

## **Success with *Alcoholics Anonymous***

Note: Terms in these pages such as *Alcoholics Anonymous* and AA refer to the book *Alcoholics Anonymous* unless otherwise stated. Page references are from the 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition

### **-Introduction**

Generally speaking, as I study the program of *Alcoholics Anonymous* I think of it in terms of how I can best carry this message to the sufferer. As *Alcoholics Anonymous* states in several places (AA pg 18):

“But the ex-problem drinker who has found this solution, who is properly armed with facts about himself,…”

...and AA pg 89:

“You can help when no one else can.”

...and AA pg 132:

“We have recovered, and have been given the power to help others.”

...and AA pg 164:

“Ask Him in your morning meditation what you can do each day for the man who is still sick. The answers will come, if your own house is in order. But obviously you cannot transmit something you haven't got.”

Or in other terms, the recovered alcoholic must understand in what direction the man who is still sick must be guided if he is to get well. We must have a message to carry “*and it must have depth and weight.*” Or in even simpler terms, the guide must know where the sufferer needs to go AND how to help him get there – the recovered alcoholic must know something to be of any real help! We have to know what the goal is in order to guide someone else to the same place. This brings a question to mind.

What is success with *Alcoholics Anonymous*? Is it staying sober - or being an active member of The Fellowship (or a Fellowship) of Alcoholics Anonymous? Or is it something entirely different? Of course we must persevere – we never reach a point where we can rest on our laurels. We must continue to grow each day for the rest of our lives, but there is a point where the sufferer can know ‘By the Grace of God I am recovered. I am free from alcoholism and baring any self-imposed failure I need have no fear of ever falling back.’ At what point can a man or woman know, as Bill wrote (AA pg 13):

“My friend promised when these things were done I would enter upon a new relationship with my Creator; that I would have the elements of a way of living which answered all my problems.”

Is it when we draw our first sober breath, when we attend our first meeting, when we clean our first ashtray, when we complete the first nine steps? What standard are we to use to measure success?

### **-Part I – The problem**

Before setting a standard for success, we must first understand where we failed. One way to discover a problem is to look for symptoms of the problem. If the symptoms are there, the problem is there. This is what *Alcoholics Anonymous* does. For example (some excerpts from AA pg 21):

“Here is the fellow who has been puzzling you, especially in his lack of control. He does absurd, incredible, tragic things while drinking. He is a real Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.”

"His disposition while drinking resembles his normal nature but little. He may be one of the finest fellows in the world. Yet let him drink for a day, and he frequently becomes disgustingly, and even dangerously anti-social."

"He often possesses special abilities, skills, and aptitudes, and has a promising career ahead of him. He uses his gifts to build up a bright outlook for his family and himself, and then pulls the structure down on his head by a senseless series of sprees. He is the fellow who goes to bed so intoxicated he ought to sleep the clock around."

Look for the most obvious symptoms first. Anyone who suffers from these, and is willing to be honest with their selves, can spot them easily. The reader probably does not have all the symptoms listed. However, the fact that the sufferer, for example, never lost a job, is not evidence that the problem is not present. The symptoms must be examined and taken in their totality. Remember, the symptoms are not the problem, but they are observable and can indicate that the problem is present. The book goes on to shed more light on the primary symptom (AA pg xxviii):

"...they" [*alcoholics*] "cannot start drinking without developing the phenomenon of craving. This phenomenon, as we have suggested, may be the manifestation of an allergy which differentiates these people, and sets them apart as a distinct entity. It has never been, by any treatment with which we are familiar, permanently eradicated. The only relief we have to suggest is entire abstinence."

For a person who suffers from the inability to control the amount they take once started, the only answer is to stop entirely. Simple enough, except alcoholism has another symptom (AA pg 23):

"These observations would be academic and pointless if our friend never took the first drink, thereby setting the terrible cycle in motion. Therefore, the main problem of the alcoholic centers in his mind, rather than in his body."

...and AA pg 54:

*"The fact is that most alcoholics, for reasons yet obscure, have lost the power of choice in drink. Our so-called will power becomes practically nonexistent. We are unable, at certain times, to bring into our consciousness with sufficient force the memory of the suffering and humiliation of even a week or a month ago. We are without defense against the first drink."*

A one-two punch – can't live with it and can't live without it! For one who suffers from this two-fold malady, abstinence is the ONLY hope of living a successful life but the sufferer can't master alcohol. Even during periods of abstinence alcohol has called the shots. We had to avoid it, had to keep busy with other things to keep our mind off it, had to go to meetings to find others to help us fight against it. Alcohol was still our master! *Alcoholics Anonymous* does not teach that abstinence will solve the problem. It simply says abstinence must be included in the solution. If the reader agrees that he/she suffers from these two symptoms, the book gives us more (AA pg 50-51):

"Once confused and baffled by the seeming futility of existence, they show the underlying reasons why they were making heavy going of life. Leaving aside the drink question, they tell why living was so unsatisfactory."

...and AA pg 52:

"We were having trouble with personal relationships, we couldn't control our emotional natures, we were a prey to misery and depression, we couldn't make a living, we had a feeling of uselessness, we were full of fear, we were unhappy, we couldn't seem to

be of real help to other people - was not a basic solution of these bedevilments more important than..."

*Alcoholics Anonymous* has taken the reader out from behind the bottle. These symptoms deal with the sober mind. Since drunkenness did not cause these symptoms, abstinence can't make them go away. Now we are starting to get to the real problem as illustrated on AA pg 34:

"For those who are unable to drink moderately the question is how to stop altogether. We are assuming, of course, that the reader desires to stop. Whether such a person can quit upon a nonspiritual basis depends upon the extent to which he has already lost the power to choose whether he will drink or not."

...and AA pg 25:

"If you are as seriously alcoholic as we were, we believe there is no middle-of-the-road solution. We were in a position where life was becoming impossible, and if we had passed into the region from which there is no return through human aid, we had but two alternatives: One was to go on to the bitter end, blotting out the consciousness of our intolerable situation as best we could; and the other, to accept spiritual help."

And why do we need Spiritual help? AA pg 45:

"Our human resources, as marshalled by the will, were not sufficient; they failed utterly. Lack of power, that was our dilemma. We had to find a power by which we could live, and it had to be a Power greater than ourselves. Obviously."

Why do we lack the power? Because our manner of living, selfish and self-centered, has blocked us off from God, the One who has ALL power. Not because we can't control our drinking. Our sober state of living is just as much, if not more, a part of the problem.

AA pg 62:

"Selfishness - self-centeredness! That, we think, is the root of our troubles."

"Above everything, we alcoholics must be rid of this selfishness. We must, or it kills us! God makes that possible. And there often seems no way of entirely getting rid of self without His aid."

It is selfishness that can actually kill us - alcohol may be the instrument used, but it is selfishness that actually does it. Why selfishness? Because in that state we are cut off from the only Power that can save us - God! Bill stated that he needed to come into a new relationship with his Creator (pg 13). We are told that we need the same thing (AA pg 72):

"We have been trying to get a new attitude, a new relationship with our Creator,..."

Our problem is separation from God. EVERYTHING else, the drinking, the bedevilments (pg 52), etc, etc, are just a symptoms of this root cause - they are not the problem.

AA pg 25:

"...we have been spiritually sick. When the spiritual malady is overcome, we straighten out mentally and physically."

## **-Part II - The Solution**

Before we get into the Solution spoken of lets take a look at what the Solution is not:

- As we see from Part I, abstinence is not the solution. Just getting the mind clear does not solve the problem, and often makes it worse!

- Fellowship is not the solution. *Alcoholics Anonymous* makes it clear that fellowship, just as abstinence, is a part of the new life, but it is not the Solution. AA Page 151

"Some of us sought out sordid places, hoping to find understanding companionship and approval. Momentarily we did - then would come oblivion and the awful awakening to face the hideous Four Horsemen - Terror, Bewilderment, Frustration, Despair."

This is how we used fellowship – for our own selfish ends. We didn't have a choice since we lived our lives for ourselves. We sought out those who gave what we needed – oblivion from our intolerable lives by any means possible.

- The twelve steps are not the solution. Note what Bill writes on Page 9:

"They had told of a simple religious idea and a practical program of action."

The *simple religious idea* – Bill needed to come into a new relationship with his Creator; AND a practical program of action, what was later to become the twelve steps. These are two separate things. The steps are simply a method by which "*faith can be acquired.*" And again on pg 17:

"The tremendous fact for every one of us is that we have discovered a common solution. We have a way out" [*of our self-centered lives*] "on which we can absolutely agree, and upon which we can join in brotherly and harmonious action."

Two separate things – a common Solution (proper relationship with God) and a way out (the twelve steps).

We see that simply completing the first nine steps cannot be the actual solution, and thus cannot be used as a standard to determine success.

How about this: lengthy sobriety, restored relations with the people about me (fellowship) and completion of steps are SYMPTOMS of the new life, but they are not conclusive evidence that the sufferer has had the vital Spiritual Experience need to bring them into proper relationship with their Creator. Why are they not conclusive? Because any one, or a combination of them, can be exhibited by someone who is still self-centered and blocked from God!

Remember – the goal of *Alcoholics Anonymous* is NOT to get someone to quit drinking or to 'join us' or to take the steps. The goal is to come into a new (proper) relationship with our Creator. AA pg 68:

"We are in the world to play the role He assigns. Just to the extent that we do as we think He would have us, and humbly rely on Him, does He enable us to match calamity with serenity."

...and AA pg 77

"But this is not an end in itself" [*the twelve steps*]. "Our real purpose is to fit ourselves to be of maximum service to God and the people about us."

*Alcoholics Anonymous* does not lay out much Doctrine about what is right and wrong in regards to our relationship with God. It does however give us some clear indications that there is right and wrong. For example, AA pg 13-14:

"Belief in the power of God, plus enough willingness, honesty and humility to establish and maintain the new order of things, were the essential requirements. Simple, but not easy; a price had to be paid. It meant destruction of self-centeredness. I must turn in all things to the Father of Light who presides over us all."

There are things we must quit doing, and others we must start doing - AA pg 45:

"Well, that's exactly what this book is about. Its main object is to enable you to find a Power greater than yourself which will solve your problem. That means we have written a book which we believe to be spiritual as well as moral. And it means, of course, that we are going to talk about God."

Moral means right and wrong - AA pg 64:

"Though our decision was a vital and crucial step, it could have little permanent effect unless at once followed by a strenuous effort to face, and to be rid of, the things in ourselves which had been blocking us."

The things in ourselves, the wrong things - AA pg 66:

"For when harboring such feelings" [*deep resentments*] "we shut ourselves off from the sunlight of the Spirit."

If we do this we suffer (because it is wrong) - finally on AA pg 84:

"This thought brings us to Step Ten, which suggests we continue to take personal inventory and continue to set right any new mistakes as we go along. We vigorously commenced this way of living as we cleaned up the past. We have entered the world of the Spirit. Our next function is to grow in understanding and effectiveness. This is not an overnight matter. It should continue for our lifetime. Continue to watch for selfishness, dishonesty, resentment, and fear. When these crop up, we ask God at once to remove them."

Steps ten thru twelve clearly indicate that we must continue to learn (far beyond the limited information given in *Alcoholics Anonymous*) for the rest of our lives. We must discover what is right and wrong, not according to ourselves, or according to AA, or according to society, but according to our Creator. Why? So we can continue and grow in our new, proper relationship with Him!

AA pg 164:

"Our book is meant to be suggestive only. We realize we know only a little. God will constantly disclose more to you and to us. Ask Him in your morning meditation what you can do each day for the man who is still sick. The answers will come, if your own house is in order. But obviously you cannot transmit something you haven't got. See to it that your relationship with Him is right, and great events will come to pass for you and countless others. This is the Great Fact for us."

The author(s) realized they knew only a little (and didn't even put down all they did know). Their point is this: Start here, with this simple approach. AA pg 13:

"There I humbly offered myself to God, as I then understood Him, to do with me as He would. I placed myself unreservedly under His care and direction. I admitted for the first time that of myself I was nothing; that without Him I was lost. I ruthlessly faced my sins and became willing to have my new-found Friend take them away, root and branch."

See to it that your relationship with God is right and great events will come to pass! The '*as I then understood Him*' will grow into the way God would have us understand Him! Seek and Ye shall find, knock and it shall be opened!

### **-Conclusion**

I will be the first to admit that early in my recovery I was ignorant to almost all the ideas expressed in Part I and Part II. Fortunately this level of understanding wasn't required for

me to make a start. What is important to understand is that I was guided by God, through a recovered alcoholic, in this direction. The drunk who helped me knew what I needed even though I didn't. From the beginning, unbeknownst to me, I was set on the path that leads in this direction. Any other direction and I would have ended up in a ditch – maybe sober, but separated from my Creator.

Had the man who started me off sent me down another path, one where I made the rules (like who is God, what does He want me to do) I would either be dead or quickly on my way there – although I may have remained sober!

No now we get down to the skinny of it. AA pg 63 states:

“As we felt new power flow in, as we enjoyed peace of mind, as we discovered we could face life successfully, as we became conscious of His presence, we began to lose our fear of today, tomorrow or the hereafter.”

Is there ANY question what ‘the hereafter’ referred to is speaking of? It can't be the future in this life (that's ‘tomorrow’). While *Alcoholics Anonymous* is quite “shy” on proclaiming God as they now understood Him, even a casual reading of the AA book shows they understood God to be the One revealed through the Holy Prophets and Apostles in the Bible. The first 164 pages are filled with direct Biblical quotes (Father of Light, faith without works is dead, take up his bed and walk, take the bit in our mouths, etc). It is also filled with Biblical principles from front to back (couldn't stand before his Creator guilty of such ruinous slander, cornerstone, God is everything or else He is nothing, etc).

As for what the book says in the Foreword to the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition – let's look at that. Most of what appears as this foreword actually came into existence in 1941 with the 2<sup>nd</sup> printing of the 1<sup>st</sup> edition. They added an appendix to this called ‘Now we are two thousand’. This appendix evolved over the next 14 years, finally being called ‘Now we are thousands’. This appendix was all about another Alcoholics Anonymous, an institution called AA! It goes on to say that membership in this institution (called a fellowship) had now become paramount. The foreword to the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition actually says that alcoholics would have no hope if the institution of AA disappeared! Read it for yourselves on pages xviii and xix. What happened to the fellowship described on AA pg 161:

“No one is too discredited or has sunk too low to be welcomed cordially - if he means business. Social distinctions, petty rivalries and jealousies - these are laughed out of countenance. Being wrecked in the same vessel, being restored and united under one God, with hearts and minds attuned to the welfare of others...”

There is only ONE who has ALL power – that One is God! For anyone (alcoholic or not) to get out from under their own personal pains and grievances with this life, only to fall short of coming into proper relationship with their Creator is the saddest thing of all. I will close with these verses Mark 8:34-38

**“34 And when he had called the people unto him with his disciples also, he said unto them, Whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. 35 For whosoever will save his life shall lose it; but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospel's, the same shall save it. 36 For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? 37 Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul? 38 Whosoever therefore shall be ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation; of him also shall the Son of man be ashamed, when he cometh in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”**