

## Thoughts on the First Three Pages of "How It Works"

By this time in the writing process, I can envision Bill thinking: "I've thoroughly reviewed 'the problem' in the 'Doctor's Opinion,' Chapter One (*Bill's Story*) and part of Chapter Two (*There Is A Solution*). I've told them what's going to happen if they don't find 'the Solution' in Chapter Three (*More About Alcoholism*). I gave them some 'new ideas' so they might be more able to 'make a decision' regarding 'that Power which is greater than human power' in Chapter Four (*We Agnostics*). So – I've done all the preliminary work – it's time to detail 'the Program of Action.'"

And so he sets out to write what is perhaps the most significant pattern for living since the *Ten Commandments* or the *Sermon on the Mount* in Chapter Five (*How It Works*).

*"It was now realized that we had enough background and window-dressing material, and that at this point we would have to tell how our program for recovery from alcoholism really worked. The backbone of the book would have to be fitted in right here."* (*Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, pg. 159 bottom).

So – that was the assignment. But what was the environment – the culture - of this as yet unnamed fledgling society? What exactly was "the program" they were following at that time?

*"Since Ebby's visit to me in the fall of 1934 we had gradually evolved what we called 'the word-of-mouth program.' Most of the basic ideas had come from the Oxford Groups, William James, and Dr. Silkworth. Though **subject to considerable variation**, it all boiled down into a pretty consistent procedure which comprised six steps. These were **approximately** as follows:*

- 1. We admitted that we were licked, that we were powerless over alcohol.*
- 2. We made a moral inventory of our defects or sins.*
- 3. We confessed or shared our shortcomings with another person in confidence.*
- 4. We made restitution to all those we had harmed by our drinking.*
- 5. We tried to help other alcoholics, with no thought of reward in money or prestige.*
- 6. We prayed to whatever God we thought there was for power to practice these precepts.*

*This was the substance of what, by the fall of 1938, we were telling newcomers."* (*Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, pg. 160)

In the Big Book ("*He Sold Himself Short*"), Earl Treat (who helped form the first A.A. group in Chicago) gives the Akron version of the six steps as they were taught in 1937:

- 1. Complete deflation.*
- 2. Dependence and guidance from a Higher Power.*
- 3. Moral inventory.*
- 4. Confession.*
- 5. Restitution.*
- 6. Continued work with other alcoholics.*

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In a July 1953 *Grapevine* article titled "A Fragment of History: Origin of the Twelve Steps" (reproduced in *The Language of the Heart*, pg. 200) Bill wrote:

*"During the next three years after Dr Bob's recovery our growing groups at Akron, New York and Cleveland evolved the so-called **word-of-mouth** program of our pioneering time. As we commenced to form a society separate from the Oxford Group, we began to state our principles **something like this**:*

- 1. We admitted that we were powerless over alcohol.*
- 2. We got honest with ourselves.*
- 3. We got honest with another person, in confidence.*
- 4. We made amends for harms done others.*
- 5. We worked with other alcoholics without demand for prestige or money.*
- 6. We prayed to God to help us to do these things as best we could.*

*...these principles were advocated **according to the whim or liking of each of us...**"*

In using terms like "**word of mouth**," "**subject to considerable variation**," "**approximately**," "**something like this**" and "**according to the whim or liking of each of us**" it was clear that the need for consistency was critical before the "program" became distorted and diluted to the point of being unrecognizable.

So – his "*assignment*" then was to state the program in writing – no more "word of mouth" interpretation.

So let's look at how he wrote the first three pages of "*How It Works*", and what the expectations and reactions of the fellowship were.

*"Bill wrote the Twelve Steps...while lying in bed at 182 Clinton Street with pencil in hand and pad of yellow scratch paper on his knee." (Pass It On, pg. 197 bottom)*

In *The Language of the Heart: A Fragment of History: Origin of the Twelve Steps* (pg.200-201), Bill wrote:

*"I well remember the evening on which the Twelve Steps were written. I was lying in bed quite dejected and suffering from one of my imaginary ulcer attacks. Four chapters of the book, Alcoholics Anonymous, had been roughed out and read in meetings at Akron and New York. We quickly found that everybody wanted to be an author. The hassles as to what should go into our new book were terrific. For example, some wanted a purely psychological book...A few, led by our wonderful southern friend, Fitz M., wanted a fairly religious book infused with some of the dogma we had picked up from the churches and missions which had tried to help us. The louder these arguments, the more I felt in the middle. It appeared that I wasn't going to be the author at all. I was only going to be an umpire who would decide the contents of the book.*

*"Having arrived at Chapter Five, it seemed high time to state what our program really was. I remember running over in my mind the word- of-mouth phrases then in current use. Jotting these down, they added up to the six named above. Then came the*

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*idea that our program ought to be more accurately and clearly stated. Distant readers have a precise set of principles. Knowing the alcoholic's ability to rationalize, something airtight would have to be written. We couldn't let the reader wiggle out anywhere. Besides, a more complete statement would help in the chapters to come where we would need to show exactly how the recovery program ought to be worked."*

In *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, (pg. 161-162), Bill said:

*"This particular evening, as my mind ran over these developments, it seemed to me that the program was still not definite enough....our literature would have to be as clear and comprehensive as possible. Our steps would have to be more explicit. There must not be a single loophole through which the rationalizing alcoholic could wiggle out...Finally I started to write. I set out to draft more than six steps; how many more I did not know. I relaxed and asked for guidance. With a speed that was astonishing... I completed the first draft. **It took perhaps half an hour.** The words kept right on coming. At this moment a couple of late callers arrived. One of them was ...Howard A....with a newcomer.... I was greatly pleased with what I had written, and I read them the new version of the program, now the "Twelve Steps. Howard and his friend reacted violently. "Why Twelve steps?" "You've got too much God in these steps; you will scare people away." And, "What do you mean by getting those drunks down 'on their knees' when they ask to have all their shortcomings removed?" And, "Who wants all their shortcomings removed, anyhow?" "You've got to tone it down. It's too stiff. The average alcoholic just won't buy it the way it stands.*

*"I sprang to the defense of the new creation, every single word of it. A terrific discussion developed which cooled only when Lois turned up a couple of hours later. "Why don't you forget about it for awhile," she said, "and have a cup of coffee." This we did."*

However, upon awakening the next day, Bill was just as committed to this "new creation" and set out to present it to the rest of the fellowship. And – that's when the crap hit the fan!

*"What the hell is this?" they said.*

*"God gave man Ten Commandments – now you've got twelve – and six had been quite sufficient for us until now."*

*"This sounds too much like the Oxford Group absolutes."*

*"You're giving people directions and you don't have the right to tell anybody what they have to do."*

Some wanted more Christian doctrine. Some wanted more use of the word "God". Others wanted the word "God" deleted from the book entirely. One group wanted a more psychological, rather than spiritual approach.

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And *Bill this...* and *Bill that...* And this quarreling almost destroyed the entire fellowship as well as the book project.

*"As the one who had to do the writing, I was caught squarely in the middle of this arguing....For a while it looked as if we would bog down into permanent disagreement. Despairing of satisfying everyone, I finally asked that I might be the final judge of what the book said. Seeing that we would get nowhere without such a point of decision, (they) agreed."* (according to Bill in *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, pg. 163-4).

So Bill agreed to some modifications in the first three pages of *How It Works*. And it is a great testament to Bill's abilities as a teacher – and salesman – that most of what he originally wrote that night, before Howard and the newcomer paid him a visit, remained intact!

But from that point onward, he was to be the final arbiter of what went into the book.

So let's begin our study of Chapter Five by contrasting the original version of those three pages with the final version that appears in the book today.