

IS AA DYING? I AM RESPONSIBLE

Imagine if you can that every alcoholic in Australia found recovery in AA and, as a symbol of unity, with arms outstretched, formed a human chain. I estimate that chain would stretch for over 1,600 kilometers. Just picture it - one alcoholic linked to another and another and another from Sydney to Melbourne and on to Brisbane or from Adelaide to Alice Springs!! Even if my estimate were wrong by 50% the chain still would exceed 800 km. Compare this to how far that chain would stretch today - probably no more than 25 kilometers – barely enough to get out of the suburbs of Melbourne where I live!

In *AA Comes of Age* I have been inspired and touched by many passages and pages but none more than the one on page 144 where Bill recalls: ‘When Dr. Bob and I realised on that fall day in 1937 that some two-score of us had recovered from alcoholism, we at once asked ourselves, “How can this experience be shared? How can the word be spread?” The vision, commitment and tenacity of our co-founders are the reason I am sober today and able to write this article. Perhaps, ironically, the principles underlying these words – one alcoholic helping another alcoholic, sharing and spreading the word, come from an era when the main concern of AA members was probably ‘Can AA Get Established?’ Today they speak to me of the issues raised by our provocative Conference Theme.

As a Conference theme the suggestion that AA might be dying will, to some, sound alarmist or even defeatist. I think not. As a vital part of putting AA’s program of recovery from alcoholism into our lives we complete a Fourth Step by conducting a *fearless* inventory and, to sustain that recovery, we conduct regular inventories in accordance with the Tenth Step. Structured groups take their inventories. It is not extraordinary therefore, for the Fellowship as a whole to look at its own state of health and for each of us to consider the part we play in keeping it healthy. Furthermore, the theme also makes it abundantly clear to me that the responsibility for AA’s health and longevity lies with me as an individual member and, equally as important, as part of a group

AA came into existence 66 years ago this June. How many organizations do you know that have survived even this long? Certainly some churches, charities, sporting clubs and some businesses, but not the great majority. In fact, the evidence is overwhelmingly that longevity is not something we can take for granted.

Many of us know about the Washingtonians. They were spectacularly successful in dealing with alcoholism in the United States in the 1840’s. Despite achieving a membership reputed to be in the order of 500,000 within a year - astonishing for the times – they just as quickly disappeared. The powerful and salutary lesson from this phenomenon was what led to AA’s commitment to its singleness of purpose – we confine ourselves to problems with alcoholism.

Bill W once said that if AA were to be destroyed it would be from within. So let’s *honestly* ask ourselves how well we are travelling.

If growth is a sign of good health, is AA growing? AA membership is difficult to measure. The general consensus is that it is somewhere in the vicinity of 15,000 but that this is falling. By comparison with other western countries AA should, on a per

capita basis, have in the order of 60,000 members. Given that the fellowship has existed here for over 50 years, that Australia's population is growing at approximately 1% per year and that there is no evidence of a decline in the incidence of alcoholism, these are disturbing symptoms of decay or a lack of relevance.

I know of Groups that do nothing more than open the doors each week, do you? They struggle to fill service positions or don't rotate them to let new blood in and they are unaware or not interested in a broad interpretation of the 5th Tradition. Nothing new here! In an article written by a California P.I. Chairman, published in *The Grapevine** over a quarter of a century ago, some similar sentiments were echoed and I quote: ' Bill W. on that historic day in the Akron hotel lobby, did not leave a note with the desk clerk to the effect that he would be waiting in his room reading the papers in case an enquiring alcoholic stumbled in wanting help. Today, though, much Twelfth Step work is conducted on just such a premise. "Let the bum find us" is a disturbingly pervasive attitude, and is contrary to every historic and traditional principle established in the early days of AA.' Keeping the doors open is vital, but if AA is not continually attracting and retaining new members then sooner or later there might be no one new coming in and eventually no one at all

AA today, perhaps as never before, finds itself in competition with other organizations offering 'solutions' to problem drinkers. To draw from my own experience, and generalising broadly from what I hear at meetings I believe that prior to and even after making it to AA, many people are looking for a 'quick fix' for their problems, the 'easier softer way' that Chapter 5 of the Big Book refers to. For a practising alcoholic in need of a solution the proliferation of alternatives to AA has never been as great. Today such a person is offered the option of 'controlled drinking'. This might work for some; fortunately it was not an option put to me. I tried to control my drinking by myself and, guess what, it never worked. I can imagine how seductive this option would have sounded coming from an 'expert'.

Another issue for AA is that of addictions other than alcohol and, in particular, those unfortunate enough to be addicted to alcohol and something else. I have heard great consternation in the fellowship about these issues although our Traditions and literature make it absolutely clear that AA is for alcoholics be they dual addicted or otherwise. I wonder if we reach enough of these poor people.

Membership surveys done from time to time, though imperfect statistically provide more insight. There is a significant drop off in numbers and attendance at meetings around the five years of sobriety mark. This was about this time that I started to get better mentally, a time that came close on the heels of a much greater involvement in service work as a result of becoming a District Committee Member after a period as GSR.

The success of work done by AA's pioneers in Australia may mean that many new members, thankfully, don't have to reach the parlous 'low bottom' stage of alcoholism vividly described in many of the original stories in the Big Book. Does this mean that some of urgency that drove the early AA's is missing? Ask yourself, as I ask myself, am I too comfortable, complacent, busy or ungrateful?

On the world stage, AA's growth has undoubtedly been considerable. It's development throughout North America and then to many other parts of the world is well documented. I wonder to what extent the health of the fellowship is directly

related to the effort expended on carrying the message of recovery. In Australia if there is a belief or a sense that 'the job is done' then the 12th Step and the 5th Tradition are, for the fellowship as whole, not given the priority they were and the result is decay.

What has been important in my recovery has been a growing involvement with Alcoholics Anonymous and its spiritual principles. As I have recovered and come to put the Steps into my life on a daily basis I have also developed a willingness to give of myself for the sake of the fellowship. For me the two are now inextricably woven together. I know that I am sober thanks to the program of Alcoholics Anonymous but I also know that I am entrusted with perpetuating the Legacies which our Founders left us – *all three Legacies* – Recovery, Unity and Service. I must confess that the knowledge of the Legacies came to me slowly. In early recovery I was really only aware of the Steps with the Traditions relegated to a place of much lesser significance. Getting actively involved in service work with other committed members has exposed me to the other Legacies and the learning process still continues today.

I have come to believe that the most tangible way that I can express my gratitude to AA is to live a sober life and work, in every way I can, to share what has been so freely given to me. This requires me to be a living example of the principle of 'giving it away to keep it'. Thankfully I'm also told that we seek progress not perfection!!

I have also come to believe that the role of Sponsor is vital to the future health of the fellowship. To me this means that as a sponsor I have a responsibility to help sponsees develop an understanding of all of AA's Legacies.

My conclusion is that, thankfully, AA in Australia is not dying - but it's not thriving either. AA might be a god inspired program but it has no god given right to exist. It's continued existence, which is vital to me and to all those alcoholics still to find us, depends upon each member accepting the responsibility to carry the message of recovery to the best of their ability every day.

The part I play in this is perfectly expressed in Appendix B on pages 287 and 288 of AA Comes of Age: 'Gradually we saw that the unity, the effectiveness and even the survival of AA always would depend on our continued willingness to give up our personal ambitions and desires for the common safety and welfare. Just as sacrifice meant survival for the individual, so did sacrifice mean unity for the group and for AA's entire fellowship.'

In the end it all comes down to me, because / am responsible.

Yours in fellowship and service,

David H.
Melbourne

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