Archives in-form the present and the future not only with artifacts but also with ideas. For archives are places where memories are not so much stored as they are preserved for incorporation into new reality, the ever-changing reality of any living phenomenon. Memory itself is less a warehouse than a construction site, and thus also the places and the people that serve memory are builders as well as preservers.

All living realities change. Bill Wilson and most of the other early AAs recognized that AA would change. But there are different kinds of change. On the one hand, there is the development that results from natural growth and constructive adaptation to new circumstances and surroundings. On the other hand, there is the subversion that turns one reality into a very different reality, often the very opposite of its original thrust. Alcoholics Anonymous, like any other reality, finds itself under pressures to change in both ways.

Constructive change is aided by a connection with history. History is less an anchor that keeps something in one place than it is the stabilizer that makes it possible for the rudder to be effective, that prevents a boat’s being toppled over by every passing wind (or windbag).

History is important because *story* is important, and few existing entities better demonstrate or more deeply realize the importance of story than the storytelling program and fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous.

History is important less because, in Santayana's often quoted but rarely grasped caution, "Those who do not remember the past are doomed to repeat it" than because, in those thematic words I noted earlier, "Those who have no memory, have no hope." There is a link

between memory and hope: both are fragile, and so each sustains the other, and each needs all the help it can get from the other. And this is why the *real* story of Alcoholics Anonymous is important. We need hope, and our hope is founded in memory. And because memory is fallible and easily deceived, we need the archives that house and make available the necessary checks to errant memory.

Let's look at recent memory and how some among you have served it. I assume you are familiar with the recently published or in-process works on Alcoholics Anonymous by Bob Fitzgerald, Mary Darrah, Mel Barger, Wally Paton, and the revision of Nell Wing's reminiscences, *Grateful to Have Been There*. We are also being blessed with some excellent dissertation studies of aspects of Alcoholics Anonymous. Although few of these are primarily historical, several of them — and certainly many possible future studies — could benefit and could benefit us if their authors knew of and had access to archival materials, and especially to the stories of AA members over the years.

What is going on at the dissertation level should be of interest to people like us, because what most keeps these studies honest is access to the real continuing story of Alcoholics Anonymous. Serious students need both access and guidance. Let me mention two recent examples where local cooperation helped produce very good work, work that may have an impact even on some cynical academics. A dissertation out of Northwestern University by Kathleen Flynn examines the story-style of A.A. talks — Kathi's field is performance studies, and she offers a fascinating analysis of what happens at AA convention gatherings. At the University of Rochester, an anthropology candidate, Maria Swora, has just completed a dissertation on how what happens within A.A. meetings fits understandings of how people change. Rochester, New York, had one of the early "Wilson Clubs" and for a long time was a bastion of the old-time A.A. that had definite membership requirements, and Maria's work has captured the lingering traces of such practices.

So not only A.A. but serious study of A.A. is vibrantly alive, and no matter what the explicit field of study, each of these works sheds further light on A.A.'s continuing story. I maintain a bibliography of serious literature on Alcoholics Anonymous, and it currently comprises some 2,000 items, with about five or six new additions each month.

## **The Dangers in Distortions of A.A.'s Story**

That was the good news. Less happily, there have also recently appeared people who in pursuit of a particular agenda tell A.A.'s story in ways that distort its history. A bit later I shall mention three such distortions, but here let me frame some points in the context of a very real concern over the Oxford Group enthusiasts who try to provide historical underpinning for what has become a movement to Christianize Alcoholics Anonymous by reinterpreting A.A.'s early history. Some of these zealots at times directly denigrate the contributions of Sister Ignatia and Father Dowling in their single-minded, indeed narrow-minded, attempts to prove that A.A. came out of "Bible Christianity."

There is nothing wrong with reinterpretation, so long as it is based on evidence. One reason we tell stories is to upgrade memory, and we revise our stories and our memory as more information comes in. But there are three guidelines that should undergird that process in any genuinely historical study.

First, there has to be evidence for any claim. Just because you think "it would be nice" if something happened in a certain way does not mean that it did. Some people think that Bill Wilson must have known Dr. Bob before Bill ever went to Akron back there in April of 1935. Maybe he did. I do not know, for certain, but all the evidence that we have says that he did not and, therefore, if someone says that he did, please show me your evidence. This may not seem like such a big deal, except that it would call into question Bill's fundamental honesty on a key issue. And so it is not merely trivial, like whether Dr. Bob had his last drink on June 10th or June 17th. Thanks to the research and evidence turned up by a New Jersey attorney, it seems probable that June 17th is the correct date, and the same evidence suggests how naturally such a memory error might have occurred. So we have been celebrating A.A.'s birthday a week early each year: I doubt that discovery impacts anyone's sobriety much, one way or the other.

The second requirement is that you have to look at *all* the available evidence. Yes, certain things did happen in Akron. But other things

were also happening in New York and elsewhere. The historical storyteller has to take into account everything that we know, not just the facts that he or she happens to like. Actively drinking alcoholics are pretty good at the latter – just looking at those truths that they like. You can make a marvelous story out of the things that you like. "Well, I always got up and got to work in the morning; I never missed a day's work." But you do not bother mentioning that you had to be poured into bed every night and how often you went home from work at midday, or whatever the rest of the story was. Truth and honesty require examining and incorporating *all* the available evidence.

Third, you also look at what else is going on at the time, the context, the wider "climate of opinion." Yes, the book *Alcoholics Anonymous* shows signs of being influenced by Oxford Group literature. But also being read at the time were Karen Horney's 1937 book, *The Neurotic Personality in Our Time*, glimmers of which can be found in the Big Book. And in Dale Carnegie's 1935 best-seller, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, you will find a chapter titled, "When You Are Wrong, Promptly Admit It." Some early A.A. members had been in therapy with Horney or her disciples. Bill Wilson, for one, revered Carnegie. In discussing influences on early A.A. thinking, then, these names merit mention along with those of William James and Henry Drummond and Emmet Fox.

And we need to look not only at the context of the time we are studying but at the context of our own time and its impact on what we see. In the vocabulary of his age, for instance, Bill Wilson was a "flirt." Since then he has become a "womanizer," a "male chauvinist" and "a hegemonic white male oppressor of women." Not too dissimilarly, the current emphasis on harm reduction and the DSM-IV distinction between "alcohol dependence" and "alcohol abuse" leads to viewing differently the Big Book's page 31 differentiation of "a certain type of hard drinker" and "the real alcoholic" – "alcoholics like us."

AA's story will always be re-written and always be in need of rewriting. Some have suggested that I revise *Not-God*, but I respectfully decline. My story is of AA's intellectual history, its place in the history of understandings of spirituality in the context of the mid-twentieth century. That was and is my expertise, and I think I have told and

documented that story pretty well. But what we need now is a history of Alcoholics Anonymous written by someone who is skilled in the economics and the politics of non-profit organizations and especially someone who is well aware of how some of those things have changed over time. We do not know anything near the full story of the impact of the Rockefeller empire on AA. Nor do we really know the details of that "Works Publishing" stock deal and the full roles of Hank Parkhurst and Horace Crystal in the fashioning of "The One Hundred Men Corporation."

And then there are the "small points." Some Oxford-Group thumpers say that Dr. Bob Smith had vastly cut down his drinking even before Bill Wilson's arrival, that participation in the Group had helped Bob to go on only an occasional binge. But there is a quotation from Dr. Bob's "lead" from a Youngstown, Ohio, *Vindicator* article, reproduced in the pamphlet, *What Others Think of Alcoholics Anonymous*: "The speaker told how he ended 35 years of steady drinking after trying various methods that included hospital and sanitariums. Ardent reading of the Bible and an earnest desire to stay sober also failed. He still got drunk every night. Then he met the other founder-to-be who had been sober for four months and had learned that the way to convince himself was to convince some other drunk."

Even in the area of ideas, of course, I would offer some additions to whomever picks up that larger task. *Not-God* does not do justice to the continuing impact of Dr. William Duncan Silkworth. In 1937, two years before the publication of the Alcoholics Anonymous Big Book, Silkworth published, in the journal of the Medical Society of New York, an article dealing with the distinction between two terms, two words: *decision* and *resolution*. Those who ponder that article may never hear the words of the Third Step in exactly the same way again. Under the title, "Reclamation of the Alcoholic," Silkworth observed to his fellow physicians:

Without quibbling over words, I wish to differentiate between a decision and a resolution or declaration of which the alcoholic has probably made many already. A resolution is an expression of a momentary emotional desire to reform. Its influence lasts only until he has an impulse to take a drink. A decision on the other

hand is the expression of a mental conviction based on an intelligent conception of his condition. Often when a resolution is made, individual must fight constantly with himself. The old environment forces are still arrayed against him and he finally succumbs to his old means of escape. However, if he has made a decision through understanding of facts appealing to his intelligence, he has changed his entire attitude. No will power is needed because now he is not tempted.

That article is of course not the whole story of Silkworth's impact. "Silky" was always there, always available, in those days when Bill was hanging around Towns Hospital seeking out new prospects. It was Silkworth who gave Bill the advice that shaped how Bill told his story when he first met Dr. Bob Smith. And evidence suggests that Silkworth's brief advice did more to shape how A.A. storytelling developed than did all the Oxford Group's ranting about "sharing for witness."

Then too, many of the early A.A.s had been in treatment, some with followers of Richard Peabody or others influenced by the Emmanuel Movement, some with students of Karen Horney. Over-emphasis on the Oxford Group derives from a blinkered view of early A.A. Yes, there were three times as many members in Akron as in New York City well into 1940. And most of the Big Book stories in the first edition come out of Akron. Even that early, however, the New Yorkers had a disproportionate influence on the development of A.A. nationally. Because many worked in sales and traveled, when inquiries came in, after the Jack Alexander article, it was New Yorkers who were more likely to go to those places and meet those people. And when other Americans traveled, they were more likely to visit New York than Akron or even Cleveland. When, after the publication of the Jack Alexander article, people inquired about A.A., they wrote to New York: that's the address that was given. So despite their initial small numbers, the New York A.A.s had an impact out of proportion to those numbers. You don't just count members to tell where the center of gravity is: you look also at relative weight.

And in the mid-West, of course, the 1939 split of the Clevelanders from Akron was over the Oxford Group connection. And almost immediately there were splits in Cleveland itself, and this fact and

process tells us something else that was not only important in early Alcoholics Anonymous but that may have increasing significance today, not least because so many forget this early history. So let's turn to the topic of "Varieties of the Alcoholics Anonymous Experience."

A theme that bridges A.A. history and A.A. spirituality – and probably history and spirituality in general – is openness to *difference* and therefore the cherishing of *varieties*. Because we are finite, there is no "once and for all"; or, in the words of Chapter Five: "First of all, we had to quit playing God. It didn't work."

If I were to write another book on A.A., its title would be *Varieties of the Alcoholics Anonymous Experience*. The vast diversity of meetings and groups is surely the outstanding characteristic of A.A. today. But this is not some new, postmodern thing. From the very beginning there were these varieties of A.A. understanding and experience. They have always been with us, and members have recognized this. In a 1946 pamphlet put out by the Cleveland Central Service Office, for example, we read the following:

"A.A. groups are not mentioned in the Twelve Steps, nor are hospitals, central offices, minstrel shows, clam bakes, bowling teams, softball leagues, open meetings, or many of the other activities of the movement. . . .

"A.A. groups are fundamentally little bands of people who are friends and who can help each other stay sober. Each group, therefore, reflects the needs of its own members. The way a group is managed is the way its members want it to be managed for their common benefit. As a result, we have large groups, small groups, groups which have refreshments, groups which never have refreshments, groups which like long meetings, groups which like short meetings, social groups, working groups, men's groups, women's groups, groups that play cards, groups which specialize in young people and as many other varieties as there are kinds of people. . . .

"Each group has its own customs, its own financial problems, and its own method of operation. As long as it follows as a

group, the same principles A.A. recommends for individuals – unselfishness, honesty, decency, and tolerance – it is above criticism. . . .

"Because this is a large country, because the cultures of various sections and cities differ, because of chance and fate, there is not great uniformity in A.A. customs. The only national standards are the book, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, and the literature put out by The Alcoholic Foundation. The Foundation tries to curb dangerous practices and to avoid unfavorable and inaccurate publicity."

I see threats from especially three directions to the integrity of AA's own story: the Christianizers, the New Agers, and the minions of the Treatment Industry. Each camp is driven by its own agenda, an ideology so profoundly embraced that its proponents seem convinced that only they are committed in "real AA."

The Christianizers, in their single-mindedness, seem blind to the other sources of AA ideas and practices. Their hearts are pure, but this distortion of AA history is especially perilous at a time when AA is being categorized as "a religion" by some U.S. Judicial Jurisdictions. The problem is that this can make it more difficult for some alcoholics who need the fellowship and its program to find help. The earliest AAs were dedicated to keeping the door to AA open as wide as possible. AA's story has been one of the progressive widening of that already open door, and anything that works against that seems untrue to that story, especially when justified on the basis of a very faulty understanding of AA history.

New Agers create the same problem from the opposite direction. Though enthusiastic about that they term "spirituality," their faddish shallowness turns many away from seriously investigating A.A. Alcoholics Anonymous was earlier confused with encounter therapies: one contribution of Charles Dederick in founding Synanon was that he clarified that distinction. A.A. is rooted in the acceptance of limitation: "I am an alcoholic" means that I *cannot* drink alcohol safely. New Age philosophy, whatever its proximate trappings, is essentially pantheistic and eventually inevitably denies limitation. In my very limited

experience, it poses more danger to contented sobriety than all the urgings to “moderate drinking” for “problem drinkers” who are not alcoholics. AA derives from an ancient tradition of wisdom founded in that same acceptance of finitude and limitation, a tradition dignified by many saints and scholars. To make it seem otherwise, for whatever supposed reasons of “marketing to moderns,” is untrue to its story and, because it is dishonest, is unlikely to succeed in furthering a program that so stresses honesty. Archives, like history, exist in service to truth.

Finally, the pushers of treatment have long tried to wrap themselves in the mantle of Alcoholics Anonymous. Modern treatment for alcoholism grew not out of medical setting but out of AA farms and “Serenity Houses.” Then came money and professionalization and the demand for credentials that required even those with good sobriety to talk in the vocabulary of psychotherapy rather than the language of the Twelve Steps. Bill White is currently working on a history of this process, and several of you have assisted his very important research. The best defense against those less interested in helping alcoholics than in enriching themselves is the true story of their origins and relationship to AA. In diverse ways, your archives contain the raw materials of that story.

It is only fair, having dissected these three dangers to the integrity of AA’s story, that I offer for your judgment my own criteria for “real AA” — criteria that I believe are derived from AA itself rather than from any ideology, though of course it will be up to you to judge that. Five hints, then, on how to find and recognize “real A.A.”, on how to know whether or not you are at a “real A.A. meeting:

First, listen to the *language*. the vocabulary used. Real A.A. uses the vocabulary of the 12 Steps. It speaks of “defects of character” and “shortcomings,” taking *one’s own* “moral inventory”; “becoming willing” and “humbly asking.” It does not speak of “inner children” or spearing fish (“cod” + épée + ants”).

Second, in real A.A. we find much *humor*: not the false humor of aggression but the genuine humor of recognizing “the juxtaposition of incongruities” – the seeing together of two (or more) things that do not

belong together. "Sober alcoholic" is, after all, a funny expression, a real "juxtaposition of incongruities." The laughter that characterizes A.A. is often misunderstood: it is not laughter at or even with the speaker – its heartiness derives from being laughter at *self*, laughter at recognizing *self* in the "mirror" that stories provide. Grimness and moroseness belong in bars, and those who cultivate them will likely end up there. Genuine humor marks the acceptance of being human without chemical crutches.

Third, what about the *story-style*? Do the stories told "share experience, strength and hope" by describing "in a general way what we used to be like, what happened, and what we are like now"? Or do those present "do some of that but mostly we tell what's happening to us and how we feel about that."

Fourth, though perhaps this should come first, in real Alcoholics Anonymous there is awareness of – and faithfulness to – AA's *Twelve Traditions*, which are to the spirituality of the group what the Twelve Steps are to the recovery of the individual member.

Fifth and finally, though perhaps also again the most important, do we get the sense that those who are present are there not because they "want to" but because they *need to*? We live in a voluntary, self-willed age, but as one A.A. speaker once put it: "I didn't come into A.A. to save my soul. I came in to save my ass. It wasn't till years later that I learned they were attached."

In conclusion, I wish to offer two conclusions. The first appears in *Not-God* and in my first presentations on A.A.'s story, in answer to the question, "How long will A.A. last?"

So long as somewhere, when a sober alcoholic meets another alcoholic, drinking or sober, and sees in that person first and foremost *not* that he or she is black or white, or male or female, or Baptist or Catholic or Jew, or gay or straight, or *whatever*, but sees rather another alcoholic to whom he or she *must* reach out for the sake of his or her own sobriety – so long, in other words, as one alcoholic recognizes in another alcoholic first and foremost that he or she *is* alcoholic and that therefore *both* of them need each other –

there will be not only *an* Alcoholics Anonymous, but there will be *the* Alcoholics Anonymous that you and I love so much and respect so deeply.

After ten more years of research and thought, I added another paragraph to the second edition of *Not-God* and to my presentations:

For the deeper answer is that alcoholics, once they have tasted sobriety, try to hang on to it and therefore to Alcoholics Anonymous – to the way of life encapsulated in the Twelve Steps and protected by the Twelve Traditions and extended through the Twelve Concepts. It is conceivable, because all institutions degenerate, that individuals who call themselves "Alcoholics Anonymous" might some day ignore service, violate tradition and scorn the Steps – or worse, accord them only lip-service. But should that happen, I am certain that somewhere, perhaps under a battered bridge or in a dingy alcove, some alcoholic who is trying to stay sober will sidle up to some other alcoholic who may even be drinking and say: "Psst, buddy. You must be awfully thirsty, but let me tell you how it was with me when I used to need a drink." And in that moment an A.A. meeting will begin, and the story of Alcoholics Anonymous will continue, and nothing I – or you – might do can destroy that . . . and for that, I am – as you are – profoundly grateful!

Thank you very much for inviting me and listening to me today.