

A LITTLE HISTORY OF HOW THIS CAME TO BE

Alcoholism has been a part of human life for a very long time but recovery from that dreaded disease is recent. In fact, it has been around less than 1/2 of 1% of the recorded history of so-called modern man.

The Good Book tells the story of one of God's chosen, Noah, who became a farmer after the flood and among other things, grew grapes. When you are still "begetting" at the age of 500, a few drinks are in order. But Noah drank of the wine and passed out naked in his tent. Even in those days, this was not considered social drinking. The need for Al-Anon became apparent for the first time with this event. His sons found him naked, put a cloak over their shoulders, backed into the tent and covered his nakedness. They turned their back on the problem and tried to cover it up. (Genesis 9:20 – 25)

4,000 years ago, King Solomon wrote about the alcoholic. One version of what he wrote goes like this:

"Who has woe? Who has sorrow? Who has contentions? Who has complaints? Who has wounds without cause? Who has redness of eyes? Those who linger long at the wine, those who go in search of mixed wines. Do not look on the wine when it is red, when it sparkles in the cup, when it swirls around smoothly; at the last it bites like a serpent, and stings like a viper. Your eyes will see strange things. And your heart will utter perverse things. Yes, you will be like one who lies down in the midst of the sea, or like one who lies at the top of the mast, saying, "They have struck me, but I was not hurt; they have beaten me but I did not feel it. When shall I awake, that I may yet seek another drink?" (Proverbs 23:29-35).

Except for the brief experience of the Washingtonians around the 1840's to 1850's, there has been only death or insanity for the alcoholic. It would appear that around the turn of the 20th Century God said it was time for the alcoholic to have a chance and he picked 7 characters to make this thing happen. (There are of course many more but for simplicity we'll talk about the 7.)

Four of our characters were born in Vermont and all four were to become real alcoholics (Rowland Hazard, Ebby Thatcher and Bill Wilson all from East Dorset and who were friends in their earlier days. The fourth was Robert Smith, born about 75 miles up the road in St. Johnsbury). One was to be found in Switzerland with an interest in our mental states – the world renowned psychiatrist Dr. Karl Jung. Two were to be found in New York City; one with an interest in our physical state – William D. Silkworth, M.D., a Neurologist and the other with an interest in our spiritual state – Rev. Sam Shoemaker, Pastor of the Calvary Church. These were the "Magnificent Seven."

The four alcoholics were coming to the end of their respective roads about the same time. Rowland, being from a wealthy family, was able to spend a year under the care and treatment of Dr. Jung who had pronounced Rowland cured at the end of that time. Unfortunately for Rowland, that proved not to be the case, because he was drunk before he was able to get out of Europe. On returning to Zurich, Dr. Jung reversed his

diagnosis and pronounced Rowland as completely hopeless. Dr. Jung had never seen an alcoholic of Rowland's kind ever recover. All the others had died an alcoholic death or gone permanently insane. Rowland pleaded for an alternative and Dr. Jung said that he had heard of alcoholics having a vital spiritual experience. These were a phenomenon, completely without explanation or understanding, and he had no idea where these might be found or what must be done for these miracles to occur.

Rowland returned to the U.S. of A. a broken man and, by talking with Rev. Sam Shoemaker, learned of a small group called the Oxford Group to have found a solution to some very difficult living problems. They had started out being known as "The First Century Christianity Movement," which gives us a clue as to their basic concepts – the "Four Absolutes" which incorporated Absolute Honesty, Absolute Unselfishness, Absolute Love and Absolute Purity. These "Absolutes" were abstracted from the first four Books of the New Testament. From the "Absolutes," the alkys came up with the "Six Precepts" which can be found on page 292 of the Third Edition or on page 263 of the Fourth Edition of the Basic Text Book "Alcoholics Anonymous." These were the forerunners of our Twelve Steps. Rowland followed the directions of the Oxford Group and was able to stay happily sober. The Rev. Shoemaker was the spiritual leader of this Group and would later become Bill Wilson's first spiritual advisor.

One of the "Six Precepts" of the Oxford Group was that a member must try to help others. Rowland heard that Ebby was in big trouble and about to be committed to the insane asylum for alcoholic insanity, which in those days could be a lifetime sentence. Rowland got another Oxfordite, appeared before the judge who was preparing the commitment papers and requested that Ebby be released into their custody because of their success in sobriety they believed they could help him.

Ebby tried their program and he too found sobriety. Both Rowland and Ebby understood that their freedom from drinking was the result of a Spiritual Intervention, and believed that to stay sober, they must try to help others so afflicted.

Meanwhile, the other two guys from Vermont were really having their problems with alcohol. Bill Wilson had just completed his second trip to Townes Hospital where Dr. Silkworth had explained his ideas about the disease of alcoholism; the allergy of the body which produces the craving for more alcohol once he had taken the first few drinks and the obsession or insanity of the mind that condemned him to start drinking, unmindful of the ensuing consequences. Dr. Silkworth pronounced Bill as hopeless and told Lois, Bill's wife, that she would soon have to turn Bill over to the undertaker or the keepers of an insane asylum, perhaps within a year.

Robert H. Smith, M.D. was rapidly losing everything he had even though he was and had been an active participant of the Oxford Group in Akron, Ohio for over two years. That Group had been praying that Dr. Bob would be relieved from the grip that Demon Rum had on him, but he only got worse.

Back in New York, Ebby remembered his ole drinking buddy, Bill Wilson, and knew from rumors that were floating around Wall Street that Bill, the stockbroker, was in bad shape. He decided to find out where Bill was living and give him a call to see if they could have a visit. He made it to Bill's home and surprised him by appearing to be sober and declining the drink Bill offered him. It had been many years since Bill had seen Ebby sober. Bill was more than a little curious as to what had happened to his old drinking buddy. So he told Bill of the practical program of action that had produced two months of happy sobriety and offered the program to Bill. Bill listened but declined to partake thereof because it something to do with God and Bill was a hardnosed agnostic. Knowing of Bill's anti-religious belief, Ebby left Bill with one very dramatic thought, "*Bill, why don't you choose your own conception of God?*" Though his thirty day drunk was to last two more weeks, that thought would not leave him. At the end of that drunk, Bill wound up at Townes Hospital for the third time about to go into D.T.'s. On the third day of his sobriety, he decided he would do what Ebby said he had done. He called Ebby from the hospital and asked him to pay him a visit. He asked Ebby to explain what it was he had done one more time. Ebby again outlined the simple program of action. After Ebby left, Bill got on his knees beside his bed and said, "If there is a God, let Him show Himself now!" and Bill experienced his "Hot Flash." The next day, Ebby returned to the Hospital and helped Bill learn how to apply the simple program of action to his life. Bill left the hospital at the end of seven days with a thought that his primary purpose in life would be to try to help other alcoholics. (Praying only for the knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out?)

Rev. Shoemaker worked with Bill and helped him confirm that helping others was what he was to be about. Bill and Ebby worked the Oxford Mission for four months without a single success. Bill became discouraged and told Lois that the "Hot Flash" he had in Townes Hospital must have been a fluke. His effort to help other alcoholics was a complete waste of time and that he had had it with those damn drunks. He was going to get a steady job, get her out of the Department Store and they were going to start living a normal life.

Lois said, "No Bill, you aren't wasting your time. For the first time in our seventeen years of married life, you have gone four months without a drink. This thing is working, and I so love you sober. Please keep trying." So Bill went back to Dr. Silkworth and explained his lack of success. Dr. Silkworth told Bill that his problem was quite simple. He was getting the cart before the horse. "Tell them about the scientific hopelessness of alcoholism," the Doctor said. "Tell them about the physical allergy that prevents them from being able to control the amount the drink once they have started drinking. Tell them about the insidious insanity, the obsession that condemns them to start drinking even though they really don't want to. Tell them your story of what your life was like before you found your recovery. Once they hear that, they then be willing to hear about that God of yours." Bill said, "Yes, that just might do it."

While this had been going on, he and a few friends who still had some money, learned of a machine company in Akron, Ohio, of all places, that could be had for a song in a "We can't lose" proxy fight. The "we can't lose" deal lost and Bill found himself alone, broke and full of resentment and fear in the lobby of the Mayflower hotel. He went to the church directory

in the lobby, located the name of a minister named Walter Tunks who might know something of the Oxford Group and called for help. Bill desperately wanted to locate another serious drinker to talk with. The result of that call was that he was given ten names and telephone numbers. The first nine calls were typical of what an alcoholic might expect; "We're busy," "We don't know any drunks," "You certainly called the wrong number here," and then the ninth one just hung up on him. With the nine rejections on top of his already horrible fear and dejection, he started to the other end of the lobby to the bar. In a moment of sanity, he remembered what always happened and returned to make the tenth attempt at the numbers the kind pastor had given him. The result was that he ended up talking with Henrietta Seiberling, a member of the Akron Oxford Group and daughter-in-law of the founder and president of Goodyear Rubber Co. Remember that the Akron Oxford Group had been praying for Dr. Bob's release from the bottle. When Henrietta heard what Bill wanted, another alcoholic to try to help so he could stay sober, she knew that God had answered their prayers and insisted that Bill come out right away. That was May 11, 1935, the Saturday before Mother's Day.

Henrietta called the Smith residence and when Ann Smith answered the call, she had to remind Henrietta that it was the day before Mother's Day and that Dr. Bob, being the loving husband that he was, had brought her a beautiful potted plant to celebrate the occasion. The potted plant was sitting on the dinning room table but unfortunately Dr. Bob was also potted and he was under the dinning room table. Maybe they could make it the next afternoon.

At Ann's insistence, the nagging wife, Dr. Bob agreed to go to the Seiberling Estate that Mother's Day afternoon to meet this character from New York but she had to promise that they would stay no longer than fifteen minutes.

When they met at the Gatehouse, Bill looked at Dr. Bob, who was perspiring, shaking with blood shot eyes and said, "Dr. Smith, it is so good to meet you." Dr. Bob replied, "Yes Mr. Wilson, it is good to meet you also but we must be very brief. I have but a few minutes." And Bill replied, "Dr., I understand. You look like you could use a drink." And that piqued Dr. Bob's curiosity about this "Rummy from New York."

Fifteen minutes and six hours later they were still at it and Ann Smith suggested that they return to the Smith residence to continue their discussion. One month later, on June 10, Dr. Bob had his last drink. Three days later, Bill and Dr. Bob talked to an alcoholic attorney of the hopeless variety, Bill Dotson, "Anonymous Number Three", and three months later, Bill returned to New York; Dr. Bob had taken his last drink and Alcoholics Anonymous had been born, but nobody knew it at that time.

Dr. Bob and Bill Dotson in Akron and Bill Wilson in New York went to work feverishly on improving their success rate. By the end of 1936, there were a total of ten sober members of this rag-tail group.

In the Fall of 1937, Bill visited Dr. Bob. Bill had a little over 2 ½ years of sobriety and Dr. Bob a little over two years. They were comparing their experience with helping alkys find sobriety. As they compared notes and counted noses, they were struck with an amazing fact;

approximately 40 hopeless, helpless alcoholics were sober as a result of the simple program of action which they had learned from the Oxfordites. The age of miracles was with them; forty miracles were trying to carry the message of hope to the hopeless. They knew they must find a way to present this simple program of action in such a manner that alcoholics everywhere could have a chance to live and become useful and successful citizens again. The outcome of this realization bore fruit in 1939 with the writing and publication of our basic text, the book, Alcoholics Anonymous. It has remained virtually unchanged since the original printing and has become the basic text for recovery for something in excess of 200 different anonymous fellowships over these few years. Some of these are Al-Anon, Alateen, Narcotics Anonymous, Cocaine Anonymous, Overeaters Anonymous, Gamblers Anonymous, Sex-Addicts Anonymous, Sex and Love Anonymous, Co-Dependents Anonymous, Emotions Anonymous, Smokers Anonymous, Incest Survivors Anonymous, Shoppers Anonymous, Depressives Anonymous, and on, and on, and on. It is estimated that something over 20 million people are now using the “Big Book” to learn the direction for taking the 12 steps. It is now the second leading best seller of all time... “and we are sure our way of living has its advantages for all” (pg xiii). The only differences in these different anonymous programs is Step One, The Problem (what is it we are powerless over), and Step Twelve (who is it that we can help). Steps Two through Eleven are the same for all.

And so here we are, about to soberly embark on a journey through a book that could never have been written by a guy who could never have had the wisdom we will find as we study the experience of more than 100 recovered men and women shared in this volume. We the hopeless are doing the impossible and will soon learn how we can make this miracle reality in our lives.

I said there were seven main characters in this scenario. I think there were nine. Had it not been for a lady named Ann and a gal named Lois, Bill and Dr. Bob would never have met, and where would you and I be today?