

PLAIN LANGUAGE BIG BOOK

A Tool for Reading
Alcoholics Anonymous

This is A.A. General Service Conference-approved literature

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First Edition. First Printing.

Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc.

This is A.A. General Service Conference-approved literature.

Mailing address:

Box 459

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New York, NY 10163

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ISBN: 978-1-64427-879-6

Printed in the United States of America

70M – 11/24 (WR)B-90

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A Tool for Reading Alcoholics Anonymous

ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS WORLD SERVICES, INC.

NEW YORK CITY

2024

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PREFACE

Welcome to the first plain language edition of Alcoholics Anonymous.

Before we explore how this program might help you, we want to share a short history of this book.

The first version of the book Alcoholics Anonymous was published in April 1939. Since then, millions of copies have been bought and read by people across the world. It became the book that most A.A. groups used in their meetings, and many people now simply call it “the Big Book.” The central text of that book has remained the same since then, but many of the personal stories in the unabridged version have been changed since that time.

This version is different. It offers the same message and ideas as the first Big Book, but is written to be more easily understood.

This book is not intended to replace Alcoholics Anonymous. It is written to make the ideas presented in the Big Book easier to access. It is another tool for sharing the message of A.A.’s program of recovery.

We wanted to offer a version that used clearer and simpler language. We know that some people cannot be in regular contact with other A.A. members to get help with the ideas and vocabulary in the Big Book. Other people have a hard time reading, especially books written long ago that use older language. We want our program to help all people who want to stop drinking, and believe that creating a plain language Big Book would make that possible.

If you are curious about the original Big Book, we encourage you to get a copy and read it. Many, many A.A. members love it. If you attend A.A. meetings, or know any A.A. members, some of the members there would be happy to help you read through it.

But we have made sure that this version carries the same message and offers all of the same information as the original. It contains the same program of recovery from alcoholism that works for us and that will work for you if you follow it.

We hope that as you read, you will feel less alone. And we hope that the more you read, the more you will think to yourself, “Yes, I believe this program can work for me, too.”

FOREWORD

How and why did Alcoholics Anonymous begin? To understand this, we must share a story with you.

In 1935, in the town of Akron, Ohio, a New York businessman and an Akron doctor met for the first time. These two men would become the co-founders of Alcoholics Anonymous.

The businessman told the doctor that he had been trying to stop drinking for a very long time. He had been a heavy drinker for many years, and his drinking was destroying his life. His marriage and business were ruined. He felt confused and scared all the time. He was desperate for help. He had tried many different things, but nothing seemed to work. (You'll read his full story in Chapter 1.)

He explained that he had talked with a man named Dr. William D. Silkworth, who was studying alcoholism. Dr. Silkworth had helped the businessman understand exactly how serious alcoholism was. He taught him how important it was to stop drinking. He was one of the first medical doctors who saw alcoholism as a kind of disease. Before that, many people believed that alcoholics were weak or sinful or stupid. Treating drinking as a sickness was a very new idea.

It was an idea that had been very helpful to the businessman. Like many alcoholics, the businessman felt less shame about his drinking when he thought of it as a disease. He still wanted to stop drinking, but he didn't think of himself as a failure or a terrible person because he drank. Dr. Silkworth helped the businessman change how he thought about alcoholism. (You will read Dr. Silkworth's ideas in the next section of this book. They are very important to A.A.)

In addition to talking with Dr. Silkworth, the businessman had tried going to meetings of a religious group called the Oxford Group. Members of this

group believed that selfishness and fear were the cause of all human problems. The Oxford Group asked their members to try many things to make themselves less fearful and less selfish. These things included apologizing to people they had hurt, making lists of their own strengths and weaknesses, and helping other people through difficult times. The businessman didn't think the Oxford Group could help him stop drinking because most members did not struggle with a drinking problem. However, he was very interested in their ideas and found them to be helpful.

The businessman had also tried to help other struggling drinkers in his hometown. He believed that only alcoholics could help other alcoholics stop drinking. Unfortunately, none of the people he tried to help gave up drinking.

All of this experience and knowledge still helped the businessman. He had stopped drinking for several months.

But now he was worried. He had come to Akron on a business trip which had gone very badly. He was far away from home and feeling upset. He wanted to drink very much and became desperate.

He needed to tell his story to another alcoholic as soon as possible.

If he could talk to someone who understood exactly what he was feeling, that would help him. If he could talk to someone who knew how hard and complicated alcoholism was, that would help him. Maybe talking would even keep him from drinking, just for a little while.

The businessman found a phone at the hotel and began to make a series of phone calls to people, beginning with names he recognized from the Oxford Group. Finally, a local woman suggested that he talk to a doctor in Akron who she said had a drinking problem. They got together and spoke for a long time about the things they had been through.

The doctor listened to the businessman, then talked about his own experiences. The doctor had also tried many things to stop his drinking and

Reading and writing have helped the A.A. program grow and spread. The book Alcoholics Anonymous has been translated into more than 70 languages. This means that people all over the world can read and understand how A.A. works. This program has helped millions of people stop drinking, and it will help millions more in the future.

And it all started when a New York businessman and an Akron doctor decided to talk to each other. Those two men knew that talking and sharing would help them stop drinking. We are grateful to them. Their wisdom and self-sacrifice have saved more lives than we can ever count.

If you would like to learn more about the history of this book, you can read the forewords to the first four editions of the Big Book starting on page 176. You can also visit www.aa.org, or order any of the A.A. books, booklets, and pamphlets that sound interesting to you. Our organization has a powerful history, and we love helping members learn about its growth.

If you are ready to begin your own A.A. journey right now, just turn the page.

GLOSSARY

This is a plain language version of the Big Book, but there are certain unusual words that we could not change or simplify. These words will always be part of the A.A. experience. You will hear them if you attend meetings, and you may hear them any time you speak with another A.A. member.

We have created this list of words and their definitions so you can fully understand everything you read in this book, and everything about the A.A. program. We hope you find it helpful.

Abstinence: Preventing yourself from doing something on purpose. Avoiding an activity, such as drinking.

Addiction: Not having control over doing, taking, or using something even if it is hurting you.

Agnostic: An agnostic neither believes nor disbelieves in the existence of God or gods, or is unsure if one exists.

Amends: Making amends is important in Step Eight and Step Nine of A.A. It means finding ways to make things right with people you have hurt. It involves accepting responsibility for what you've done, stating you were wrong, explaining how you have changed, and asking what you can do and/or how you can heal the relationship.

Alcoholic: Someone who is unable to control their drinking.

Atheist: Someone who does not believe in God or gods.

Big Book: Another name for the book titled *Alcoholics Anonymous*. “The Big Book” is a term used by many A.A. members.

Bill W.: A.A.’s co-founder, whose story appears in Chapter 1 of the *Big Book*.

Binge: Drinking very large amounts of alcohol in short periods of time. (See also: spree)

Chronic: A problem or condition that lasts for a very long time, is difficult to change, and may come back after going away for a short time.

Cravings: An irresistible urge to drink. Obsessive thoughts about alcohol that compel the drinker to start drinking and keep drinking.

Defects of character/character defects: Personality flaws or shortcomings that get in the way of your spiritual growth, e.g., jealousy, impatience, self-pity. Addressing our defects of character (or “shortcomings”) is the focus of Steps Six and Seven.

Delirium tremens: Also called “the shakes” or “the DTs,” delirium tremens takes place when a chronic alcoholic suddenly stops drinking. It is a sign of severe alcohol withdrawal, meaning the physical body is struggling to work correctly without alcohol in its systems. The most common symptom of delirium tremens is body tremors or shaking, but symptoms also include irritability, confusion, nausea, vomiting, high blood pressure, hallucinations, and seizures.

Detox: This is short for “detoxification.” It is a monitored recovery period, often at a hospital, during which an alcoholic attempts to get alcohol out of their body and system. Detox is the process of returning a heavy drinker’s system to normal after extended abuse of alcohol.

Dry / dry drunk: Someone who has stopped drinking but hasn’t changed the way they think or feel in any positive way. Dry drunks often relapse into drinking. Many dry drunks also still show many of

the same behaviors as when they were drinking alcohol. In other words, they are not truly “recovering” from alcoholism.

Fellowship: Members of A.A. sometimes refer to themselves as “the Fellowship,” meaning a group of people with shared experiences who care for and support each other.

God as we understood/understand God: Your own ideas and feelings about a Higher Power. A version of faith that feels true and powerful to you.

Higher Power: A force or power that is stronger than you are. Something that influences events in the universe.

Inventory: Inventory is important to Step Four in A.A., where it’s described as a “searching and fearless moral inventory.” This is a structured list that includes resentments, fears, and the hurt you’ve caused with your alcoholism.

Relapse: When an alcoholic who has stopped drinking for a period of time begins to drink again.

Self-seeking: Acting in a way that puts our own self-centered needs first.

Serenity: A state of feeling calm, peaceful, and untroubled.

Sober/sobriety: The dictionary definition of these words focuses on one thing: NOT using mood-altering chemicals such as alcohol or narcotics. In A.A., we think about sobriety a little differently. First, in A.A. we focus only on alcohol. Second, our definition includes not drinking (or staying “dry”), but it also includes changing our outlook so that we can lead better, healthier, and more peaceful lives.

Spree: Drinking very large amounts of alcohol in short periods of time. (See also: binge)

Vital spiritual experience: A powerful emotional event that allows an alcoholic to feel connected to a Higher Power. It also changes an alcoholic's attitude about drinking.

THE DOCTOR'S OPINION

The members of Alcoholics Anonymous believe that anyone who reads this book will want to know the opinions of medical doctors. We say that our program works, but what do physicians think? Is there any proof of what A.A. claims?

We understand this. You may want this information before you commit to getting sober and decide to join the program. You may want evidence that it works from someone outside our organization. It helps to hear from doctors and other trusted professionals, who understand alcoholism and how it affects our health.

SOBER/SOBRIETY: The dictionary definition of these words focuses on one thing: NOT using mood-altering chemicals such as alcohol or narcotics.

The founders of A.A. understood this, too, and responded by getting input from a well-known expert. The Big Book includes several letters from Dr. William D. Silkworth, who is mentioned in the Foreword. Dr. Silkworth ran the Charles B. Towns Hospital for Drug and Alcohol Addictions in New York City during the 1930s. (One of his patients there was Bill W., one of the co-founders of A.A., whose story you will read in Chapter 1.)

In A.A., we think about sobriety a little differently. First, in A.A. we focus only on alcohol. Second, our definition includes not drinking (or staying “dry”), but it also includes changing our outlook so that we can lead better, healthier, and more peaceful lives.

When A.A. was getting started, some alcoholics felt unsure about joining. They also wanted some sort of proof that the program could help them. So the co-founders asked for Dr. Silkworth's help. He wrote a letter saying that he'd seen the program work for many alcoholics. The co-founders knew they could show this convincing letter to anyone who had doubts. It could help them feel more comfortable about the program. It could help them be confident that it would be a positive force in their lives.

Below, you can read a plain language explanation of Dr. Silkworth's first letter. It is shown side-by-side with the original version that he sent to A.A. in the 1930s.

PLEASE NOTE: The two versions contain all of the same information, but when you compare them the text may not line up exactly. It may help to read the plain language explanation first, and then read the original version.

ORIGINAL

To Whom It May Concern: In late 1934 I attended a patient who, though he had been a competent businessman of g

Before the first Big Book was published, A.A.'s co-founders asked Dr. Silkworth to write more about his thoughts on the program. He said yes, and his second letter is printed below.

In this second letter, he says he believes that both the bodies and minds of alcoholics are affected by their alcoholism. This is something that many alcoholics already believed to be true. It was a huge relief to hear an expert agree.

A.A. members and other people who struggle with drinking are often told that we are unstable. We are told we are running away from our real lives. For some of us, those things are definitely true. But we felt certain that our struggles weren't just mental, but also physical. Alcoholism wasn't just in our heads and hearts. It was in our bodies, too. We are grateful to Dr. Silkworth for confirming this in his letter.

CHRONIC: A problem or condition that lasts for a very long time, is difficult to change, and may come back after going away temporarily. A "chronic alcoholic" is someone who has been drinking for a long time. They may have stopped drinking for a little while, but they cannot stop permanently.

The A.A. program helps alcoholics work through their problems with beliefs and spirituality. But we do believe anyone whose mind is still foggy from alcohol should consider spending time in the hospital before joining A.A. Being clear-headed helps alcoholics understand and accept what we are teaching.

Here is Dr. Silkworth's second letter. Again, you will find a plain language explanation next to the original version that he wrote for publication in the first version of the Big Book.

ORIGINAL

The subject presented in this book seems to me to be of paramount importance to those afflicted with alcoholic addi

As you continue reading through this book yourself—and as you learn more about A.A.'s beliefs and practices—we hope that you will also find your way to acceptance of your problem.

CRAVING: An irresistible urge to drink. Obsessive thoughts about alcohol that compel the drinker to start drinking and keep drinking.

Chapter 1

BILL'S STORY

NOTE FROM THE EDITORS: This chapter contains the story of Bill W., one of A.A.'s founders. The story is told from Bill's point of view. It describes his struggles with drinking, his surrender to alcoholism, and his journey to recovery.

During World War I, I was a young officer in the U.S. military. After spending time at a base in Plattsburgh, New York, I went with some other officers to a New England town where the people were very kind to us. They made us feel like heroes. They told us how brave we were for going off to war. During this exciting and emotional time, there were many celebrations in homes and bars. I discovered how much I loved liquor. Although my family back home had warned me not to drink, I began to drink regularly.

Once we arrived in Europe and began to fight the war, I felt very lonely and continued drinking to deal with my feelings. One time while I was in England, I visited Winchester Cathedral where I spent some time wandering around by myself. I saw these words written on an old tombstone:

“Here sleeps in peace a Hampshire Grenadier

Who caught his death by drinking cold small beer.

A good soldier is ne'er forgot

Whether he dieth by musket or by pot.”¹

Looking back, these words seem like a warning to me about the dangers of drinking. But at the time, I didn't think too much about their meaning.

When I was 22 years old and the fighting was over, I finally went home as a war veteran. I was an officer, so I had been in charge of other soldiers. The men in my unit had followed my orders and given me their respect, so I believed I was a talented leader. Because of this, I felt sure that I could become the leader of a huge company back at home. My success as an officer made me confident that I would be a success no matter what I did with my life.

My early career as a stock market investor

I took a night school course in law, and got a job as an investigator for an insurance company. I was very eager to show the world how successful and important I could become. Because of the type of work I did, I had to spend time near Wall Street, where the New York Stock Exchange is located. This is an area where lots of bankers and investors work. Just by being around them, I became interested in what they did. Investing money in the stock market sounded exciting, and I knew it had helped some people become rich very quickly. Maybe that would work for me, too.

I started studying economics and business as well as law. I was already drinking regularly at the time and my drinking made it hard for me to study. I almost failed my law course. At one of my final exams, I was too drunk to think or write. I wasn't drinking every day, but my drinking habits still worried my wife. We had long talks about it. I would try to calm her down by telling her that the world's great geniuses had done their best work while

drunk. She tried to be patient with me, but she knew I was making bad choices.

By the time I had finished my law course, I knew I wasn't meant to be a lawyer. I wanted to work on Wall Street as a stock market investor. Business and financial leaders had become my heroes. I felt sure I could make a fortune working with them.

My drinking habits and my false belief in my talents as a businessman put me on a path to failure and unhappiness.

But I didn't know that at the time. My wife and I saved up \$1,000, which I used to buy some cheap stocks that were unpopular with other investors. I believed that they would rise in price and be worth a lot of money someday. I tried to convince my broker friends to send me out traveling. I wanted to inspect factories run by the companies whose stocks I'd bought. I believed that most people lost money in stocks because they didn't understand the companies they were investing in. I decided that I could become a better investor by doing research in person. My broker friends wouldn't pay for me to travel. So my wife and I both quit our day jobs, and drove off on a motorcycle. We had a sidecar stuffed with a tent, blankets, clothes, and three huge reference books on investing.

Our friends thought we had lost our minds, and they might have been right. I made a little money on my first few investments but not very much. My wife and I worked on a farm for a month so we wouldn't have to spend the tiny amount we'd earned from our investments. (That month on the farm was the last honest, hard work I did for a very long time.)

We traveled across the whole eastern United States in a year. At the end of it, I sent the research I'd done to my coworkers on Wall Street. They were so impressed they gave me a job. I even had an expense account—a bank account owned by my employer but controlled by me. I got to use the money in that account for travel, meals, and anything I thought would help me earn more money for the company. I succeeded in that job, and earned some large bonuses.

Wealth, success, and lots of liquor

For the next few years, I had plenty of money and got lots of praise from my coworkers and bosses. I believed I was living out my destiny as a successful leader. Many people listened to my advice about how to invest in the stock market, and we all made a fortune. This was in the late 1920s, when America seemed to be having one big, never-ending party. Drinking was an important and exciting part of my life. I went to jazz clubs filled with loud talkers and big spenders. I met lots of people who I thought were my friends.

DELIRIUM TREMENS: Also called “the shakes” or “the DTs,” delirium tremens takes place when a chronic alcoholic suddenly stops drinking. It is a sign of severe alcohol withdrawal, meaning the physical body is struggling to work correctly without alcohol in its systems. The most famous symptom of delirium tremens is body tremors or shaking, but it may also cause irritability, confusion, nausea, vomiting, and seizures.

Around this time, my drinking became even more serious. I started drinking non-stop all day and almost every night. If my friends begged me to stop, we would fight, so eventually I started drinking alone. Inside our beautiful apartment, my wife and I would fight, too. I had not cheated on her with other women. I was loyal to her, and being drunk all the time kept me from cheating. But she was unhappy with my behavior.

Then, in 1929, I started playing golf, and became obsessed with the sport. My wife and I began to spend lots of time in the country so she could watch while I practiced playing. Many people play golf and drink at the same time, which was part of the reason I loved it so much. I was drinking every day and every night. It was fun to wander around fancy, exclusive golf clubs that I’d dreamed about as a young boy. My skin became very tan, and

I was spending my money almost as fast as I could earn it. But my habits were having some nasty effects. I was drinking so much that I began to feel jittery in the morning.

The jittery feeling that Bill was experiencing in the morning was delirium tremens.

Suddenly, in October of 1929, the stock market became unpredictable and unstable. Prices rose and fell all day long, and stock market experts like me were under a lot of stress. After one of those stressful days, I went to a hotel bar to get drunk but then returned to the office. It was eight o'clock, five hours after all stock market work had stopped. A machine called a ticker was still printing out information about stock prices. One of my stocks had gone from \$52 per share in the morning to \$32 that night.

All the money I'd made was suddenly gone.

The newspapers printed stories about men committing suicide by jumping out the windows of tall bank buildings. That disgusted me. I would not jump. Instead I went back to the bar. My friends had lost several million dollars since ten o'clock that morning—but so what? Tomorrow was another day. As I drank, the urge to be a successful businessman came back to me. I believed I would make it through this crisis somehow.

A new start in Canada

The next morning I called a friend in Montreal. He had plenty of money left, so I decided to move to Canada to work for him. By the following spring, my wife and I were living just like we had in New York. We had a lovely home and plenty of money. I felt like I had won a huge battle, all by

myself. But my drinking caught up with me again, and my generous friend had to fire me. This time we stayed broke.

We went to live with my wife's parents. I found a job, then lost it because I started a fist fight with a taxi driver. For the next five years I didn't have a steady job, and I was drunk almost all the time. My wife had to work in a department store to pay our bills. She would come home exhausted to find me drunk.

Liquor was no longer something I wanted. It became something I needed. I made my own liquor—called “bathtub gin” since it was created at home, often in bathrooms—and drank it constantly. Sometimes I was able to sell some of my stocks to earn a few hundred dollars. Then I would pay my debts at the bars and restaurants.

This went on and on, and I began to wake up very early in the morning shaking violently. If I wanted to eat any breakfast without feeling shaky, I had to drink a glass full of gin and six bottles of beer. There were many signs that I was becoming very sick, but I still thought I could control my situation. And there were a few short periods of time when I did stay sober. These periods of time helped my wife feel hopeful. But gradually things got worse. Our house was taken by the bank, my mother-in-law died, and my wife and father-in-law became sick.

After all that terrible news, I got an exciting business opportunity. It was 1932 and stocks were very cheap, so I was asked to buy some stocks with a group of investors. If it went well, I would make a ton of money. But before the deal was done, I decided to spend several days getting very drunk. After that I was told I wasn't welcome in the group of investors anymore. The business opportunity was gone. I had ruined my chance to take part in it.

That experience made me see that I was in a terrible situation. This had to stop. I realized I could not take a single drink or I would just keep drinking. I decided I was done drinking forever. Before that, I had made lots of promises to stop, but I had never done it. This time, my wife believed that I would actually do it. I believed it, too.

Shortly after that I came home drunk. I hadn't even tried to resist drinking. Someone had pushed a drink my way, and I had taken it. Was I crazy? I began to wonder if I was, since I seemed to have absolutely no control over my own actions.

Stopping and starting again

I tried to stop drinking again. I was able to stay sober for a pretty long time, and I began to feel very confident that I could stop drinking. I decided I was finally strong enough to quit for good! I had beat my alcoholism. Then one day I walked into a cafe to use their phone. Very soon after that, I found myself beating my fists on the bar, drunk, and wondering what had happened to me. As I brought the cup of whisky to my lips, I promised myself I would do better next time. But I figured I might as well get good and drunk then. And I did.

I'll never forget the guilt and hopelessness I felt the next morning. I didn't have the courage to keep fighting to stay sober. I also woke up feeling shaky and jittery, like I had so many times before. My brain was going a million miles a minute. I was convinced that something terrible was about to happen to me. The sun was barely up, but an all-night bar was open and I drank at least 12 beers as quickly as I could. My nerves finally began to calm down.

Then I looked at the morning paper, and saw that the stock market had crashed again. I felt like I had crashed my life. The stock market would recover someday, but I felt like I never would. That was a hard thought. I wondered if I should kill myself. But I thought no—not now.

My mind felt hazy and I decided that drinking gin would clear it up. So I drank two bottles and forgot everything.

Even though I spent the next two years drinking as much as I possibly could, my mind and body kept me alive somehow. My choices made me feel full of shame, but I couldn't stop myself. When I woke up in the morning feeling shaky and confused, I would steal money from my wife's purse to buy more liquor. I wondered again and again if I should kill myself. I thought maybe I could jump out a window or overdose on prescription medicine ... but I was too scared. My wife and I would go to the country, hoping a change of scenery might help me change my behavior. But it never did.

Then there was a night when the physical and mental pain was so hellish I felt sure I would jump through my window, glass and all. I dragged a mattress to a lower floor in case I actually did jump. My wife called a doctor, who gave me a sedative: Medicine to help me calm down and get some sleep. The next day, I started drinking gin along with the medicine. That combination of things nearly killed me. People in my life were afraid for me, and I was afraid for myself. I couldn't really eat anything while I was drinking, so I was 40 pounds underweight. My life was in serious danger, and I knew it.

Learning about alcoholism at the hospital

My brother-in-law was a medical doctor. He worked with my mother to get me into a well-respected hospital that treated alcoholics. I was given more sedatives to calm my body and mind, and eventually my brain stopped racing. Various therapies and a little exercise helped me feel better. Best of all, I met a doctor who explained what was happening to me. He said that my behavior had been selfish and foolish, but I was also very sick in both my mind and my body. He said to me that it wasn't all my fault that I kept going back to drinking. He explained that most of his patients had gone through similar struggles.

It was a relief to hear that most alcoholics have a hard time resisting drinking, even if they are able to control themselves in other parts of their lives. This helped me understand my actions. I wanted very badly to stop drinking, but it seemed like I just couldn't. This is how most alcoholics felt. Knowing this gave me hope, and I felt like I was finally strong enough to get sober. For three or four months, everything went well. I got some work, made a little money, and believed my new knowledge could solve my drinking problem.

But it did not. The day came when I drank again. After that, my emotional and physical health got much worse and I went back to the hospital. I felt sure this would be the end for me, and that I would die. The doctors told my tired and desperate wife that I was at risk for a heart attack during my morning attacks of the shakes. They also said that my drinking might cause permanent brain damage. They expected one or both of these things to happen within a year. I would either end up unable to speak, or unable to live and sent to an early grave.

Everything they told my wife made sense to me. I already knew I was destroying my life, and welcomed the idea of dying. I remembered coming home from World War I and feeling sure I would be a huge success. I felt deep shame at how terribly I'd behaved. I was out of options, and felt like I was trapped in a corner. I thought about my poor wife and how happy we'd been in the past. I wished I could apologize and make things better with her, but it seemed like it was far too late for that.

I can't find any words to describe the loneliness and despair I felt during this time in my life. I felt like there was no way to escape my awful situation. I was powerless, and believed that alcohol would always control me.

When I finally left the hospital, I felt like a broken man. I stayed sober for a while out of fear, but the moment I took a single drink I was back to my old habits. On Armistice Day 1934—the anniversary of the end of World War I—I got drunk and stayed drunk. Everyone in my life felt sure I would drink myself to death this time.

I had no idea that in a few short weeks, I would be introduced to a whole new way of living. A way of living full of peace, relief, and even happiness. Soon, I would be thrown into something I call “the fourth dimension of existence.” When I got to this fourth dimension, I would finally be free. My life would feel completely different to me in magical, spiritual new ways. I was experiencing those darkest hours that come right before the dawn.

I would feel like I was starting to live for the very first time.

A visit from a friend

Near the end of November 1934, I sat drinking in my kitchen. I thought about how I had enough gin hidden around the house to keep me drunk through that night and the next day. My wife was at work. I wondered if I could hide a full bottle of gin near the head of our bed. I knew I would need it before I woke up the next morning.

My thoughts were interrupted by the telephone ringing. I heard the cheerful voice of an old school friend through the phone. He asked if he could come over to visit me. And he was sober! It was years since I could remember hearing him sober, so I was amazed. I'd heard rumors that he was arrested and ordered by a judge to get treatment for his alcoholism. I wondered how he had escaped. I imagined that he would come over for dinner, and then I could drink openly with him. I wasn't thinking at all about my friend's health or well-being. I was just thinking of having fun with him like we used to do. I thought of his visit like being rescued. I felt like I was lost in the desert all by myself and dying of thirst. He was a pool of clear water that appeared suddenly to save my life.

The door opened and he stood there, looking healthy and happy. He seemed very different, though I couldn't figure out what had changed.

I pushed a drink across the table to him. He refused it. I felt disappointed but curious. I wondered what had happened to change him. He wasn't

acting like himself.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

He looked straight at me and smiled. He said, “I’ve got religion.”

I was shocked by this news. I thought to myself, “Well, last summer he had been a crazy alcoholic. Now he’s just as crazy about religion.” His eyes were wide and sparkling with excitement. I expected him to start giving me a long, passionate speech about finding God.

But he didn’t. Instead he told me how two men had come to his court hearing, and convinced the judge that he didn’t need to go to the hospital against his will. These men said they had a simple religious idea and a practical program of action to help alcoholics get sober. They offered to help him stop drinking. That was two months ago, and he hadn’t had a drink since then. It worked!

He had come to tell me about his experience and I was shocked, but interested. Before he arrived, I had felt hopeless about my own drinking. Now I was curious. He talked for hours, and memories from my own childhood came back to me. I could almost hear the sound of the preacher’s voice as I sat in church on Sundays. I remembered how my grandfather felt about religion. He believed that there was some great mystical force working in the world, but he didn’t want the preacher to tell him what that force was or how it worked. He wanted to make up his own mind about God and religion. He didn’t respect the people who went to church regularly and did exactly as they were told by the preacher. Remembering all of these things made me feel uneasy.

Then I remembered that day at the Winchester Cathedral in England, when I saw those words written on the gravestone. And I started to wonder about my own relationship with religion.

ATHEIST: Someone who does not believe in God or gods.

I had always believed in a Power greater than myself. I was not an atheist. I didn't think many people were true atheists, because believing that no Higher Power existed would be so hopeless. It would mean that the universe came from nothing and existed for no reason, which is dark and depressing. I respected the great scientists of the world, and all of them believed that nature followed certain rules and laws. Things like gravity, motion, and other scientific laws worked in predictable ways. Everything worked in harmony. Because of this, it seemed to me that there must be a Power greater than myself. A Power that was guiding our world in some way.

So I believed there must be a God, but I had not made myself think about God's power or ability to help me. I didn't like or trust preachers, ministers, and religions. And if anyone started talking about a God who was made of love and strength, I felt angry and uncomfortable.

I knew that wars had been fought over religion, and people had been killed because of their religious beliefs. This made me feel sick. I even doubted if the religions in our world had truly helped people at all. When I fought in World War I, I saw people do brutal, awful things again and again. This made it seem like the Devil was the one controlling human life.

But my friend told me honestly that God had helped him when he could not help himself. Like me, he had felt totally hopeless and unable to control his actions. Doctors had told him it was impossible for him to get sober and healthy again. A judge wanted to lock him up in a hospital so he couldn't hurt himself or anyone else. Just like me, he had given up completely. But when he connected with God, he was filled with hope and the courage to live and try again. He had gone from wishing he was dead to living a joyful, healthy life. He felt like he had been saved from his own death. When he was drinking he felt like he was living in a garbage dump. Now, his life was better than he ever thought it could be.

By connecting with God, he realized he was not alone. He was not the only person or force guiding his actions. And that was such a relief to him. Knowing he was not alone had saved him from hopelessness.

I was amazed. I began to wonder if religion was more important and useful than I had realized. Maybe God could help people who could not help themselves. Maybe God could guide them toward strength that they could not find alone. My friend's story showed me that miracles were possible. He was a miracle himself, sitting across the kitchen table from me.

Looking at him, I realized that he hadn't just changed how he thought and felt. He had changed his entire being. He was a completely new and totally different person. He was a better, happier, healthier person.

Even though I could see all of this, I still felt some doubt. I had never fully embraced God before, especially a God that was connected to me on a personal level. I didn't like that idea. When people talked about God using terms like "universal mind" or "spirit of nature," I felt more comfortable. The idea of God as a loving ruler of everything didn't make sense to me. (I have talked to many people who felt the same way.)

Then my friend suggested something that might help me. He said, "Why don't you create your own idea of who—or what—God is?"

That simple question changed everything for me. All of my fear and doubt melted away. I felt like I had been living in the shadows for years, and could suddenly step into the sunlight. It was a miraculous moment.

I realized that I didn't need to suddenly become a man who went to church every day and had total faith in God. I just had to be willing to believe in a Power greater than myself. That was the only thing I needed to do to begin moving away from my drinking problem. I just needed to accept that I was not the only person or force guiding my life. If I let myself believe that a Power greater than myself existed, I could start recovering. Then, one day, I could be as healthy and happy as my friend.

At that moment, I thought again about that day at the Winchester Cathedral in England, when I saw the words written on the gravestone. When I was there, I needed and wanted God to be part of my life. I was willing to believe in a Power greater than myself, and that Power had come to visit me. God had been with me in that graveyard. But soon after that, I let

myself get distracted by the activity of daily life. I let go of my connection with God, and I had not tried to find it again.

My conversation with my friend made me feel determined to connect with God again. This time for good.

The long road to recovery

I returned to the hospital, where I was treated for possible signs of delirium tremens (the shaking that happened to me in the morning before I started drinking). While I was there, I made a silent agreement with God. I asked God to care for my health and well-being, and promised that I would listen for God's direction. I thought long and hard about all of the hurtful decisions I had made, and I asked God to forgive me. I had never been able to forgive myself, but when I made this agreement with God I finally felt forgiven. It was like I had been carrying a huge weight on my shoulders, and God took that weight away from me.

I have not had a single drink since that day.

My old school friend visited me at the hospital, the same friend who had come to my house to tell me that God had helped him get sober. I explained my own struggles with drinking. Together we made a list of people I had hurt, and also people who had made me angry. I told my friend that I wanted to talk with every person on the list and admit that I had been wrong. I promised that I wouldn't blame these people or criticize them during our conversations. I just wanted to make things right between us, if I could. This would be part of my process for getting sober.

My friend asked me to do something else, too. He suggested that I silently explore my new relationship with God. If I ever felt doubt or confusion, he said I should sit quietly and ask God for direction and strength. If I prayed, I should not pray for myself unless I was asking for wisdom I could use to help other people. I needed to learn to trust in the Higher Power, and I

needed to be less self-centered. These things would take practice. But my friend told me that practicing them and creating a relationship with God was all I needed to stay sober.

It seemed simple, but that didn't mean it would be easy to do. Making these big changes was overwhelming. But as soon as I started making these changes, my life was transformed. Lying there in the hospital, I felt like I had finally won a long and difficult battle. Then I felt a deep sense of inner peace and a surge of confidence. It seemed like I was standing at the very top of a mountain, and a strong, clean wind was blowing through me. God comes to some people slowly, but my own experience connecting to that Higher Power was sudden and very powerful.

For a moment I was scared, so I called my doctor¹ into my room to explain what was happening and how I felt. He listened quietly as I talked.

Finally he said, "Something has happened to you that I don't understand. But you had better hang on to it. Anything is better than the way you were." (My doctor now sees many people who have had experiences like mine.)

Bringing a message of recovery to more alcoholics

While I lay in the hospital, I thought about the thousands of hopeless alcoholics in the world. If I could help them like I had been helped, they might find hope again. Then they could help even more alcoholics recover and get sober. I imagined a network of alcoholics connecting with one another. Help and hope could spread through them.

When my old school friend had talked to me in my kitchen, he told me that what mattered most was helping other people. He told me that part of my healing process was to work with others like he had worked with me. Sharing experience, strength, and hope with other alcoholics was the only way to survive the pain and challenges of recovery. Alcoholics who didn't help other alcoholics would eventually drink again. And if alcoholics drink,

they will eventually drink themselves to death. Helping each other and working together would keep us hopeful and alive.

My wife and I decided that we would spend all of our time working with other alcoholics. This was easy to do since my old coworkers didn't believe I would stay sober. I couldn't get a job for about a year and a half. I was still pretty sick during that time, and also struggled with some difficult feelings. I felt sorry for myself, and sometimes I felt frustrated with my new life. Once in a while it got so bad that I came close to taking a drink. As soon as that happened I would find another alcoholic to talk with, and that kept me sober. Whenever I was feeling overwhelmed or angry, all I had to do was go to the hospital and work with another alcoholic. Helping others get sober helped me stay sober. Doing that helped me feel stable again. It works when nothing else does.

By talking and working with other alcoholics, I began to make some important friendships and build a community. It's wonderful to feel part of a group that understands what I've been through. They understand because they've been through it themselves. Together, we all feel real joy to be alive. The work we've done has saved families from destruction, helped fix broken relationships, and kept people from losing their jobs. I've seen people follow this program and finally feel able to rebuild their lives. In fact, I can't think of any kind of trouble or misery that the members of our Fellowship couldn't deal with together. We meet as a group or one on one. We welcome any new people who want to join the program. We are growing quickly into a large, strong community.

An alcoholic who is actively drinking is a difficult person to love. We know this from experience. The community of recovering alcoholics that we created has dealt with situations that were stressful, funny, and sometimes deeply sad. One poor man committed suicide in my home. He could not, or would not, see our way of life.

The work is hard, but we actually have a lot of fun doing it. Some people might be shocked to hear a group of sober alcoholics joking and laughing together, but the humor keeps us sane. And underneath it is a strong dedication to healing, and dedication to each other. We must have faith all

day every day—in each other and in a Higher Power—or we will never survive.

Most of us feel like we have created an ideal place and life together. We feel loved, understood, and peaceful whenever we are with the members of our Fellowship. And we know that every day, alcoholics across the world are having talks like the one that took place in my kitchen all those years ago. We are connecting with each other in a widening circle of peace, acceptance, and healing that touches more people every single day.

Bill W., co-founder of A.A., died January 24, 1971.

¹This means, “In this grave lies a soldier from Hampshire whose job was throwing hand grenades. His death was caused by drinking too much beer. Good soldiers like him are never forgotten, whether they die in battle or because of their drinking.”

¹This is Dr. Silkworth, whom you read about earlier.

Chapter 2

THERE IS A SOLUTION

We, the members of Alcoholics Anonymous, know thousands of people who have felt just as hopeless as Bill. Nearly all of those people have learned to live in sobriety. Through A.A., they have solved their drinking problem.

We are a large and varied group of people who live all over the world. We come from many countries and work at many different jobs. We come from many political, economic, social, and religious backgrounds. We are people who normally would not spend time together. But through our experiences with A.A., we have found friendship, fellowship, and understanding. We are like passengers on a boat that has been shipwrecked, right after we've been rescued. We feel connected because of what we have all experienced. And we feel joy because we are so relieved that our lives are no longer in danger. We have escaped disaster. We all feel this, no matter what our lives are like outside of A.A. We might be rich or poor, young or old, with our families or totally alone. When we are together, none of that matters to us.

Unlike rescued passengers from a sinking boat, our joy lasts long after we've left behind our drinking days. Knowing that we've all faced the same type of danger ties us all together. So does the fact that we've found a solution to our drinking, and we're experiencing that solution together. These things make us into a Fellowship.

FELLOWSHIP: Members of A.A. sometimes refer to themselves as “the Fellowship,” meaning a group of people with shared experiences

who care for and support each other.

The tremendous fact is we have found a way to recover from alcoholism, and we agree on it completely. This book was created so that anyone who suffers from alcoholism can learn about this Fellowship, and decide if they'd like to join us.

We believe that alcoholism is a sickness, and it affects all of the people in our lives. When someone has cancer, people feel sorry for them, but no one is angry or hurt about the fact that they have cancer. This is not how it is with alcoholism. People do get angry at us. This is because alcoholism causes pain and destruction for everyone who knows and loves us. It causes misunderstandings, bitterness, and money problems. It makes our friends and employers feel frustrated and disappointed in us. It hurts our children, our partners, and our parents. Everyone we know is affected.

We hope the information and stories in this book will help and comfort these people, too—people who aren't alcoholics themselves but have been affected by the alcoholics they know need help and support.

Alcoholics who help each other feel understood

Many excellent doctors who treat alcoholics have trouble getting us to talk about our experiences. We may share a little, but we don't feel comfortable explaining how we feel. Our partners, parents, and close friends have an even harder time talking to us about alcoholism. Most of us don't want to describe our feelings or struggles, even to people who care about us.

But recovering alcoholics who are already in A.A. are completely different. We can usually gain the trust of other alcoholics very quickly. Ex-problem

drinkers who have joined A.A. understand how alcoholism works. They are often able to help alcoholics who are still drinking to open up and start talking. Without this connection, very little (or nothing at all) will work.

This is because recovering alcoholics in the A.A. program have had many of the same problems and struggles as newcomers to A.A. We have experienced the same pains and seen the same situations go wrong. So when a recovering alcoholic talks with a newcomer, the newcomer feels at home. It's clear that the recovering alcoholic has found a way to end a damaging drinking career, and truly wants to help the alcoholic who is still drinking. It's an open and welcoming conversation. The newcomer may worry at first that there's some sort of "catch." Will they have to listen to long lectures? Will they have to pay fees or follow lots of rules? Very quickly they realize that talking with an A.A. member is safe. Their conversations are just honest sharing of stories.

In Alcoholics Anonymous, newcomers don't feel judged or pressured. The only goal of A.A. members is to help. This simple approach to recovery has helped many alcoholics find hope.

Why was the Big Book created?

A.A. members are not paid to help each other. We don't think that the program would be more effective if we paid members or experts to work for us. We believe that when an alcoholic stops drinking, that is just the beginning of recovery. The rest of the recovery journey is longer and slower. It involves being able to live by A.A.'s principles each day, at home and at work. All of us are on that journey, no matter how long we have been members of A.A. Learning to live by these guiding principles is absolutely essential to our recovery.

All of us are also dedicated to helping new A.A. members—or anyone who joins the program and is struggling. When A.A. first began, everything was done person to person, which worked very well and helped hundreds of

people get sober. But we wanted to find ways to reach and help more alcoholics. The members who lived in large cities saw that people were struggling with alcoholism every day. Those people might be able to recover if they understood how A.A. worked. We knew there must be a way to spread their ideas.

Eventually, we decided to publish an anonymous book that explained the challenges of alcoholism and the basics of the A.A. program. We combined our experiences and knowledge to write about what we'd created, and why, and how it could be helpful to anyone with a drinking problem.

We wanted this book to feel welcoming to anyone, regardless of their background or views. But we also realized that any book about alcoholism would need to talk about medical, psychiatric, social, and religious issues. So we did not skip over these upsetting and controversial topics. In fact, we pointed out that A.A. members are more helpful to each other when they can disagree respectfully. Learning to see things from multiple angles helps us become more accepting and tolerant. This makes us more useful as A.A. members.

And as you will see, being useful to other alcoholics and helping them is absolutely essential to being in recovery in A.A.

Understanding types of drinkers

You probably have many questions about how A.A. works. You might wonder what you need to do to join the program. This book will answer all of those questions in the coming chapters. But first, we need to explain a few important ideas about alcoholism itself.

Many alcoholics have heard—or been told—many of the following things:

“I can drink when I want, and stop when I want. Why can’t she do the same thing?”

“That guy just can’t handle his booze.”

“She has zero self-control.”

“Why don’t you stick to beer and wine? Too much hard liquor is your problem.”

“I’m sure he could stop if he wanted to.”

“He’s got a family at home. You’d think he’d get sober for their sake.”

“The doctor told her if she ever drank again it would kill her ... but she just keeps getting wasted.”

These pieces of advice and opinions are all very common. Some alcoholics hear them all the time. But they are all based on misunderstandings about alcoholism. People who say these things aren’t aware of how alcoholism actually works. And because they aren’t aware, they compare alcoholics to other kinds of drinkers.

If they have a good reason, average drinkers can usually give up liquor. They can take it or leave it. They can “go cold turkey,” as the saying goes.

Hard drinkers struggle more to break the cycle. There’s a certain type of hard drinker whose habits affect both physical and mental health. Drinking may even cause them to die earlier than they would otherwise. But some of these hard drinkers can still reverse their habits. If a strong reason comes up, they can stop drinking. Serious sickness, falling in love, getting a new job, moving to a new place, or getting a warning from a doctor may be enough to make them change. They may stop or slow down their drinking, even if they need medical support to make the changes stick.

But what about chronic alcoholics? Lifelong, serious alcoholics? Some of us start off as average drinkers, and over time become hard drinkers. At both of these early stages, we still have some control over our actions. But

if we continue to drink frequently, we will form a drinking habit that's almost impossible to break. When this happens, it can seem like we've crossed an invisible line. Whenever we start to drink, we cannot control how much we drink. And we certainly can't stop drinking altogether.

For non-alcoholics, it can be extremely confusing to watch chronic alcoholics live their lives. We often do strange and destructive things while drinking. This includes things we would never do while sober. We may seem like two different people living in one body. Alcoholics can seem like happy, normal people until we spend a day drinking. After that, we often become angry, dangerous, and unreliable. We may be reasonable about everything except liquor. When it comes to drinking and alcohol, we become dishonest and selfish. Some chronic alcoholics are talented people who seem to have promising careers and lives ahead of them ... but all that hope is destroyed when we go on drinking sprees.

SPREE: Drinking very large amounts of alcohol in short periods of time. (See also: binge)

Some alcoholic behaviors seem downright strange to non-drinkers. We may go to bed extremely drunk, wake up very hungover, and still look for more liquor in the morning. We may hide alcohol all over the house so no one can pour our entire supply down the toilet. As our condition gets worse, we might use both drugs and liquor to quiet our nerves so we can keep going to work. Eventually this stops working, and then we stop trying. If things get bad enough, some chronic alcoholics will go to medical doctors for help, but few doctors understand how to help us.

Does this description fit every alcoholic? Of course not. Our behaviors vary, and so do our lives. But if you are struggling with drinking yourself, some of what you've just read will probably sound familiar.

Why can't alcoholics just stop drinking?

Why do alcoholics behave like this? Especially when we know from experience that taking one drink will lead to more drinks? And that leads to being drunk and making terrible choices? If alcoholics can use common sense and willpower in other areas of our lives, why can't we use it when it comes to drinking?

There are no easy answers to these questions. Experts have a variety of opinions about why alcoholics react differently to liquor. No one is sure why we have so much trouble controlling our drinking.

But we are sure that a single drink is enough to affect our behavior in very serious ways. When we stop drinking for months or years at a time, we are able to change ourselves. With no liquor in our systems, we can control our actions and choices. We become more like normal people. But as soon as we drink any amount of alcohol, something happens that makes it impossible for us to stop. It doesn't matter how long we have been sober. One drink can start the terrible cycle of drinking again.

The alcoholic's main problem lives within the mind. Most alcoholics cannot explain why we decide to drink. When asked for a reason, we may give some excuse that makes no sense. Our excuses sound ridiculous since drinking causes such chaos and pain in our lives. We may even say something that has no logic at all. We may sound like people who deal with headaches by hitting themselves on the head with a hammer. (They are in more pain than before, but they don't feel the headache anymore.) Our reasons and choices are totally confusing to sober people. But if anyone points this out, we usually laugh it off or get angry.

Once in a while, alcoholics tell the truth. And the truth is usually that we have absolutely no idea why we take that first drink. Some drinkers make up excuses when people ask about their drinking, but in our hearts we just don't know why we do it. As our alcoholism gets worse, we feel confused a

lot of the time. Many of us believe that someday, somehow, we will find a way to trick ourselves into getting sober. Many more of us secretly believe we are lost forever.

The sad truth is that alcoholics are often lost. We cannot control our drinking. At a certain point, all alcoholics realize that we have no control. Even though we want to stop drinking more than anything, it doesn't matter. We just cannot stop.

No one knows exactly why, but alcoholics have lost the power to make our own choices when it comes to drinking. We have no willpower when it comes to drinking. We can't even remember how awful it felt the last time we got drunk. We know that drinking will make a mess of our lives, but knowing that won't keep us from getting drunk. Or we may tell ourselves that this time will be different, and we will handle ourselves better. But we know this is a lie.

To non-alcoholics, we may seem like we don't understand how our actions will affect our lives. We look like we don't understand cause and effect. Or we don't care what happens to us. To non-alcoholics, alcoholics look like we're constantly pressing our bare hands to hot stoves while saying, "It won't burn me this time."

When alcohol is involved, many alcoholics feel like we aren't able to think at all. Our brains seem to switch off completely. Many of us have started drinking at a bar, thinking a drink or two won't hurt us. As soon as we realize we've had four or five drinks, we pound on the bar in surprise. We say to ourselves, "For God's sake, how did this happen?" As soon as that thought appears in our minds, it's replaced by "Well, I'll stop with the sixth drink." Or "Does it even matter if I stop?"

This is a dangerous way to think. When alcoholics begin to think like this, we need immediate medical help. Otherwise we may become mentally ill, give ourselves brain damage, or end up dead. This is not an exaggeration. Throughout history, millions of alcoholics have drunk themselves into terrible sickness or early graves. So many want to stop but cannot.

Alcoholism is a life and death situation

But there is a solution. We learned from other people's practices and combined these with our own experiences. We saw that certain actions helped other alcoholics stay sober and adopted them. Things like apologizing to people they had hurt, making lists of their own strengths and weaknesses, and helping other alcoholics get sober. We have collected a set of ideas and actions that could help any alcoholic get sober. It is a kind of "spiritual toolkit." And when we began to use that toolkit, we found true happiness and a miraculous new way to be in the world.

The great fact is this: We have had deeply spiritual experiences. These experiences have changed our attitudes toward life, toward other alcoholics, and toward God as we understand God. All of us feel this way. We believe that God has entered our hearts and lives in the most miraculous way. By helping us become sober, God has done for us things that we could never do alone.

We believe there is no middle-of-the-road solution. There is no "halfway." There is no compromise. Alcoholics have two options: One is to continue drinking to escape from how awful our lives have become until we eventually die, bitter and alone. The other is to accept spiritual help.

Why alcoholics must connect with a Higher Power

We'd like to share a story that shows how important it is for recovering alcoholics to believe in a Power greater than themselves. Incorporating a Higher Power into the recovery process is critically important.

Years ago, a Rhode Island businessman found himself unable to control his alcoholism. He spent most of his time in hospitals. Even with medical care, he couldn't stop drinking. He had worked with many American doctors but none of them could help him. So he went to Europe to get help from a famous psychiatrist practicing in Switzerland. This doctor helped him understand how his mind and emotions worked. The Rhode Island man left Europe feeling confident that this new self-knowledge would prevent him from drinking again.

But once he was home, he started drinking right away. And he had no idea why.

So he returned to Europe and asked his doctor bluntly why he could not recover. Our alcoholic friend knew he'd lost his self-control, and he desperately wanted to get it back. He felt like he could make wise decisions in other areas of his life, but always made terrible decisions about drinking. He wanted his doctor to explain why this was happening.

In fact, he begged the doctor to be completely honest. The doctor gave him the hard truth. In the doctor's opinion, our alcoholic friend was totally hopeless. He would never stop drinking, and never be able to get his life back on track. The only way for him to stay alive would be to commit himself to a hospital forever or hire a bodyguard to keep him from drinking.

The doctor was being truthful, but it turned out that our friend didn't have to lock himself away to stay sober. He was able to go wherever he wanted and to avoid drinking as long as he maintained a certain attitude, which was brought about by a spiritual transformation.

If you are an alcoholic yourself, you may read this story and think you can do the same thing without spiritual help. You may want to get sober without involving God in your journey. Before you make that decision, let us share the rest of the conversation our alcoholic friend had with his European doctor.

The doctor said, "You have the mind of a chronic alcoholic. In my whole career, I have never seen anyone in your state of mind get sober."

Hearing this, our friend felt as though the gates of hell had closed on him with a clang.

He said to the doctor, “Are there any exceptions?”

“Yes there are,” the doctor said. “Over the years, I have seen some exceptions to cases like yours. They have shown up when an alcoholic has something called a ‘vital spiritual experience.’ The way I understand them, these experiences are huge emotional events. Events that completely transform the alcoholic’s attitudes. They leave behind ideas, feelings, and attitudes that were extremely important to them. A completely new set of ideas, feelings, and attitudes replaces them. It’s like they were living in a black-and-white version of the world until the vital spiritual experience, and afterward everything is in bright, vivid color.”

The doctor continued, “Actually, I have been trying to trigger this kind of experience in you. I’ve been able to do it for some of my patients in the past. I have not done it for anyone who is as ill as you are right now.” (See page 165 for more on the experience the doctor is talking about.)

VITAL SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE: A powerful emotional event that allows an alcoholic to feel connected to a Higher Power. It also changes their attitude about drinking. Afterward, the alcoholic may finally feel like they belong in this world. They may have a sense that life is good and right and purposeful.

Hearing this was a relief to our alcoholic friend. He was a regular churchgoer, so he thought maybe he could create a vital spiritual experience for himself. The doctor pointed out that religious belief was not the same thing. Fortunately, our friend found his way to the profound transformation he needed. And it made him a free man.

God, as you understand God

At one time or another, all members of the A.A. Fellowship have felt as desperate as our friend in the story above. We have wanted to escape our alcoholism, and not known how. At first it seemed like a weak idea, but when we fully accepted the love and guidance of God, we were finally able to pull ourselves out of our suffering. We were given new lives, and given a new way to live them.

According to A.A. cofounder Bill W., a “vital spiritual experience” is necessary for alcoholics to wake up and begin the process of recovery.

For as long as humans have walked on the earth, we have connected with God in many different ways. We have called God by many names, and practiced our faith in a variety of ways. In Alcoholics Anonymous, we respect all faiths, spiritual practices, and ways of thinking about God. Members of the Fellowship may feel more comfortable saying “a Higher Power” or “a Power greater than ourselves” or “the Creator.” They may rely on ideas about God that they have held since childhood. Or they may choose to create their own ideas of who or what God is to them right now.

We don’t believe that there is only one way to create a relationship with God. We don’t believe that there is only one way to find faith. And we are not interested in telling others what or how to believe. But we do believe that all human beings can connect with a Power greater than themselves, if they are willing to try. And we believe that doing so can be simple and rewarding.

Those of us who already practice some form of religion can continue to do that. Nothing in the program will interfere with their religion or beliefs. And those of us who do not practice any specific religion are just as welcome in our Fellowship. We believe that attending religious ceremonies, reading

scriptures, or visiting sacred places is a personal choice for each of us to make. We welcome all people, no matter how they connect with their Higher Power. We don't judge anyone, and we practice our own faiths knowing that we won't be judged by other A.A. members. There is no conflict between members about what we believe.

In the next chapter, we will explain alcoholism as we understand it. After that, you'll find a chapter addressed to agnostics (people who aren't sure if God is real). Many people who once doubted God's existence are now A.A. members. You may be surprised to hear that these kinds of doubts don't prevent people from having vital spiritual experiences. They also don't prevent people from eventually connecting with a Higher Power.

In the coming chapters, you will read some stories from alcoholics who learned to embrace the importance of a Higher Power in their recovery journey. Their stories are included here to show how many people across the world have felt exactly as you do. As you hear from them and learn about their experiences, you may see yourself in their stories. You may find yourself saying, "Yes, I am one of them too; I must be an alcoholic after all."

Chapter 3

MORE ABOUT ALCOHOLISM

Most of us struggle to admit that we are real alcoholics. Just like everyone else, we dislike feeling different or unusual. We want to be normal, regular people. So we spend a lot of time and energy trying to prove that we can drink like normal, regular people. We believed that somehow, someday we will be able to control and enjoy our drinking. Since we cannot, we fail over and over again. It is astounding how long we continue trying to prove that we aren't alcoholics! Some of us do it until we lose our minds—or die.

Over time, we have learned that the first step in recovery is to completely accept that we are alcoholics. The false belief that we are like other people, or more specifically like other drinkers, must be smashed. As alcoholics, we have lost the ability to control our drinking. We have lost this ability permanently. There may be short periods of time when we feel like we have taken control. Then we begin to relapse, and then we lose control completely. In fact, it is usually worse. Whenever this happens, we feel like we have failed completely in our lives and may never be worthy again. We are convinced that we have an illness that only gets worse, and never better.

RELAPSE: When an alcoholic who has stopped drinking for a period of time begins to drink again.

There is no treatment, program, or medication that will make alcoholics the same as normal drinkers. We have tried every treatment we could find, and

nothing worked. Doctors who treat alcoholic patients also agree that it is impossible to turn an alcoholic into a normal drinker. Maybe someday scientists will find the secret, but they haven't done so yet.

We have a huge amount of evidence showing that alcoholics cannot control their drinking, but some alcoholics stubbornly believe that they still can. They will insist that they can drink like normal people whenever they want. They will say they can quit whenever they want. They will experiment and argue, trying their hardest to show that they are in charge of their actions.

Many members of A.A. have experimented with their drinking in this way. Here are some of the ways we have tried to prove that we can drink normally:

- Drinking beer only
- Limiting the number of drinks we drink at one time
- Never drinking alone
- Never drinking in the morning
- Drinking only at home
- Never keeping alcohol in the house
- Never drinking during business hours
- Drinking only at parties
- Switching from liquor to wine
- Drinking only natural wines
- Agreeing to resign from our jobs if we ever get drunk at work
- Swearing that we will never drink again

- Reading inspirational books
- Spending time at health spas
- Going into treatment for alcoholism voluntarily

This list could go on forever. As you might have guessed, none of these experiments has changed us into normal drinkers.

We don't like to label other people as alcoholics, but you can try this experiment and decide for yourself. Go to a bar and start drinking. Force yourself to stop drinking suddenly. Do it more than once. Doing this will show you how much control you really have. Even though you may not feel well later, the experiment may be worth it.

Many of us believe that we might have been able to stop if we'd decided to do so earlier in our lives. Whether or not this is true is hard to say. Few alcoholics truly want to stop while they have any chance at success.

However, there are stories of people who showed signs of alcoholism and were able to stop drinking for a long period of time simply because they tried their hardest. Here is one of those stories.

Once an alcoholic, always an alcoholic

Once there was a 30-year-old man who was doing a lot of binge drinking. During this time, he felt very nervous when he woke up in the morning. He calmed his nerves with more booze. This man was eager to be successful in his career, but realized that he would fail at his job if he drank at all. He knew that once he started, he had no control over his drinking. So he decided that until he had succeeded in the business world, he wouldn't take a single drink.

He kept this promise to himself. He didn't drink at all for 25 years, and retired at age 55 after a long and happy career. He began to believe that this long period of abstinence from alcohol meant he could drink like a normal person. (Many alcoholics tell themselves this lie.) So he began to experiment with drinking occasionally. After just two months of this he was in the hospital, feeling confused and humiliated.

ABSTINENCE: Preventing yourself from doing something on purpose. Avoiding an activity, such as drinking.

Once he was released from the hospital, he tried his best to stop drinking and found that he just couldn't do it. He had enough money to pay for any kind of counseling or treatment he might want, but nothing helped. Everything he tried failed. Although he was a perfectly healthy man when he retired at age 55, he died just four years later.

This story contains a powerful lesson. Most of us think that if we stop drinking for a long period of time, that means we can begin to drink normally. This man was dry for 25 years. As soon as he started to drink again it was as if he had never stopped. Members of A.A. have a saying, "Once an alcoholic, always an alcoholic." We have seen this saying come true again and again. If we plan to stop drinking, we need to do it knowing that we will not be able to experiment with drinking ever again.

DRY / DRY DRUNK: Someone who has stopped drinking but hasn't changed the way they think or feel in any positive way.

Younger people reading the story above may feel hopeful. When they hear that this man stopped drinking for so long just by using his willpower, they may think they can do the same thing. If any of those people were to try it,

they probably would not succeed. Most of them don't truly want to stop drinking, and being young doesn't make it easier. Some people who have been drinking for just a few years struggle to stop as if they had been drinking for decades. You don't have to drink for a long time, or drink large quantities of alcohol, to be a serious alcoholic.

Dry drunks often relapse into drinking. Many dry drunks also still show many of the same behaviors as when they were drinking alcohol. In other words, they are not truly “recovering” from alcoholism.

And even if you can stop drinking for a year, or five years, or ten years, you may still be an alcoholic. In fact, you probably are. We don't say this to make you feel shameful. It's simply a fact.

You don't have to drink for a long time or drink huge amounts of alcohol to become changed by your drinking. Some alcoholics start drinking and then spiral out of control in a few years. And some drinkers would be insulted if you called them alcoholics to their faces, but are totally unable to stop drinking. We at A.A. are familiar with the symptoms of alcoholism, so we see potential new alcoholics everywhere. Especially among young people.

When we meet with someone who isn't sure if they are an alcoholic, we challenge them to stop drinking for a whole year. If they are an alcoholic, it is very likely that they will fail. But even if they do succeed in avoiding liquor for a year, they might still become alcoholics later on. Many of us have been sober for a year at a time, and became serious drinkers after that. Being able to stop for a long period of time isn't enough. We think that most people who read this book would struggle to stay sober for a year. Some will be drunk one day after making the decision to stop drinking. The rest will be drunk within a few weeks.

How to tell if you are an alcoholic

One of the most frustrating things about alcoholism is that it affects all alcoholics equally. People who want to stop drinking and people who don't want to stop drinking will both be unable to get sober. People who are good-hearted and people who are cruel will continue to drink uncontrollably. People with strong willpower in all other areas of life will have zero willpower when it comes to drinking. Alcoholism doesn't care who you are or what you've done.

So how do you know if you are an alcoholic yourself? The quickest way is to go to a bar and try to control your drinking. Let yourself drink for a little while, then make yourself stop very suddenly. Try to do this more than once over a few weeks. If you are honest with yourself, it won't take long to see the truth.

If you don't want to try this experiment, you don't have to. The members of A.A. have learned to see and understand the signs of a relapse. We know how alcoholics think. We know how they're feeling when they want to stop drinking and cannot do it. Throughout this book are stories of real alcoholics who share their own experiences. If you read these stories and recognize yourself in them, then that is all you need. You are one of us.

Let's start with the story of a man we will call Jim. He ran a successful car dealership that had been started by his father. He had a lovely wife and family. He was a war veteran, a talented salesman, and a well-liked member of his local community. He seemed quite normal, except that he had a nervous personality. He didn't start drinking until he was 35, but his drinking became serious very quickly. Soon he lost his car dealership. Within a few years, he started to become uncontrollably violent when he got drunk. Jim went into a hospital psychiatric ward, and when he was ready to leave, he found out about the A.A. program.

He started the program and felt hopeful at first. He moved back in with his family, and began to work as a salesman for the car dealership he had lost through drinking. Everything seemed to be going well. But Jim didn't try to connect with a Higher Power. That meant he wasn't fully committed to A.A. He was only doing some of the things he needed to stay sober.

Soon, he was getting drunk again many days in a row. He was surprised and upset when this happened. Each time he spoke with other A.A. members to figure out what he'd done wrong. He didn't want to get drunk, so why had he done it? Where had he slipped up? He knew he was a real alcoholic and in serious trouble. He knew he would have to go back to the psychiatric ward if he kept drinking, and that he would lose his family. He didn't want any of those things to happen.

But he got drunk again. Some friends of his in A.A. asked him to explain exactly how it happened. This is what he told them:

"I came to work on Tuesday morning. I remember I felt angry that I had to work as a salesman at the dealership I used to own. I talked with the boss, but nothing serious. Then I decided to drive into the country and see one of my customers. On the way I felt hungry so I stopped at a roadside restaurant where they have a bar. I was not planning to drink. I just thought I would get a sandwich. It was a restaurant I had been going to for years, so I thought I might find a customer for a car there. I ate there many times during the months when I was sober. I sat down at a table and ordered a sandwich and a glass of milk. Still no thought of drinking. I ordered another sandwich and decided to have another glass of milk.

"Suddenly I had a thought: If I put an ounce of whiskey in my milk, it couldn't hurt me on a full stomach. I ordered a whiskey and poured it into the milk. I had the feeling I wasn't being very smart. But I told myself it was OK since I was drinking the whiskey on a full stomach. The experiment went so well that I ordered another whiskey and poured it into more milk. That didn't seem to bother me so I tried another."

This is how Jim ended up in a psychiatric ward again. He knew that he might have to go back into the hospital if he drank. He knew he might lose his family and his job. He also knew that drinking made him feel terrible,

both physically and mentally. He had plenty of knowledge about himself as an alcoholic. And he ignored it all when he decided it would be “safe” to drink whiskey if he just mixed it with milk.

The mind of an alcoholic

You may think Jim’s story is an extreme case. To anyone in our Fellowship, it is not. It shows the same kind of thinking that all of us have experienced. Some of us may have thought more about what might happen after we drank, or got drunk, or went on a binge. But the way our minds work is tricky. We could imagine the awful things that would happen after drinking, but we could always find an excuse to take that first drink. Trying to reason with ourselves never worked for long. The unreasonable need to drink always won. The following day, we would truly have no idea how it could have happened.

There are also times when we go out to get drunk on purpose. This usually happens when we can use the excuse of feeling nervous, angry, worried, depressed, jealous, or some other strong emotion. But even when we do this, we can look back on our choices and see our excuses were weak. Especially when we consider the chaos that our drinking created in our lives. Any one of us will tell you that when we began to drink regularly instead of casually, we almost never thought about the consequences of our actions.

Alcoholics are able to ignore the ways that first drink might impact our lives. This is both strange and puzzling, of course. We think it compares to the thoughts of someone who is obsessed with jaywalking.

Imagine a person who gets a thrill out of walking in front of fast-moving vehicles. She enjoys doing this for a few years even though people in her life have warned her to stop. You might just think of her as a foolish woman with a strange definition of “fun.” Then her luck runs out and she gets injured a few times, right in a row. If she thought like a normal person, you

would expect her to stop jaywalking altogether. But she doesn't, and soon she gets hit by another car and fractures her skull. A week after leaving the hospital, a speeding bus breaks her arm. She says she has decided to stop jaywalking for good, but in a few weeks she breaks both legs.

This continues for several years, and all that time she continues to promise she'll be careful. Or she says she will keep off the streets altogether. Finally, she loses her job, her spouse demands a divorce, and people start to make fun of her. She tries everything she can think of to get jaywalking off her mind. She goes into rehab, hoping to cure herself. But the day she gets out, she races in front of a fire engine, which breaks her back. This behavior just doesn't make any sense to us. Someone like that must be deeply troubled, right?

This story may sound ridiculous at first ... but is it? Those of us who have suffered from alcoholism will quickly admit that it sounds familiar. If we swapped alcoholism for jaywalking, the story would fit us exactly. Even if we are smart and sensible in all other areas of life, when alcohol is involved we seem almost insane. It's strong language, but to most of us it feels true. We feel as though we have lost our sanity.

Some of you are thinking, "What you're describing makes sense, but it doesn't apply to me. I have some of these symptoms, but not all of them. I haven't gone to the same extremes as the people in these stories. And I won't, especially now that I've read their stories and understand myself better. I haven't ruined my entire life through drinking. I won't ruin it now, thanks to this new information you've shared with me."

Some people who aren't alcoholics can stop drinking or control their drinking. Some people who drink without thinking or drink heavily can stop drinking or control their drinking. Their brains and bodies are not affected by alcohol in the same ways as ours. Actual alcoholics will be absolutely unable to stop drinking no matter what. Learning that they are alcoholics will not help them. Actual alcoholics will be absolutely unable to stop drinking just because they want to.

We will make this point over and over again so it is sure to sink in.

Drinking without thinking

Let's look at another story to show how important it is to accept that alcoholics are different from regular drinkers. A man we will call Fred is a partner at a well-respected accounting firm. His income is good and he has a nice home. He is happily married, and he's the father of kids who are ready to go to college. He makes friends easily. He's respected at work, and appears to be a stable, happy man. But he is an alcoholic.

About a year ago, Fred went to the hospital with a bad case of jitters. It was his first time experiencing the jitters and he felt ashamed. He was not ready to admit that he was an alcoholic. Instead, he told himself he came to the hospital to rest his nerves.

The doctor hinted to Fred that his health might be worse than he realized. This made Fred feel depressed, and he decided to quit drinking altogether. He never thought that he might not be able to quit. Although he began working with A.A. members while at the hospital, he still wouldn't accept that he was an alcoholic. He liked some of the ideas he had heard, and he admitted he had some of the symptoms of alcoholism. But he still believed he could stop drinking if he just put his mind to it. He felt sure that the humiliation of going to the hospital would keep him sober the rest of his life. His new knowledge from A.A. would help, too. Self-knowledge would fix his problem.

Fred left the hospital and seemed to do fine for a while. A few months later, he was back at the hospital, and his shakes were even worse. He was eager to talk with other A.A. members. He told them a story that illustrates everything we have been saying throughout this chapter. Fred was absolutely convinced he had to stop drinking. He had no excuse for drinking. He showed real judgment and determination in other areas of his life, yet he was totally powerless to stay sober.

Here's what he told a few members he was close to:

“I was impressed with what you told me about alcoholism, and I truly didn’t believe it would be possible that I would drink again. I liked how you described the ‘insanity’ that comes before the first drink. But I was confident that would not happen to me after what I had learned. I felt like I wasn’t as serious a drinker as most of you. I had been able to deal with my other personal problems in the past. Because of that, I believed I could stop myself from drinking. It seemed like all I needed to do was use my willpower and stay alert.

“I felt like this for a while, and it worked at first. I had no trouble saying ‘no’ to drinks. I began to wonder if I was making a big deal about nothing. One day I went to Washington to present some accounting evidence to a government bureau. I had been out of town before during this ‘dry’ spell, and I had not had a drink then. So there was nothing new about that. Physically, I felt fine. I wasn’t especially worried or anxious either. My business went well, which I knew would make my partners happy. It was the end of a perfect day, not a cloud in the sky.

“I went to my hotel and changed my clothes for dinner. I went into the dining room. The thought came to mind that it would be nice to have a couple of cocktails with my dinner. That was all. Nothing more. I ordered a cocktail and my meal. Then I ordered another cocktail. After dinner I decided to take a walk. When I returned to the hotel, I decided I wanted a cocktail before going to bed. So I stepped into the bar and had one. I remember having several more that night and plenty the next morning. I have a hazy memory of being in an airplane flying to New York, and finding a friendly taxi driver at the airport instead of my wife. The driver drove me around for several days. I barely remember where I went or what I said and did. Then I woke up in the hospital feeling sick and overwhelmed.

“As soon as I could think straight, I tried hard to remember that evening in Washington. I realized I hadn’t even tried to resist that first drink. I started to drink liquor like it was as harmless to me as ginger ale. I remembered what my alcoholic friends had told me. They said if I had an alcoholic mind, I couldn’t avoid drinking again. They said that no matter how hard I tried, someday I would find an excuse to drink. And I realized right then that I did have an alcoholic mind. I saw that willpower and self-knowledge

would not help me. Nothing could help me during those strange times when my brain turned itself off and I started drinking without thinking. Before that, I never understood people who said their drinking defeated them. I knew then. I felt crushed.

“Two of the members of Alcoholics Anonymous from the hospital came to see me. They grinned, which I didn’t like so much. Then they asked me if I thought I was an alcoholic after all. I said I was. They told me that the way I had acted in Washington was called the ‘alcoholic mentality,’ and that it was a hopeless condition. I couldn’t beat it on my own. I believed them.

“Then they told me about the importance of connecting with a Higher Power and how the A.A. program worked. They said more than 100 of them had followed the program and successfully gotten sober. I had never gone to church very often, but what they told me about the spiritual side of A.A. didn’t seem too odd or unreasonable. The actions I would need to take as part of the program made sense. They also sounded hard. I would have to change some beliefs that I’d had throughout my whole life, which wouldn’t be easy. But as soon as I decided to join the program, I had this strange feeling that I would find relief soon. That turned out to be true.

“Soon I discovered that connecting with a Higher Power was the missing piece. Since I found that, my life has felt more satisfying and enjoyable. My old way of living didn’t feel bad at the time. Still, I wouldn’t trade the best moments of that life for the worst moments I have now. I wouldn’t go back to it even if I could.”

Fred’s story shows how confusing and upsetting the alcoholic mentality can feel. Especially if you don’t know what it is or why it’s happening to you. We hope that some of you readers recognize yourselves in his story. Fred had only started to struggle with his alcoholism when he joined A.A. Many alcoholics have to do more damage to their own lives before they decide to address their drinking.

Many of the doctors and psychiatrists we’ve spoken to agree with our conclusions. They know that we cannot stop ourselves from drinking, and that willpower is never enough. One of these doctors, a staff member at a world-renowned hospital, made this statement to A.A.’s founders:

“What you say about the hopelessness of the average alcoholic is correct, in my opinion. I have heard the stories of two of your founding members. I have no doubt that they would have been 100% hopeless if they had not connected to a Higher Power. If they had come to my hospital for treatment or detox, I wouldn’t have taken them as patients. That’s how bad they were. Alcoholics who are that sick are too heartbreaking. I am not a religious person myself, but I have deep respect for the spiritual aspect of A.A. For most alcoholics, there is no other workable solution.”

We’ll say it once more: At certain times, alcoholics have no mental defense against the first drink. They cannot stop themselves from drinking. No other human being can stop them from drinking. The only way to stop is to create a meaningful relationship with a Higher Power.

Chapter 4

WE AGNOSTICS

Now that you've read the first three chapters of this book, we hope you have learned something about alcoholism. You may also know the difference between an alcoholic and a non-alcoholic. If you're still unsure if you're an alcoholic yourself, there are two simple ways to tell.

1. If you have tried your hardest to stop drinking and couldn't do it, you are probably an alcoholic.
2. If, once you start drinking, you have no control over how much you drink, you are probably an alcoholic.

Being an alcoholic means you are suffering from an illness that cannot be cured with medicine or therapy. And as we've mentioned before, the only way to permanently control your drinking is to create a personal connection with a Higher Power.

If you are an atheist or an agnostic, you might feel like you are being forced to make a choice that will turn your world upside-down. To be doomed to die an alcoholic death or to find a way to live a spiritual life is not an easy choice to make. We are here to tell you that connecting with a Higher Power is both possible and absolutely critical to your recovery.

AGNOSTIC: Someone who neither believes nor disbelieves in the existence of God or gods, or is unsure if one exists.

Remember the stories of other alcoholics you read in earlier chapters? If you look back over those stories, you'll see that many of the people in them also wanted to skip "the God stuff" in stopping their drinking. They thought they could get sober without finding a Higher Power that they trusted to help and guide them. How many of them succeeded? None. Still, we know that choosing between living your entire life as an alcoholic or becoming a spiritual person can be difficult.

Many people have had a hard time with this choice. In fact, nearly half of us were atheists or agnostics when we first formed our Fellowship. We tried to avoid the issue of spirituality at first. Eventually we realized it was the only way to begin recovering. We found our own ways to think about spirituality, and created our own definitions of a Higher Power. As you work through A.A., you may find yourself doing something similar.

**HIGHER POWER: A force or power that is stronger than you are.
Something that influences events in the universe.**

But you may be thinking that there must be a non-spiritual way to overcome your alcoholism. Something similar that doesn't involve God. But if changing a few behaviors or thinking more positively could cure alcoholism, many of us would have recovered a long time ago. Instead we found that—no matter how hard we tried—relying only on ourselves and our willpower always completely failed.

Some of us spent years of our lives trying to get sober. But the only thing that made a difference was finding a connection to a Higher Power.

A Higher Power can guide your journey

Here is why we think that spirituality is the only way to deal with alcoholism: As alcoholics, we are powerless against our alcoholism. We are powerless to control our drinking. Which means that in order to change our drinking habits, we cannot just rely on ourselves. We don't have the right kind of power, and that is exactly our problem! We need to connect with some sort of power outside of ourselves that can guide us. And it needs to be a Power greater than ourselves.

But where and how do we find this Power?

Well, that's exactly what this book is about. It was written to help you find a Power greater than yourself that will help you solve your problem. If you are an agnostic or an atheist, this may worry you. Much of this chapter will talk about how you might start to connect with God on your own terms.

Plenty of new A.A. members have doubts about spirituality at first. When we talk to alcoholics who haven't started the program yet, we bring up the subject of God very carefully. At first, these new people look eager and hopeful as we explain how the program works. Then their faces fall when we bring up spirituality, especially when we mention God. Often this is because we have opened a topic that newcomers would rather avoid or ignore.

We know how this feels. We have had those same concerns ourselves.

Some of us in A.A. have been extremely anti-religious. Some of us connect the word "God" to ideas we were forced to accept during our childhoods. If those ideas didn't make sense to us back then, we may have rejected the idea of God completely. We started to believe that faith and trusting a Higher Power were signs of weakness. We saw war, destruction, and pain in the world. We found it hard to believe that God would let these things happen. We looked at people who claimed to be godly, and felt we couldn't trust them.

But at other times we felt differently. When we stopped to enjoy the magical beauty of nature, we felt like a Higher Power must exist. We looked

up at the stars and wondered who made them. We felt filled with amazement in those moments.

Whatever you feel and believe about God right now, someone else in the program has believed the same thing. We can promise you that. If you pray every day and believe that God guides your life, you are not alone. And if you are a strong atheist and dislike religion, you are also not alone. Others in A.A. have felt what you are feeling, too, and may even feel it right now.

Here's something that helped those of us who felt uncomfortable with the idea of a Higher Power: We don't have to use anyone else's spirituality as a model. We can decide for ourselves how we want to think about the Higher Power that guides us.

Define “God” on your own terms

When we joined the program, we found out we didn't have to immediately accept that God, or any Higher Power, exists. We just needed to keep an open mind about spirituality and faith. As we learned more about the program, some of us slowly became more spiritual. Others had very sudden and unexpected experiences of faith! At the beginning, all that was needed from us was openness.

We found that as soon as we allowed ourselves to believe in a Power greater than ourselves, we could change. Even if we couldn't explain or understand that Power, it still helped us recover.

We were also relieved to learn that we didn't need to accept someone else's ideas about God. Our own ideas and feelings were all we needed. Then we could connect with a guiding Higher Power. As soon as we opened our minds to a Creative Intelligence, a Spirit of the Universe that watched over everything, we began to feel a new sense of direction. We found that God didn't make it hard for people to connect or get spiritual help. We found

spirituality to be a big, friendly, welcoming space. We truly believe it is open to all people.

GOD AS WE UNDERSTOOD/UNDERSTAND GOD: Your own ideas and feelings about a Higher Power. A version of faith that feels true and powerful to you.

So when we use the word God in this book, we mean your own ideas of God. This also applies to other spiritual words and phrases you'll find in this book. They are all referring to your thoughts and feelings about God, and no one else's. If you feel any doubts about God or religion, we hope those doubts won't stop you from beginning this recovery journey.

We also hope those doubts won't stop you from asking yourself honestly what God means to you.

When we first began to recover, this was all we needed to start growing spiritually. We just needed to decide what God meant to us. Then we needed to reach toward that idea of God the tiniest little bit. After that, we felt able to accept many things that had seemed impossible before. That was growth. And all growth must start somewhere, so we started with our own ideas about God. It didn't matter how simple or small they seemed at the time.

Back then, we just needed to ask ourselves one question: "Am I willing to believe that there is a Power greater than myself?"

And if you are an agnostic who has doubts, you need to ask yourself that question now.

As soon as you can say that you're willing to believe, we promise that you're on the right track. Again and again, we've seen open-mindedness change people for the better. Accepting the idea that God may exist is all you need to start building a spiritual practice for yourself.

We learned that the only thing we needed was a willingness to believe God may exist. Before that, many of us thought we wouldn't be able to benefit from the spiritual basis of the program. We were worried that we would need to accept things on faith that felt difficult to believe. When we heard people talking about how spirituality benefited them as recovering alcoholics, we found ourselves thinking, "I wish I felt that way, too. I'm sure it would work for me if I believed in the same way that they believe." Because of these concerns and stresses, we were relieved to learn that we could begin our relationship with God at a simpler level. We just needed to find and embrace a version of faith that felt true and powerful to us.

Let go of resistance to faith

On top of struggling with faith, we often felt stubbornness and prejudice against religion. Whenever someone brought up the topic of spirituality in conversation, we would get angry or defensive. We had to learn to let go of that habit. Some of us resisted at first, but decided that being open to spiritual discussion was important. We saw that we might be destroyed by our alcoholism if we didn't create a relationship with God. We decided that changing our thinking about spirituality was better than the alternative.

You may still be asking yourself why you should believe in a Power greater than yourself. We think there are many good reasons. Let's have a look at some of them.

Many people demand facts before they make a decision. We all accept all kinds of theories and assumptions, so long as they are supported by facts. For example most of what we believe about electricity and how it works is based on theories. We happily accept what scientists tell us about electricity. Why? Because otherwise we can't explain what we see, feel, and use. We need to use a reasonable assumption as a starting point.

Gravity is another example. So is Einstein's theory of relativity. We believe in many assumptions that are supported by facts, even if there's no proof

that we can see with our own eyes. In fact, science has shown us that visible proof can be weak or misleading. The more we learn about how our world works, the more we understand that how something looks and how it is made may be very different from each other. Here's an example to make this idea clearer:

When people talk about something solid, they may use something like a steel beam as an obvious example. But a steel beam is made up of invisible particles whirling around at incredible speed. These tiny particles behave in predictable ways. They are governed by scientific laws that apply to everything in the world. Based on the facts that scientists have used to back up this theory, we have no reason to doubt it.

We can accept this theory without seeing proof with our own eyes. So why can't we also accept the idea that our world is protected by a powerful God that we cannot see? You can indeed see these with microscopes. So why can't we also believe that our world is guided by a Power greater than ourselves? Many of us stubbornly cling to the idea that our universe needs no God to explain its mysteries. If that's true, we might as well believe that life originated out of nothing, means nothing, and is going nowhere.

Those of us who are agnostics and atheists don't believe that a Power greater than ourselves affects our choices and lives. We believe we are in total control. Doesn't that sound a little arrogant?

Those of us who started our A.A. journeys as agnostics and atheists felt this way once. We thought our own brains were the only power in our lives. We are asking you now to open yourself up to other ideas about the world. We are asking you to rethink your negative beliefs about organized religion. We have learned that even imperfect faiths have given hope and meaning to millions of people all over the world. People of faith understand what life is all about. The ideas that shape their lives make sense.

We used to look down on them. We would make fun of their spiritual beliefs and practices to amuse ourselves. We would look at their natural, normal imperfections and decide that they were bad and wrong. We did all of this instead of accepting them as human beings. Instead of recognizing that many spiritual people had lives that were stable and happy.

We accused faithful people of being intolerant and prejudiced, when we were being intolerant and prejudiced ourselves. We saw a few bad people who claimed to be godly, and assumed all godly people were just as bad. We were unfair when we thought about the spiritual side of life.

Where we all agree

We have let go of our prejudices about faith. We have learned to accept that there is a Power greater than ourselves in the world. Each of us understands that Power in a different way. We have learned that we don't need to have particular ideas about God. We can create our own beliefs about how and when God is working in our lives. We don't need to believe the same things as other people. We can decide for ourselves how we want to think about the Power greater than ourselves that guides us.

However, there's one thing that we all agree on. We now believe in a Power greater than ourselves, and that belief has helped us recover. Millions of alcoholics will tell you that believing in and respecting a Power greater than themselves helped them make huge changes in their lives. When they felt despair and faced total failure, their own minds and feelings were not enough to change their situations. But because of their faith, they could change. They found that a new power, peace, happiness, and sense of direction flowed into them. Before they were always confused and felt that life was pointless, even when they weren't drinking or drunk. These people now say that their relationship with God and spirituality are the most important forces in their lives. We feel this is a powerful reason for anyone reading this book now to open themselves to the idea of faith.

Over the last several hundred years, people have made more discoveries and created more amazing inventions than we did in all the time before that. Why would this be? Especially when we know that people were just as smart back then as we are now? It is because not everyone had access to science and research. As a result, many people's minds were full of

superstitions and outdated ideas. For example, many people who lived at the same time as Christopher Columbus did not believe the earth was round.

Knowing this, we should rethink our own prejudices. Aren't we being just as unreasonable about spirituality as these ancient people were about science and discovery?

Think of it this way: When the Wright brothers built and flew the first airplane in 1903, most American newspapers were afraid to write about it. All other inventors had failed to make machines that could fly. Another man had built a flying machine that sank to the bottom of a river. At the time, the best mathematical minds had "proved" human beings could never fly. Many people believed that God only wanted birds to have the ability to fly.

But just 30 years after the Wright brothers' first flight, airplanes were everywhere. Air travel was normal. Minds that were closed before ... were forced open.

As more and more science and technology became part of our lives, people everywhere became more accepting. Things we once thought were impossible became common. If you were to take a news story about plans to explore the moon using robots, and show it to a warehouse worker, they would say, "I bet they'll do it. Probably in the next couple of years." The time we live in is more open to change. We are comfortable replacing old ideas with new ones. We are happy to throw away old theories or inventions that don't work anymore, and exchange them for new ones that do.

At A.A., we had to ask ourselves why we haven't had the same attitude toward spirituality. If we are able to embrace new ideas and discoveries, why not new views on God? After all, we were struggling with our lives at just about every level. We truly needed help. We were having trouble with our relationships, we couldn't control our emotions, we felt miserable and depressed. We couldn't earn money or hold onto jobs, we felt useless and afraid, and we were unhappy. We couldn't even help other people. If connecting with a Higher Power could help us solve even a few of these problems, wasn't that worth exploring? Of course it was.

We saw other people solve their difficult problems by finding their own connection to spirituality. And then we knew we had to stop doubting the power of God. Our ideas did not work. But the God idea did.

Think back to the Wright brothers for a moment. Their strong belief that they could build a flying machine was the reason they kept trying. It was the reason they succeeded. Without that strong belief, nothing could have happened. We agnostics and atheists hung onto the idea that our own power would solve all our problems, including our drinking. Other alcoholics told us that help from God had worked for them. Then we realized we were being as closed-minded as the people who had insisted the Wrights would never fly.

Logic is great stuff. We liked it. We still like it. And we still believe that using reason, looking at evidence, and using our senses to make decisions are all important. We agnostics would never accept an idea that didn't seem reasonable and logical. This is why we are trying so hard right now to show you that faith is reasonable. We want to show you why we think it is more sane and logical to believe in God than not to believe.

The question of faith

When we became members of Alcoholics Anonymous, we could no longer avoid the question of faith. Did we believe ... or not? Is God everything or nothing, and how were we to choose?

Some of us had already found our way to faith through the program. Those people gave us hope for ourselves. We felt like they had already crossed over a long bridge, while we were waiting to find the courage to cross on our own. We could see the shore where they stood, and felt hopeful. And when we saw them waving, holding out their hands in welcome, we began

to cross. We began to move toward accepting that a Power greater than ourselves truly did exist.

But when we reached the far side of the bridge we couldn't step ashore. Our love of logic and reason held us back from accepting our faith.

We made ourselves think more closely about faith as an idea. We had believed in our own ability to think and be reasonable. Wasn't that a kind of faith? It was. Up to this point, we had been faithful to a "God of Reason." In a way, faith had been part of our lives for as long as we could remember!

Then we realized we had also been worshippers. We worshiped people, feelings, things, money, and ourselves. At certain moments, we felt feelings of worship for natural beauty: things like the sunset, the sea, or a flower. Most of us had fallen in love at some time in our lives. Love itself is a kind of worship. Love is a feeling that is not based in logic or reason. Seeing this, it became clear that worship had also been with us all along.

It became impossible to say we were unable to feel faith, or love, or worship. We saw that the most important experiences and emotions in our lives were built on faith. We saw that if we built our lives around reason alone, it wouldn't be life at all. We saw that reason wasn't the most important force in the world. In fact, reason can't always be trusted even when it comes from brilliant thinkers. Remember that several brilliant mathematicians proved that humans would never fly. And the Wright brothers still succeeded.

We began to see another kind of flight: People whose faith helped them rise above their problems. They told us God made these things possible, and we only smiled. We had seen people freed from alcoholism through their experience of faith. We met people who told us their belief in God had set them free. But we felt more comfortable telling ourselves those things weren't real.

We were lying to ourselves. Deep down in every person is the simple and powerful idea of God. It may be hidden by personal problems or by worship of other things, but it is still there. Faith in a Power greater than ourselves has existed for as long as humans have existed.

We finally saw that faith in some kind of God was as natural as the warm feelings we felt for our friends or partners. Some of us had to search long and hard, but we always found our faith eventually. God's existence was as clear and true as our own existence. We connected with God deep inside of ourselves.

God is within you already

We share these thoughts and feelings with you because we hope they will clear away your prejudices. We hope they will help you think honestly, and encourage you to look inside yourself for your own faith. Then, if you want to, you can join us on our journey toward recovery.

We'd like to share with you the experience of a man who thought he was an atheist, but had a change of heart that was dramatic, convincing, and moving.

Our friend was a minister's son. He attended church school, where he acted out and made trouble. He felt overwhelmed by his religious education and rebelled against it. As he grew older, his whole life was full of trouble and frustration. His family members had failed businesses, many struggled with their mental health, some became seriously ill, and attempted suicide. Seeing all of these terrible problems made him feel bitter and depressed. His drinking, mental illness, and physical illness, all made him consider suicide himself.

One night, when he'd been checked into a hospital, he was talking with another alcoholic who had experienced a spiritual awakening. Our friend felt angry and disgusted. He cried out, "If there is a God, then that God certainly hasn't done anything for me!" Later, alone in his room, he asked himself this question: "Is it possible that all the religious people I have known are wrong?" As he wondered about this, he felt like he was in hell.

Then, like a flash, a great thought appeared in his mind. It made all other thoughts disappear: "Who are you to say there is no God?"

This man fell out of bed onto his knees. He immediately felt overwhelmed by a feeling that God was present in the room with him. It poured over him and through him. The mental barriers he had built against faith were swept away. He had stepped from bridge to shore. For the first time, he was awakened to a Power greater than himself.

This powerful experience transformed our friend forever. On that very night, his alcoholism disappeared. Except for a few moments when he felt tempted, his desire to drink never returned. And whenever he felt tempted, he also felt very strongly that drinking would be a huge mistake. The idea of drinking made him sick to his stomach. He could not drink even if he wanted to. God had restored his sanity.

Doesn't this story describe a miracle of healing? Its elements are so simple. Events in this man's life made him willing to believe. He humbly offered himself to God. After that, he was changed forever.

We members of A.A. know that God helped us find our sanity again. Some of us connect with God suddenly and in a flash, as our friend did. Some of us grow into it more slowly. But God has come to all who have honestly sought a connection with a Power greater than themselves.

When we allowed ourselves to become closer to God, we found God!

Chapter 5

HOW IT WORKS

It's very rare for someone to completely commit to the A.A. program and still fail. People who do not recover are the ones who can't or won't follow this simple program. They are usually people who simply cannot be honest with themselves. We don't meet a lot of people like this, but they do exist. It is not their fault. They seem to have been born that way. But because they cannot be honest with themselves, they are unlikely to succeed in their recovery.

There are also people who suffer from emotional and mental disorders, and join A.A. to address their alcoholism. Many of them do recover if they are able to be honest along their journey.

Many of the stories we share in this book describe experiences that we have had ourselves. We share stories about what we used to be like, what happened to us, and what our lives are like now. If you feel like we did and want to stop drinking, then you are ready to get started. You are ready to take these steps toward recovery.

When we started, some of those first steps scared us. We thought we could find an easier way. But we could not. Since we know this now from our own experiences, we're asking you to be fearless and thorough from the start. Some of us tried to keep our old ideas, and they just held us back. Until we let go of those ideas, we were unable to make progress.

Remember that we are dealing with a disease. Alcoholism is a confusing and powerful condition that is unlike anything else in the world. Alcohol is extremely complicated, tricky, and difficult. It seems to control and punish people who are addicted to it. Without help, beating alcoholism is too much for one person to handle. We all need guidance from God, support from a Higher Power. And we need to ask for that support with full and open hearts. We stand at a turning point. We ask for God's protection and care with all the honesty we have.

The Twelve Steps

Here are the steps we took, which are suggested as a program of recovery:

- 1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.**
- 2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.**
- 3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.**
- 4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.**
- 5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.**
- 6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.**
- 7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.**
- 8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.**

9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.

10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong, promptly admitted it.

11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him , praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.

12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

If this is your first time reading through these steps, they may seem difficult ... or even impossible. Do not be discouraged. No one has ever followed these principles perfectly. We are not saints. We are simply people who are trying to grow, both spiritually and personally. These ideas are here to guide our progress. And our goal is spiritual progress, not spiritual perfection.

In Chapter 4 we shared a description of alcoholics who do not believe in God. Combined with that, we believe the stories of our experiences as A.A. members all boil down to three simple ideas:

A. That we were alcoholics and could not manage our own lives.

B. That no human power could have stopped or changed our alcoholism.

C. That God could and would help us if we tried to find God.

The Twelve Steps were created so that we could help ourselves and others understand these three ideas—and then grow beyond them. We had already accepted our powerlessness over alcohol and already believed in a Higher Power. That meant we were at Step Three (deciding to turn our will and our lives over to God's guidance). But what did that mean? And how could we do it?

Stop playing God

The very first thing we needed to understand was this: that following our own self-centered plans would never work in the long run. Even if we had good intentions, we would eventually cause trouble for other people trying to live their own lives.

Since most people do whatever they want whenever they want, it can be hard to accept this change. The people around us usually believe they are completely in charge of their own lives. They think they control everything. They're like actors who want to run the whole show they're performing in. They try to arrange the spotlights and the scenery. They tell the other actors what to do to suit their own needs. They tell themselves that if people would just follow their directions, the show would be perfect. Everybody would be happy and life would be wonderful. And while they are trying their best to control all the parts and players, they may seem kind, patient, and generous. Other times they may seem mean, selfish, and dishonest. Since they're human beings, they probably show a mix of these traits.

What usually happens when people put themselves in charge of everything? The show doesn't go very well. Our controlling friends begin to think life is treating them unfairly. They become even more controlling in response. But even after making more changes, the play still disappoints them. They may see that these bad results are

partially their own fault, but they believe other people are more to blame. They become angry, insulted, and self-pitying.

Things only get worse since what they want doesn't match up to what they do. People who run their lives in this way:

- Act kind to others, but only when it benefits them;
- Believe they can force themselves to be happy by controlling everything and every person in their lives;
- Make the people around them feel bullied, which causes those people to bully them back; and/or
- Create confusion instead of peace in their own lives, and in the lives of others.

These unfortunate people are driven by self-centeredness. They believe they know best about everything. They blame others for their troubles and struggles. If we're being truly honest, don't we all act like that sometimes? Don't we get all wrapped up with ourselves, our anger, or our self-pity?

How selfishness hurts us

We in A.A. believe that selfishness is the root of our troubles. We allow fear and self-pity to rule our lives, and we end up hurting or angering the people around us. And they react to that. Sometimes they hurt us back. While that is happening we may not understand why they're doing it. But if we think carefully about how we've acted, we always seem to find the reason. We remember that we did something selfish first, and that selfish action put us in a position to be hurt later on.

Basically, this means we are causing our own troubles. They come from ourselves, and are caused by our self-centeredness. Alcoholics are even more self-centered than most people, though we never seem to realize this. We alcoholics must work hard to get rid of this selfishness. Our Higher Power makes it possible for us to change this in ourselves. In fact, it may feel like there's no other way to make this change. We can't get rid of our self-centeredness by wishing or trying all by ourselves. We need God's help.

It took some time to understand that we had to quit playing God. Doing that just wasn't working for us. We decided that in this drama called "life," God was going to be our director. God would be in charge. This decision changed everything for us.

Most good ideas are simple, and this one was simply beautiful. It became extremely important to our journey toward freedom.

When we truly accepted that God was in charge, all sorts of amazing things began to happen for us. We felt a new sense of purpose. Everything we needed came to us, so long as we continued to trust in our Higher Power. We became less interested in ourselves. We stopped worrying about our little plans and schemes. Instead, we were interested in seeing how we could contribute to life and how we could help other people. We felt a new kind of power flow in. We enjoyed peace of mind, and we discovered we could face life successfully. As we became aware of God's presence in our lives, we stopped feeling afraid of both the present and the future. We felt like we had been reborn.

Committing to Step Three has a similar effect on many alcoholics. When we reach this Step, many of us choose to say this prayer: "God, I offer myself to Thee—to build with me and to do with me as Thou wilt. Relieve me of the

bondage of self, that I may better do Thy will. Take away my difficulties, that victory over them may bear witness to those I would help of Thy Power, Thy Love, and Thy Way of life. May I do Thy will always!”

This means, “God, I offer myself to You—to partner with me and guide me as You think best. Take away the prison of self that I have lived in, so I can do as you think best more easily. Take away my difficulties, so that when I feel I have been released from them, I can share my transformation to help others accept Your Power, Your Love, and Your Way of life. May I do Your will always!”

This prayer is a powerful one. Many A.A. members have found it helpful to take this spiritual step with an understanding person. This might be a spouse, best friend, or spiritual adviser. But if someone like that isn’t a part of your life, it is better to meet your Higher Power alone. Connecting with your Higher Power with someone who might misunderstand will be more difficult than doing it alone.

The wording of the prayer that you see here is just a suggestion. When you are ready to take Step Three yourself, you can choose other words that express the same idea, as long as you can say them with all of your heart. Saying words of dedication is only the beginning. But if you say them honestly and humbly, the power of your new understanding will fill you from head to toe.

INVENTORY: Inventory is important to Step 4 in A.A., where it’s described as a “searching and fearless moral inventory.” This is a structured list that includes strengths and weaknesses, resentments, fears, and the hurt you’ve caused with your alcoholism.

Taking inventory and responsibility

After we’d committed to Step Three through prayer, we started a personal house cleaning. We knew that putting ourselves in God’s hands was an important first step, but also knew it needed to be followed by action. Our change of heart wouldn’t permanently improve our lives unless we also dealt with the beliefs and actions that were harming us. Drinking was just a symptom of a larger disease. We had to understand its causes and conditions.

So we started our personal inventories—lists of all the things in our lives that held us back. This was Step Four. This step was inspired by the process of inventorying that businesses do: They count and write down every item that the business owns. A business that doesn’t do this regularly doesn’t understand itself, and may go broke. When people take inventory of a store or company, they find out the facts and face them. They are trying to discover the truth about the stock that is actually on the shelves. It helps business owners find damaged goods that can’t be sold to customers, and to get rid of them immediately. If business owners want to be successful, they cannot fool themselves about what can be sold and what must be thrown away.

This is also true for people. We need to understand ourselves. We need to know what’s inside of us (on our shelves), and be willing to throw out damaged goods (harmful ideas and behaviors).

So we did exactly the same thing with our lives. We took stock honestly. First, we searched out the flaws in our personalities that caused our struggles. Since we already believed that selfishness was what had hurt us most, we began there. We thought long and hard about the traits and actions related to selfishness.

We have come to believe that resentment is the worst offender. Resentment is feeling anger about being treated unfairly. It’s the feeling of holding a grudge. It means staying angry at someone for a long period of time. It destroys more alcoholics than anything else. We alcoholics are not only mentally and physically ill, we are spiritually ill. And we think resentment is the source of many forms of spiritual disease. To fully recover we need to cure our spiritual illness. Better mental and physical health will follow.

Dealing with resentment

We have discovered that the best way to deal with resentments is to write them down on paper. We did this ourselves by listing people, groups, or ideas at whom we were angry. Then we asked ourselves why we felt angry. In most cases, it turned out that we felt angry because our confidence, our bank accounts, our ambitions, or our personal relationships (including sexual relationships) were hurt or threatened. That made us feel upset. We felt like we had been wronged.

On our grudge lists, we wrote down names in one column. In the second column, we put down what the person did to make us angry. In the third column, we wrote what we felt was affected by this behavior. Was it our self-esteem, our security, our ambitions, our personal relationships, or our sexual relations?

We were as detailed as possible, as you'll see in this example:

I am resentful at:	My reason for feeling this way:
Mr. Brown	He pays too much attention to my wife and flirts with her. He told my wife about my mistress.
Mrs. Jones	She insulted me. She checked her husband into a hospital for drinking, and he's my friend. She
My employer	She is unreasonable. She treats me unfairly. She doesn't trust me. She threatens to fire me for d
My wife	She misunderstands and nags me. She likes Mr. Brown. She wants to put her name on the mort

As we went back through our lives to write these inventories, we focused on being both thorough and completely honest. When we were finished, we re-read the lists we'd written very carefully.

The first thing we noticed was that our lists were long. Clearly, we felt that the world and its people had treated us very badly. This was not a huge surprise. Most people spend their lives believing that others are wrong. They think that the world is unfair, and that nothing can be done about any of it. If they cling to this belief, people will continue to wrong them and they will continue to feel angry about it. Some of us try to find the source of our anger. When we do that, we realize we're actually feeling guilt or regret (instead of anger). Then we get angry at ourselves for being mistaken. But the more we fight and try to get our own way, the worse things become.

A life full of resentment can only create unhappiness. It's a feeling that sucks up our time and energy, preventing us from focusing on more important things. And for alcoholics, resentment is even more serious. In fact, holding on to our grudges can be fatal. As alcoholics, allowing these angry feelings to continue makes us want to live alone and in darkness. We are hiding ourselves from the warm sunlight that we can find in spirituality. The craving for alcohol returns and we drink again. And for alcoholics, drinking leads to death.

If we wanted to live, we knew we had to be free of anger.

So we turned back to our inventory list, believing it held the answers we needed. We decided to look at it from a different angle. We began to see that the world and its people weren't treating us as badly as we'd thought. But we also saw that our strong feelings about the world and its people were controlling us. Our feelings of anger and resentment were shaping our lives. Since we were alcoholics, feeling huge amounts of anger and resentment was

dangerous. How could we escape? We saw that our resentments needed to be dealt with, but how? We could not wish them away, just as we couldn't wish away our drinking.

Eventually, we realized that the people who had wronged us might be spiritually sick, too. We might not like their symptoms or the way they treated us, but accepting they were ill helped us to feel less angry at them. We asked God to help us show them the same compassion and patience that we would show to sick friends. When a person was rude or selfish, we said to ourselves, "This is a sick person. How can I be helpful to them? God, please help me not feel angry at this person."

We stopped ourselves from arguing or fighting back when we felt someone hurt us. After all, we wouldn't treat sick people that way. If we did, we would destroy our chance of being helpful! We cannot be helpful to all people, but with the help of our Higher Power we can learn to be kind to everyone we meet.

SELF-SEEKING: Acting in a way that puts our own selfcentered needs first.

Then we returned to our inventory list again. Instead of looking for the wrongs others had done to us, we looked for our own mistakes. When were we selfish, self-seeking, dishonest, and afraid? Sometimes we found items on the list where we shared the blame with other people. When this happened, we tried to focus on how we had been wrong in those situations. Where were we to blame? What was our mistake? This inventory was ours, not the other person's. When we could understand and describe our faults, we listed them. We wrote them down in black and white. We admitted our wrongs honestly and felt willing to make them right.

Fear hides everywhere

If you look back at our example list, you'll see that the word "fear" sits in parentheses next to the complaints about Mr. Brown, Mrs. Jones, the employer, and the wife. As we did our own inventories, we saw that this one word somehow touched every aspect of our lives. It was like an evil and destructive thread that wove its way through the fabric of our existence. So often, our fears were the real cause of our resentments. Fear caused events in our lives that created pain we felt we didn't deserve. But had we really set the ball rolling ourselves? Could we admit to ourselves that our fears had caused that trouble in the first place?

We reviewed our fears thoroughly. We put them on paper, even if they weren't connected to feelings of resentment. We asked ourselves why we had these fears. Wasn't it because we believed we could do everything and know everything, and then found out we were wrong? Wasn't it because we couldn't accept that we needed help? Some of us had felt very confident at times, but our confidence never took away our fears. When it made us cocky, it was worse.

If we wanted to continue recovering, we needed to find a better way to deal with our fears. And we found it in trusting and relying on a Higher Power. We learned to trust God rather than trying to understand, manage, and do everything in our lives alone. And by putting that trust in God, we are able to get through our darkest, most difficult, and most fearful times.

And we are not ashamed of relying on God, or of needing God. We know that our faith and trust isn't a sign of weakness. It is a sign of strength. Faith is a kind of courage, just as trusting a Higher Power is a kind of courage. And when we ask God to remove our fears and help us focus on better, more important things, we can begin to outgrow our fears.

How to inventory your sex life

Now let's talk about sex. It seems to us that there are two strong opinions about sex, and most people have either one or the other.

Some people say that sex is part of our "lower" nature, but that it needs to be done sometimes to keep humanity alive. They are judgmental about sex.

Other people say that sex is wonderful and that people should be allowed to have as much of it as they want, with whomever they want. This second group of people tends to believe sex is part of everything that human beings do, from art to science to religion. They see it everywhere and in everything.

A.A. would like to stay out of this argument between two strong opinions. We do not want to judge anyone's sex life. We all have sex problems. We wouldn't be human if we didn't. What can we do about them?

To answer this question for ourselves, we reviewed our own actions over the years. Where had we been selfish, dishonest, or inconsiderate? Whom had we hurt? Did we make anyone feel jealous, suspicious, or bitter? If we were to blame, what could we have done instead? We got this all down on paper and looked at it.

Then we tried to imagine a smart and fair way to run our sex lives in the future. We looked at each sexual relationship and asked, "Did I act selfishly here, or not?" We asked God to help us create some ideals. Ideals are values and behaviors that we could work toward. We wanted ideals for our sex lives, and help living up to them. We remembered that sex is natural, which means it is basically good. That means we shouldn't be greedy about it or feel disgusted by it.

When you consider these questions and think about your own ideals, make sure you are willing to work toward them. Just like everything in A.A., making changes in your sex life takes work and effort. It means being willing to make amends whenever you're wrong (as long as you don't cause more harm by doing so). In other words, we treat sex as we would any other problem. We ask God what we should do, and the right answer comes if we want it.

What happens if we fail to live up to one of our ideals about sex and relationships? Does this mean we will get drunk to punish ourselves? Some people say yes. But this is only a half-truth. It depends on us and on our feelings. If we are sorry and truly want our Higher Power to point us toward better things, we know that we can be forgiven. We will learn the lesson, and move on. If we are not sorry and our choices continue to harm other people, we will drink. There's no "maybe" about it. These are facts that we have learned directly from our own experiences.

When it comes to the sex lives of alcoholics, we recommend focusing on creating ideals with God's help and then using them to guide you. Whenever a situation comes up and you aren't sure what to do, your ideals will give you a clear answer. They will help you know how to do the right thing. They will keep you sane and strong. If your relationships are messy and difficult, working on them directly might not help you. In this case, you can focus your energy on helping other people. Think about their needs and work for them. Doing this takes you out of yourself and allows you to pay attention to other things. It might even help you avoid a headache.

Faith helps us when we cannot help ourselves

If you are thorough about your personal inventory, you will write a very long list. You will name and think about your resentments. When you're done, you'll start to see how pointless and dangerous—even deadly—your resentments are. You have begun to learn tolerance, patience, and good will toward all people. (This includes your enemies, since you now think of them as sick people who need and deserve your help.) You have listed the people you have hurt, and you are willing to straighten out the past if you can.

In this book you will read again and again that faith helped us when we couldn't help ourselves. We hope you are convinced now that a Higher Power can remove whatever barriers kept you from finding your faith in the past. If you have already made a decision and an inventory of your mistakes, you have taken important steps. You have swallowed and digested some big chunks of truth about yourself. You are on your way toward a better and brighter life already.

Chapter 6

INTO ACTION

Now that you have made your personal inventory, what should you do about it? What comes next?

Before you made your inventory, you started trying to find your spirituality and connect with a Higher Power. Part of that process was figuring out if anything was blocking you. Were there obstacles in your path? Anything keeping you from creating a relationship with God?

Making your inventory helped you find those obstacles and name them. By listing your mistakes and weaknesses, you began to see how you were keeping yourself from connecting with your Higher Power. You began to see where you were selfish and wrong.

Now, your mistakes and weaknesses are going to be removed from you. To make this possible, you must take action. You must take the Fifth Step in the program of recovery mentioned in Chapter 5: “Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.”

We know this may not be easy. Discussing our mistakes and weaknesses with another person is very difficult, but it’s also very important. We may think we did enough by trying to be honest with ourselves while we made our inventory. However, making this list by ourselves is not enough. We must go further. We must talk about our inventory with someone else.

It will be easier to talk with another person about our inventory if we know why doing this is important. And the most important reason is this: If we skip this vital step, we may not be able to stop drinking.

Finish your house cleaning

Many new people have come to A.A. who wanted to keep their lives secret. They wanted to avoid discussing the truth about their lives with anyone. Even if they did everything else in the A.A. program and followed all of the other 11 Steps, these people almost always struggled to stay sober. At some point, they got drunk. They were unable to control themselves and wondered why they started drinking again.

We think the reason is that they never completed their “house cleaning.” They started to take inventory, but didn’t finish the process. They thought they had gotten rid of their selfishness and fear, but they had not. They thought they had learned to be humble, but they had not. They had not learned enough about selfishness and fear because they had not told someone else their complete life story.

One reason it’s hard for alcoholics to know when we have told our entire life stories is this: Many alcoholics lead double lives. We are like actors. When we are around other people, we act like a character on stage, showing them the version of ourselves we want them to see. We pretend to be people we are not so others will like us. Even when we know we don’t deserve to be liked.

Leading a double life becomes harder when we go on drinking sprees. Once we get sober, we may remember how we acted when we were drunk and feel disgusted with ourselves. Realizing someone else may have seen us act this way is very upsetting. These memories are like nightmares. We may push them deep inside ourselves so we don’t have to face them. Feeling this way makes us feel constantly afraid and tense, which can lead to more drinking.

Psychologists tend to agree that alcoholics struggle to be honest with themselves, and also struggle to be honest with others. Many of us have spent thousands of dollars working with psychologists, never feeling able to tell them the whole truth. We couldn't take their advice, no matter how kind they were to us. We couldn't be honest with our psychologists or anyone else. No wonder so many doctors believe alcoholics can't recover!

Find the right person

As hard as it is, we must all find a way to be entirely honest with somebody. If we want to live long or happily in this world, we must take this step. Before we do, we need to consider who we can trust to listen to our stories. Who is the best person with whom to take this step? Those of us who belong to religions that require confession might want to talk with our faith leaders. Even those of us who don't have religious connections may feel comfortable talking with faith leaders. These people often see and understand our problems faster than others do.

If we cannot or would rather not talk with a faith leader, we need to look for a trustworthy, understanding friend. Our doctor or therapist might be the right person. It might be one of our own family members, but we cannot share anything with our spouses or our parents that will hurt them and make them unhappy. We have no right to help ourselves when doing so hurts other people. The rule is we must be hard on ourselves, but always considerate of others.

Although it's necessary and important to talk about our inventory with someone, some of us may struggle to find the right person. The right person will be able to keep a secret. This person will understand why we have decided to tell them about our lives, and never try to stop us from sharing. If a person like this cannot be found, this step can be postponed. We can wait to do it until we find a person we trust. As soon as we find that person,

however, we need to be ready to talk with them right away. Being unable to find the right person cannot become an excuse to skip this step.

When we have decided on a person to hear our story, we should make a plan to tell it immediately. We have our written inventory already, so we should feel ready for a long talk. Before we start our story, we should explain to our partner what we are going to do and why we need to do it. They should understand that telling this story is a matter of life or death for us. Most people who are told how important they are to our recovery feel honored. They are glad to help us.

When we're ready, we must swallow our pride and start telling our story. We share all the ugliest parts of our personalities. We shine a light on every dark or difficult experience from our pasts. Once we have taken this step and told our complete, unedited stories we feel happy and relieved. We can look the world in the eye. We can be alone at perfect peace and ease. Our fears fall away from us. We may start to feel closer to our Higher Power. Before this we may have had spiritual beliefs, but now we start to have a spiritual experience. The feeling that our drinking problem has disappeared may rise up inside of us. It feels like walking down a wide, open road hand in hand with the Spirit of the Universe.

After sharing our whole story, we go home. We look for a place where we can sit alone in the quiet for an hour. We think back over what we have done. We thank God from the bottom of our hearts for helping us. Taking this book down from the shelf, we turn to the page that lists all Twelve Steps. Carefully reading the first five, we think back to make sure we haven't skipped anything. We do this because we are building toward our own freedom. Think of it like building an arch that we will eventually walk through. Is the work solid so far? Are all the stones in the right place? Have we used too little cement for the foundation? Have we tried to make mortar without sand?

DEFECTS OF CHARACTER/CHARACTER DEFECTS: Personality flaws or shortcomings that block our spiritual growth and get in the way of our recovery. Examples include fear, selfishness, dishonesty, self-

pity, and pride. These are also called “liabilities” or “shortcomings.” Addressing our defects of character is the focus of Steps Six and Seven.

Let go of defects

If we feel that we have truly and completely finished Step Five, we take a look at Step Six. This step is, “Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.” Throughout this book, we’ve mentioned how important it is to be willing and open to spiritual change. That is especially important now. We must ask ourselves if we are ready to let our Higher Power remove all of our problems and struggles. Can God really take them all away? Every single one? If it turns out that there’s something we can’t let go, we can ask God to help us release it.

When we feel ready, we have completed Step Six. Then we say something like this: “My Creator, I am now willing that you should have all of me, good and bad. I pray that you now remove from me every single defect of character which stands in the way of my usefulness to you and my fellows. Grant me strength, as I go out from here, to do your bidding. Amen.” Then we have completed Step Seven.

AMENDS: Making amends is the focus of Steps Eight and Nine of A.A. It means finding ways to make things right with people you have hurt. It involves accepting responsibility for what you’ve done, stating you were wrong, explaining how you have changed, and asking what you can do and/or how you can heal the relationship.

Be willing, make amends

Now we need to take even more action. What we do next is related to the old saying, "Faith without works is dead." In other words, we must do something to make things right in our lives. When we look at Steps Eight and Nine, we see that they have to do with taking steps to right our wrongs. Step Eight is, "Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all." We made this list—or most of it—when we took inventory of ourselves. We looked hard at our lives and actions, and that included thinking about the people we had hurt. Once we have that list, we move on to Step Nine.

Step Nine is, "Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others." This is where we reach out to people we've hurt to fix the damage we did in the past. We do this to try to clear away the clutter and mess we've made by trying to run our lives by ourselves. If we don't feel ready to make amends, we work with our Higher Power until we are ready. Remember that we agreed at the beginning to do whatever it took to win our battle with alcohol.

Making amends is hard, and we may feel doubtful or afraid about this step. As we read over the list of coworkers and friends we have hurt, we may feel worried about going to some of them and talking about our spiritual experience. Luckily, we don't have to talk about God right away with everyone when we make amends. Doing that might make them unwilling to listen to us just when we are trying to make our lives better.

We should remember, though, that we want to be as helpful as possible to everyone around us. If we try talking to someone who is still angry with us or hurt by something we did, and then say we have found religion, it may go badly. Why risk making them feel put off by us? Doing that might destroy an opportunity to offer them a helpful message about recovery. But this same person will probably react well to our true wish to fix what we had done wrong. They will be more interested in our good will than hearing about our spiritual discoveries.

However, if it feels natural to mention our Higher Power, we should do it. There's no reason to hide our relationship with a Higher Power.

It can be tricky to decide how to approach someone to make amends. This is especially true if they have hurt us more than we have hurt them. We may have changed our attitude about them, since we now think of people who hurt us as sick people who need and deserve our help. But it can still be hard to make amends to them. To do this with a person we dislike, we must find a way to push through our discomfort. It is harder to make amends to an enemy than to a friend, but we grow more by making amends to an enemy. Going to them feeling helpful and forgiving, confessing how we felt, and talking about our regret are all healthy things to do.

No matter what happens, we cannot criticize the other person, or argue with them. We just tell them that we won't be able to stay sober until we have done our best to straighten out the past. We focus on changing ourselves and our lives, and never tell others what to do with theirs. When we are making amends, we don't talk about the faults of the other person. We stick to our own. And if we stay calm, are honest, and remain open, we will be happy with the results of the conversation.

Expect the unexpected when making amends

Most of the time when we make amends, unexpected things happen. Sometimes the person we are talking to admits they are wrong, too, and bad feelings that have lingered for years vanish in an instant. Sometimes our former enemies praise what we are doing and wish us well. Sometimes they offer to help us. However, it shouldn't matter if the person we're speaking with decides to throw us out of their office. We still need to do our part. We owe them amends—an honest attempt to make things right—and we cannot deny them what we owe to them. When we tell them what we are trying to do, we don't try to hide anything about our drinking. They usually know about it anyway, whether we realize it or not. We cannot worry about how long it has taken us to make these amends. Our drinking has made us slow to understand what needs doing. We must put aside our fear of being judged by our enemies because we might drink if we are afraid to face them.

We may have committed a crime that would land us in jail if the police found out. We may be unable to pay our debts. We have already admitted all of this to another person when we did Step Five. But we are sure we would end up in prison or fired from our jobs if others found out. Maybe it's a minor offense like putting personal expenses on our business credit card. Many of us have done things like that.

Maybe we are divorced and have remarried, but haven't paid alimony or child support to our ex-spouse. They may be angry; they may even have a warrant out for our arrest. That's a common form of trouble, too.

Although making amends can take many forms, we use some guidelines to make this step effective. First, we remind ourselves that we are committed to finding a spiritual experience, and we ask to be given strength and direction to do the right thing. We may lose our jobs, ruin our reputations, or even go to jail, but we are willing. We have to be. We must not run away from anything.

However, making amends involves other people. This means we must be careful not to hurt them as we work to save ourselves from alcoholism. Here's a story that shows how important it is to think of others while making amends.

A man we know got remarried. Because of his anger toward his first wife and because of his drinking, he had not paid alimony to her. She was furious. She went to court and got an order for his arrest. He had started the A.A. program, had gotten a new job, and was getting his head above water.

We thought he should be willing to turn himself in, but he disagreed. He knew that in jail, he couldn't provide for either family. We suggested he write to his first wife admitting his faults and asking forgiveness. He did, and also sent a small amount of money. He told her what he would try to do in the future. He said he was perfectly willing to go to jail if she insisted. Of course she did not insist, and the whole situation got resolved.

Before taking any action that might affect other people, we need to ask for their consent. If we have permission, have consulted with other people, asked God to help, and the action still makes sense, we must not run away from it.

This brings to mind another story. While drinking, one of our friends accepted a sum of money from a bitterly hated business rival, and didn't give him a receipt. Then our friend denied having borrowed the money, and used this incident as a way to ruin the reputation of the person who had loaned it to him. He used his own wrongdoing to destroy someone else.

Later, he felt that he could not possibly make this situation right again. If he tried to make amends to the other person, he was afraid it would destroy his reputation again, disgrace his family, and get him fired. What right did he have to involve the people who depended on him? And how could he admit that he had been so wrong?

After talking with his spouse and business partner, he decided that it was better to take those risks than to stand before God feeling so guilty. He saw that he had to trust God to guide him in this situation, or he would start drinking again. If that happened, all would be lost anyhow. He went to church for the first time in many years. After the sermon, he quietly got up and told his story to the congregation. Other members of his community were very understanding and accepting. Today he is one of the most trusted citizens in his town.

Infidelity and amends at home

Many of us have troubles with our partners and families. Maybe we have cheated on them. In this way, alcoholics may not be any worse than other people. But drinking does complicate our sexual relationships. After a few years with an alcoholic, spouses and partners get worn out, angry, and unwilling to communicate. How could they be any other way? Meanwhile, the alcoholic begins to feel lonely, and to feel sorry for themselves. They

begin to look for someone else to satisfy their sexual needs. They might have a secret affair with someone because it's exciting. Or because they believe this other person "understands" them better than their spouse. Maybe they really do. But in many cases, the spouse at home has gone through hell to support their alcoholic partner.

If we find ourselves in this situation, we have to do something about it. It can be hard to know how to handle it. If we are sure our spouse does not know, should we tell them? Not always, we think. If they know generally that we've been cheating, do we tell them all the details? We definitely need to admit we've been wrong. Our spouse or partner may insist on hearing the details. We tell them we have no right to involve another person. We are sorry for what we have done and, God willing, we won't do it again. More than that we cannot do; we have no right to go further. This is the best way to handle a situation like this, we have found. If we can avoid naming the person with whom we had an affair, that's best. It prevents our spouse from blaming that other person for everything.

In some cases being more detailed may be better. All partnerships and marriages are unique. The partners involved are the only ones who can judge what will work best. Both partners may decide to forgive and forget. Both might pray about it, keeping each other's happiness in mind. When it comes to being unfaithful, we must remember that we're dealing with one of the worst human emotions: jealousy.

Even those of us who haven't cheated on our partners still have plenty to do at home. Sometimes alcoholics say that the only thing they need to do is to stay sober. Certainly we must all stay sober, or we will risk losing our homes and families. But just staying sober means we are still a long way from making amends to our spouses or parents. There are people at home whom we've treated so horribly. It is almost impossible to understand the patience of our partners and our parents who stood by us. If they had left us or thrown us out, many of us would have had nowhere to go. We might even be dead.

An alcoholic is like a tornado roaring its way through the lives of others. Hearts are broken. Sweet relationships are dead. Affection is destroyed. Selfish and inconsiderate habits keep our homes in chaos. We believe that alcoholics who say stopping drinking is enough don't understand the damage they have caused. They're like farmers who come up from the basement after a tornado to find their homes ruined. Then they say to their spouses, "Don't see anything wrong here! And isn't it great the wind stopped blowing?"

There is a long period of rebuilding ahead. We must take control. Mumbling that we are sorry won't work at all. We need to sit down with the family and talk honestly about the past, being very careful not to criticize them for their part in it. Their defects may be obvious, but it's likely that actions we took are also responsible. So we clean house with the family, and ask each morning that our Higher Power show us how to be patient, kind, and full of love.

Spiritual life is not a theory. We have to live it. However, unless our families tell us they also want to live using spiritual principles, we shouldn't force them. We also shouldn't talk about spiritual matters all the time. If they are going to adopt a spiritual way of living themselves, it will happen naturally. Seeing our behavior change will convince them more than words ever could.

There may be some wrongs we can never fully right. As long as we can honestly say to ourselves that we would right them if we could, we don't need to worry about this. If we cannot meet with someone to make amends in person, we can send them an honest letter. And there may be a good reason to wait to make amends with other people. But we don't delay unless it's truly necessary. When we do speak with them, we need to be polite, considerate, and humble without being dramatic or overly apologetic. We don't need to crawl; we can stand on our own two feet.

Finding serenity

If we are painstaking about Step Nine, we will be amazed before we have made amends to half of our list of people. We will find new freedom and new happiness. We will not regret the past or wish we could forget about it. We will understand the word serenity and we will know peace.

SERENITY: A state of feeling calm, peaceful, and untroubled.

No matter how badly we have behaved in the past, we will begin to see how our experience can benefit others. Any feelings of uselessness and self-pity will disappear. We will lose interest in selfish things and begin to take an interest in helping other people. Self-seeking will slip away. Our whole attitude and outlook about life will change. Fear of people and of money worries will leave us. We will know how to handle situations which used to confuse or worry us. We will suddenly realize that God is doing for us what we could not do for ourselves.

SELF-SEEKING: Acting in a way that puts our own self-centered needs first.

Are these outrageous or unlikely promises? We think not! These promises come true among A.A. members every day—sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly. They will always come into our lives if we work for them.

Now we are at Step Ten, which says, “Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong, promptly admitted it.” This means that we need to continue to make right any new mistakes we make. We found a new way of living as we cleaned up our past. Our next task is to grow in our understanding and to become more effective. We cannot do this overnight. It

will happen slowly, over our whole lifetimes. We keep watching for selfishness, dishonesty, resentment, and fear. When they show up, we ask God to remove them. We talk about them with someone immediately and make amends quickly if we have hurt anyone. After that, we think about someone else we can help. Love and tolerance of others is our way of life.

At this point we have stopped fighting anything or anyone—even alcohol. By this time our sanity will have returned. We will no longer feel interested in liquor. If we are tempted, we may even pull back from liquor like we would when touching a hot flame. We are able to react sanely and normally to our lives, and find that this is happening automatically. We will see that our new attitude about liquor has been given to us like a gift. It arrives without any thought or effort on our part. That is the miracle of it. We are not fighting it, and we are not avoiding temptation. We feel safe and protected. We have not even made promises to ourselves or others about drinking. Instead, the problem has been removed from us. It does not exist anymore. We don't feel overly confident or afraid about this new state of being. It is just our new reality.

It is easy to stop paying attention to our spirituality, but we will be in trouble if we do that. We must remember that alcohol is a tricky enemy. We are not cured of alcoholism. What we really have is relief from alcoholism for that day, but this completely depends on keeping up our spirituality. Every day is a day when we must bring the vision of God's will into everything we do. We remind ourselves of Step Three, when we turned our will over to the care of God. This kind of thinking must be with us all day long. It helps us keep our will in line with our Higher Power's will.

We've already talked about receiving strength, inspiration, and direction from our Higher Power. If we have carefully followed directions, we have begun to sense the flow of spirituality into us. We have begun to develop a very important sixth sense. But we must go further and that means more action.

Step Eleven says, "Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out." We should try to embrace prayer and meditation. Both of them work, if we have the right

attitude and work at them. If you're not sure how to get started with prayer or meditation, we can make some helpful suggestions.

When we go to bed at night, we think back on our day. Were we resentful, selfish, dishonest, or afraid? Do we owe anyone an apology? Have we kept something secret that should be discussed with another person? Were we kind and loving toward everyone? What could we have done better? Were we thinking about ourselves most of the time? Or were we thinking about what we could do for others? When we do this review, we must be careful not to drift into worry, guilt, or negative thoughts. Doing that would limit how useful we can be to other people. After reviewing everything, we ask God's forgiveness and ask what we should change or do better next time.

When we wake up, we think about the 24 hours ahead of us. We consider our plans for the day. Before we begin, we ask God to watch over our thinking, especially asking that our thoughts stay away from self-pity, lying, or self-serving motives. When we start the day this way, we can clear our minds and use our brains thoughtfully. Our thoughts will be on a much higher plane when our thinking is cleared of negative motives.

When we think about our day, we may feel confused. We may not be able to decide which course to take. If this happens we ask our Higher Power for inspiration, an intuitive thought or a decision. We relax and take it easy. We don't struggle. We are often surprised how the right answers come after we have tried this for a while.

We used to get a hunch or an inspiration once in a while, but gradually these experiences become a regular part of our daily thinking. If we are new to spirituality, we may not feel fully inspired all day every day. Still, as time passes, we will find that inspiration will come to us more and more often.

We usually finish praying or meditating by asking our Higher Power to show us what our next step will be, and we ask that we be given what we need to take that step. We ask for freedom from a desire to control our lives, and we're careful not to ask for anything that would benefit only us. We

never pray for selfish reasons. Many of us have wasted a lot of time doing that and it doesn't work. You can easily see why.

If we do morning meditation, we might ask our partner or friends to join us if that makes sense. If we belong to a religion that includes morning services, we may attend those. If not, we may choose and memorize a few prayers that focus on the ideas we've been discussing in this chapter. There are many helpful books also. We may ask for suggestions from our faith leader.

As we go through our day we pause if we feel upset or filled with doubt, and ask for the right thought or action. We constantly remind ourselves that we are no longer running the show. We say to ourselves many times each day, "Thy will be done." We are then in much less danger of fear, anger, worry, self-pity, or foolish decisions. We become much more efficient. We do not tire as easily, because we are not burning up energy foolishly like we did when we were trying to control everything in our lives without help from a Higher Power.

It works—it really does.

We alcoholics struggle to obey rules when we are left on our own. So we let God help us find the rules we need to lead better lives. But this is not all. There is action and more action. "Faith without works is dead."

The next chapter is all about how to practice Step Twelve.

Chapter 7

WORKING WITH OTHERS

Experience has taught us that working with other alcoholics is the most effective way to keep from drinking. It works when everything else fails. This is why the Twelfth Step is: "Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs." We can help other alcoholics when no one else can! We know what they have gone through, so they will trust us when they cannot trust anyone else.

When we start to help other alcoholics, life becomes more meaningful. Watching other people recover, watching them help others, seeing their loneliness disappear is an amazing experience. You will also feel a fellowship growing around you and discover that you have many friends. This is an experience you must not miss. We know you will not want to miss it. Spending time with newcomers and with each other is the bright spot of our lives.

Maybe you don't know any drinkers who want to recover. You can easily find some by asking a few doctors, faith leaders, or hospitals. They will be glad to help you find people who are ready to get sober. When we first start talking with newcomers, we try not to be preachy or judgmental. Many people are uncomfortable with "God talk," and unsure about A.A. when religion is brought up. You don't want to ruin your chances of helping others by talking about faith too soon. Faith leaders and doctors are skilled at talking about tough topics, and you can learn from them if you want. But it's your own drinking experience that will make you most useful to other alcoholics. So cooperate, and never criticize. Being helpful is our only goal.

When you meet someone who might be helped by Alcoholics Anonymous, find out all you can about them. If you find out they do not want to stop drinking, don't waste time trying to convince them. They may feel ready later. Forcing them too soon will ruin your chance at helping them. This advice should also be given to their family members. They should be patient, and understand they are dealing with a sick person.

If there is any indication that this newcomer wants to stop drinking, have a good talk with the person most interested in their well-being. This is usually their spouse or partner. Get some information about their behaviors, problems, and background. Find out how serious their drinking problem is right now, and ask if they are religious. You need this information to understand what this problem drinker is going through. You need to think about standing in their shoes. Doing this will help you figure out how to begin your conversation, and what to say.

Sometimes it works best to wait until the individual goes on a drinking binge. Their family may not like this plan. But unless their physical health is at risk, it can be the most effective way to approach them. Don't have a conversation when the person is very drunk, unless they get mean and their family needs your help. Wait for the end of the spree, or until they are somewhat clear-headed. Then let the family or a friend ask them if they want to quit for good. If they say yes, they should be encouraged to talk with you. The family should describe you as a person who has recovered. They should say you are part of a fellowship of people who try to help others stop drinking. They should also say you will be glad to have a conversation about recovery.

If the individual does not want to see you, don't force them. When you speak with their family, ask them to avoid being dramatic or overly emotional. Tell the family to say very little about you. They should wait for the end of the next drinking spree. If the family wants to put a copy of this book somewhere in the house where the problem drinker can see it, they can do so. It's up to them. But urge family members to be as calm as they can.

Usually the family should not try to tell your story. In fact, when possible, it is better to meet a problem drinker through a doctor or treatment center than

through their family. If the problem drinker needs to be in the hospital that's fine, but they should not be forced to stay unless they are violent. Let the doctor tell the problem drinker about A.A. as a possible solution.

The first conversation

When the person you've helped is feeling better, the doctor may suggest you visit with them. Even though you have talked with the family, leave them out of your first discussion. Doing this helps the individual understand that they're under no pressure. They'll know they can work with you without being nagged by their family. Visit with them while they are still jittery. They may be more open to A.A.'s ideas when still feeling unwell.

Speak to your problem drinker alone if you can. Start with general conversation. After a while, talk a little about some phase of drinking. Tell them enough about your drinking habits, symptoms, and experiences to encourage them to talk about their own drinking. If they decide to talk, let them. Doing this will help you know how to keep the conversation going. If they don't want to talk, describe your own drinking career up to the time you quit. But don't talk about A.A. or how you quit just yet. If the person is in a serious mood, focus on the troubles liquor has caused you. Be careful not to scold or lecture. If the individual's mood is light, tell them funny stories of your experiences. Ask them to share some of theirs.

When the problem drinker understands that you know all about drinking, start to describe yourself as an alcoholic. Tell them how confused you were, how you finally learned that you were sick. Tell them about how much you struggled to stop drinking. Show them the mental tricks alcoholics play on themselves that lead to the first drink of a spree. (If you don't remember this, look back at Chapter 3. We describe it there, and you can use our description in your conversation.) If the individual is alcoholic, they will

understand you immediately. They will see that some of your thinking doesn't make sense—and that sometimes their thinking doesn't either.

If you think this problem drinker is a real alcoholic, talk with them about the hopelessness of alcoholism. From your own experience, show them how hard it is to live life drunk. Talk about how the strange mental condition created by that first drink keeps our willpower from working. At this stage, don't refer to this book unless your problem drinker has seen it and asks about it. And be careful not to label them as an alcoholic. Let them decide that for themselves. If they stick to the idea that they can still control their drinking, tell them that might be possible—if they're not too alcoholic. But insist that if they are too sick, they probably cannot recover by themselves.

Continue talking about alcoholism as a sickness, and one that leads to death. Talk about the illnesses of body and mind that go along with it. Keep the person's attention focused on your personal experience. Say that many alcoholics destroy their lives without realizing what they're doing. Doctors are reluctant to tell alcoholic patients the whole truth unless they're certain it will help. But you can talk with the problem drinker about the hopelessness of alcoholism because you have a solution. You will soon have your friend admitting they have many, if not all, of the traits of the alcoholic.

Helpful strategies

Even though the person may not have accepted their own alcoholism, they will become curious. They will want to know how you got well. Let them ask you that question, and tell them exactly what happened to you. Be sure to talk about the spiritual aspect of A.A. If your friend is agnostic or atheist, be very clear that they do not have to agree with your own ideas about God. They can choose any Higher Power that makes sense to them. The main thing is to be willing to believe in a Power greater than themselves, and live by spiritual principles.

In your conversations, use everyday language to describe spiritual principles. You don't want to make them feel defensive about religion, or start doubting if they can trust you.

On the other hand, your problem drinker may already be a religious person. Their religious education and training may go deeper than yours. In that case, they'll be curious to learn why their own beliefs have not worked and why yours seem to work so well. Faith must be paired with self-sacrifice and unselfish, helpful action. Let your friend see that you are not there to teach them about religion. Admit that they probably know more about it than you do. Then point out that even if their faith and knowledge is deep, they haven't applied it or they would not drink. Your own story might help them see where they failed to practice the spiritual principles they know so well. We practice no particular religion. We only deal with the general principles that most religions are built on.

Next, describe the A.A. program of action. Explain how you made your inventory, how you straightened out your past, and why you are now trying to be helpful to them, as a problem drinker. It is important for them to understand that passing along the message of A.A. is key to your own recovery. Actually, they may be helping you more than you are helping them. Be clear that they are under no obligation to you. Say that you only hope they will try to help other alcoholics when they are on the recovery path.

Explain how important it is that they place the well-being of other people ahead of their own. Make it clear that they are not under pressure, that they don't have to see you again if they don't want to. You should not be offended if they want to call it off. Again, they have helped you more than you have helped them. But if your talk has been sane, quiet, and full of human understanding, you may have made a friend. Or maybe you have just forced them to think about the question of alcoholism. All of these things are positive. The more hopeless they feel, the better. They will be more likely to follow your suggestions.

If the problem drinker resists A.A.

Your new friend may give reasons why they don't need to complete all of the program. They may rebel at the thought of doing a thorough house cleaning (inventory). They may not want to talk with other people about their problems. Don't argue with them. Tell them you once felt the same way. Say you don't think you would have made much progress if you took no action.

Unless your friend wants to talk further about their own experiences, don't force them. You don't want to wear out your welcome. Give them a chance to think it over. If you do stay, let them steer the conversation in any direction they want. Sometimes a person is anxious to start the program right away. You may be tempted to let them do just that. Sometimes this is a mistake. If the problem drinker has trouble later on, they may say you made them feel rushed. You will be most successful with other alcoholics if you don't act pushy or judgmental. Never talk down to an alcoholic from any moral or spiritual perspective. Just lay out the kit of spiritual tools for them to look at. Show them how the tools worked for you. Offer them friendship and fellowship. Tell them that if they want to get well, you will do anything to help.

If they are not interested in doing the work of A.A., you will know. If the person wants you to lend them money or act like a nurse when they go on drinking sprees, you might even stop helping them. You'll need to wait until they change their own mind. This might not happen until they get hurt some more.

If they are truly interested and want to see you again, ask them to read this book before your next meeting. After doing that, they must decide on their own whether or not to go on. They should not be pushed or prodded by you, their family, or their friends. If they are to connect with a Higher Power, the desire must come from within.

If the individual thinks they can stop drinking in some other way, or prefers some other spiritual approach, encourage them to do what they think is best

for them. A.A. does not believe there is one right path to faith. We just have an approach that worked for us. But point out that we alcoholics have a lot in common and you'd like to keep in touch. Let it go at that.

Don't be discouraged if your new friend doesn't join A.A. right away. Find another alcoholic and try again. It won't take long to find someone desperate enough to accept what you offer. It's a waste of time to keep chasing someone who cannot or will not work with you. If you leave such a person alone, they may soon realize that they cannot recover by themselves. To spend too much time on any one person means denying some other alcoholic the chance to live and be happy.

One member of our Fellowship failed completely with his first six problem drinkers. He often says that if he had continued to work on them, he would not have been able to help others who wanted to recover.

The second conversation

Let's say you are now going to your second visit with your problem drinker. They have read this book and say they're ready to do all Twelve Steps of the program of recovery. Having had the experience yourself, you can give them lots of practical advice. Let them know you are ready to listen if they want to tell their story. But don't insist if they prefer to do the Steps with someone else.

Your new friend may have financial problems. You might help them get a job or offer them a little money. But you shouldn't put your own finances at risk. You may want to let them into your home for a few days. Use your best judgment in doing this. Be sure your family is comfortable with them in the house. Don't let them stay for too long. Be certain they're not taking advantage of you by asking for money, employment, or shelter. If you let that happen, you will be letting them act dishonestly.

You may be helping their destruction rather than their recovery.

Never avoid these responsibilities, but be sure you are doing the right thing if you accept them. Helping others is the foundation of your recovery. A kind act once in a while isn't enough. You have to be unselfish and helpful every day.

You may lose many nights' sleep, be unable to enjoy your hobbies, or need to take time off work. It may mean sharing your money and your home, counseling worried spouses and relatives, trips to police stations, hospitals, and jails. Your phone may ring any time of the day or night. Your spouse may sometimes tell you they feel neglected. A drunk may smash the furniture in your home, or burn a mattress. You may have to fight with them if they get violent. Sometimes you will have to call a doctor and administer sedatives under their direction. You may have to call the police or an ambulance.

We rarely let these people live in our homes for long. This would not be good for them, and it can be very difficult for our own families.

If you have tried to work with an alcoholic who doesn't end up joining the program, keep in touch with their family. The family should be offered your way of life.¹ Should they accept and practice spiritual principles, there is a much better chance that the head of the family will recover. And even though he continues to drink, the family will find life more bearable.

Alcoholics who are able and willing to get well don't usually want a lot of charity. The people who beg for money and shelter before they are willing to give up alcohol are on the wrong track. However, we give each other money and shelter when we feel we must. This may seem inconsistent, but we think it is not.

It is not the act of giving that is in question, but when and how to give. That often makes the difference between failure and success. As soon as we think of our work with other alcoholics as charity, everything changes. They will start to rely on us instead of connecting with their Higher Power. They may start to say they can't stop drinking until their basic needs are met. We know this is wrong. Some of us have suffered quite a lot to learn this truth. Job or no job, spouse or no spouse, we just don't stop drinking when we rely on other people more than we rely on our own faith.

Burn the idea into the mind of every such person that they can get well, without anyone else's money or charity. The only condition is that they trust in God and clean house.

Marriage, spouse, and partner issues

Many newcomers to A.A. struggle with divorce, separation, or just troubled relationships. After your newcomer has made amends to their family and explained the principles of A.A., they can start following those principles at home. Even if their family is the cause of some of their problems, they cannot focus on that. They need to concentrate on their own faith. When you talk with your newcomer, tell them to avoid arguing and blaming others. This may feel hard to do, but they must stick to it if they truly want to recover.

If your friend uses A.A.'s principles at home for just a few months, they will see positive change. We have seen it happen in many homes. Spouses who felt torn apart finally find common ground. Little by little, family members start to see their own defects and admit them. These can be discussed in a helpful, friendly way.

If a newcomer is going through divorce or separation, don't rush them to patch things up with their spouse. They need to make progress in their recovery. Their spouse needs to understand and accept their new way of life. If both spouses want to get back together, they need to find new ways to act with each other. Clearly, their old ways weren't working. This means new attitudes for everyone. In some cases, it's better for a couple to stay separated. There are no set rules about relationships. Let the alcoholic continue his program day by day. If the time comes to repair a marriage, both spouses will know.

Some alcoholics claim they cannot recover unless they get their family back. This just isn't true. In some cases their spouse will never come back for any reason at all. Remind the newcomer that their recovery is not

dependent on people. It is dependent upon their relationship with God. We have seen people get well whose families have never come back to or forgiven them. We have seen others slip when the family came back too soon.

Both you and your friend must walk along the path of spiritual progress. If you keep going and don't give up, remarkable things will happen. When we look back, we see that trusting faith brought us wonder. The things that happened when we put ourselves in God's hands were better than anything we could have planned. Follow the guidance of your Higher Power and you will find yourself in a new and wonderful world.

When you're working with a newcomer and their family, don't participate in their arguments. You may ruin your chance of being helpful if you do. But do make sure the family understands that the alcoholic is very sick, and should be treated like a sick person. Tell them to do their best not to feel angry or jealous. Point out that the newcomer's character defects can't disappear overnight. Show the family that their loved one is entering a period of growth. If they are impatient, ask them to remember that sobriety is a blessing.

If you've successfully solved your own marriage problems, tell the newcomer's family how you did it. By doing this, you can help them without being critical of them. The story of how you and your spouse worked out your difficulties will be more helpful than any amount of criticism.

Living in the world as an alcoholic

Once we have accepted A.A.'s principles, we can do all kinds of things alcoholics are not supposed to do. People say we can't go where liquor is served and we must not have it in our homes. They say we can't spend time

with friends who drink. They tell us not to watch movies or TV shows that show people drinking. They say our friends must hide their bottles if we go to their houses. They insist we can't think about alcohol at all. Our experience shows that this is not actually true.

We are in situations involving alcohol every day. An alcoholic who cannot deal with them still has an alcoholic mind. That person hasn't truly found their faith or connected with their Higher Power. Their only chance for sobriety would be to move someplace like the North Pole. And even there, someone might show up with a bottle of scotch and ruin everything! Ask any spouse who has sent their alcoholic partner to distant places thinking it would solve the alcohol problem. It never works.

We believe that any method of fighting alcoholism that protects the alcoholic from temptation will fail. If the alcoholic tries to protect themselves, that may work for a while. But they usually end up going on the biggest drinking spree ever. We have tried these methods. They are attempts to do the impossible, and they have always failed.

So our rule is not to avoid places where there is drinking, if we have a real reason for being there. That includes bars, nightclubs, dances, receptions, weddings, even plain ordinary parties. To someone who has had experience with an alcoholic, this may seem like tempting fate, but it isn't.

You may notice that we said we need "a real reason for being there." As an alcoholic who is thinking of going to a bar or party, ask yourself, "Do I have any good social, business, or personal reason for going to this place? Or am I hoping to get some secondhand pleasure from watching other people drink?" If you answer these questions honestly, you don't need to worry. Go or stay away, whichever feels right. But make sure you are on solid spiritual ground before you consider going. Also make sure your reasons for going are thoroughly good. Don't think about what you will get out of the experience. Think of what you can bring to it. And if you feel shaky or unsure, work with another alcoholic instead of putting yourself at risk!

Don't allow yourself to be grouchy or sullen in places where people are drinking. Don't let yourself sigh about the good old days. If it is a happy

occasion, join others in celebrating. If you're there for business, focus on business discussions with enthusiasm. If you are with a person who wants to eat in a bar, feel free to go along. Let your friends know they don't need to change their habits on your account. When the time feels right, explain to all your friends why alcohol is a problem for you. If you do this thoroughly, very few people will pressure you to drink. While you were drinking, you were withdrawing from life little by little. Now you are returning to the social life of this world. Don't start to withdraw again just because your friends drink alcohol.

Your job now is to be as helpful as possible to others. Never hesitate to go anywhere if you can be helpful. You can visit the most dirty, dangerous spot on earth if you go there to be helpful. Keep on the firing line of life with these motives and God will keep you unharmed.

Many recovering alcoholics keep liquor in our homes. We often need it to get newcomers through a severe hangover. Some of us still serve it to our friends as long as they are not alcoholics. But others think we should not serve liquor to anyone. We never argue about this question. We feel that each family is unique, and can decide for themselves.

We are careful never to become intolerant about drinking in general. That attitude is not helpful to anyone. Every newcomer to A.A. seems worried that we will all be hateful about other people's drinking. They are all relieved when they see we are not. Intolerance of all drinking might discourage alcoholics whose lives could have been saved. They might never try to learn about A.A. for fear of being judged. That kind of intolerance is totally useless. There isn't a drinker alive who likes to be told anything about alcohol by someone who hates it.

Someday we hope that Alcoholics Anonymous will help the public understand the seriousness of alcoholism. We will never reach that goal with an attitude of bitterness or hostility. Drinkers will not stand for it.

After all, we created our own problems. Bottles were only a symbol. Besides, we have stopped fighting anybody or anything. We don't have a problem with anyone who drinks. We don't even fight alcohol. We just don't need it!

1The Fellowship of Al-Anon Family Groups is entirely separate from Alcoholics Anonymous. It uses the general principles of the A.A. program as a guide for spouses, partners, relatives, friends, and others close to alcoholics. Alateen, for teenaged children of alcoholics, is a part of Al-Anon.

You can get information on Al-Anon/Alateen Family Groups by visiting www.al-anon.org.

Chapter 8

TO PARTNERS

Every person who drinks involves other people in their drinking. Usually there's a partner who fears the next drinking spree, or parents who hate to see their child wasting away. The choices of alcoholics affect those around them.

Our Fellowship includes partners, spouses, relatives, and friends whose problem has been solved. It also includes people who have not yet found a happy solution. We want the partners of our members to speak with the partners of people who drink too much. What they say will apply to nearly everyone who loves an alcoholic.

Here are some of the things we hope they might say:

As partners of alcoholics, we understand each other in a unique way. We want to understand mistakes that we ourselves might have made. We hope to help you feel that no situation is too difficult to fix, and that you can find ways to move beyond unhappiness. All of us have traveled a rocky road. We've felt frustration, self-pity, misunderstanding, and fear. Our pride has been hurt. Our partners have made us feel everything from pity to resentment. Throughout it all, we hope that one day our loved ones will be themselves again.

We are loyal, and our hope that our partners will somehow start behaving like normal drinkers has gotten us into trouble. We have been unselfish and put our partners' needs before our own. We have told countless lies to protect our pride and our partners' reputations. We have prayed, we have begged, and we have been patient. We have also been cruel at times. We

have run away. We have been so upset that nothing would calm us. We have been full of terror. We have looked to others for their sympathy. We have cheated on our partners as a kind of revenge.

NOTE FROM THE EDITORS: When the Big Book was published in 1939, most of the members of the A.A. Fellowship were men. In that version this chapter was titled “To Wives.” For this plain language version, the title has been adapted to “To Partners,” and the chapter adjusted to speak to partners and spouses regardless of gender.

Unhappy homes

Many nights our homes have become battlegrounds. In the morning, we kissed and made up. Our friends have told us to kick out our partners, and we’ve done it thinking the relationship was truly over. But then we would find ourselves hoping, and willing to take them back. Our partners have sworn that they would never drink again, and we believed them when no one else did. Then, in days, weeks, or months, we would find them drunk once more.

We rarely invited friends into our homes, never knowing how or when our partners might show up. We didn’t go out much either. Eventually, we lived mostly alone. When we did go out, our partners would sneak so many drinks that we could never relax and have fun. Or if they drank nothing, they would feel so sorry for themselves that they’d still ruin the occasion.

We’ve never had financial stability. Our partners were always in danger of being fired, or already unemployed. An armored car could not have brought

the paychecks home safely. The checking account melted like snow in summer.

Sometimes our partners cheated on us. This broke our hearts, especially if we were told that these exciting strangers understood our partners in ways we never could.

Our partners brought home collection agents, sheriffs, angry taxi drivers, policemen, bums, friends, and even lovers. They would call us cold and unwelcoming. “Killjoy, nag, downer”—that’s what they said. The next day they would be themselves again and we would forgive and try to forget.

We have tried to encourage our children to continue loving their alcoholic parent. We have told our kids that their mother or father was sick, which was closer to the truth than we realized. Our partners have hit the children, kicked in doors, and smashed beloved dishes. In the middle of this chaos they may have stormed out, threatening to live with their lovers forever and leave us behind. Sometimes when we felt desperate, we’ve gotten drunk ourselves. We were surprised to find that our partners seemed to like it when we were drunk.

Trying every option

Maybe at some point we got a divorce and took the children home to our parents. Our partners’ parents accused us of deserting our partner, even though we’d stayed for so long. Finally, we were forced to take second or third jobs just to support ourselves and our families.

As our partners’ drinking sprees got more frequent, we tried talking to doctors. The upsetting physical and mental symptoms, the way they sank into never-ending guilt, the depression and shame that followed them everywhere like a dark cloud—these things terrified and distracted us. We felt like animals on a treadmill, patiently and wearily climbing, falling into exhaustion after each unsuccessful effort to reach solid ground. Most of us

have seen our partners in the final stages, through long stays at rehabs, hospitals, and jails. Sometimes we had to watch our loved ones scream in confusion. Death was often near.

While all this went on, we made mistakes. This is only natural. We made some of these mistakes because we just didn't understand alcoholism. Sometimes we had a feeling our partners were sick, but we didn't trust that feeling. If we had really understood that alcoholism is an illness, we might have made different choices.

Playing the blame game

We found ourselves wondering how people who loved their families could be so unthinking, so insensitive, so cruel. They weren't capable of feeling love, we thought. But just as we had decided for good that our partners were heartless, they would surprise us with promises to change. For a while they would be their old sweet selves, but then they would smash our love to pieces all over again. Whenever we asked why they had started to drink again, they would reply with some silly excuse, or offer us no reason at all. It was so confusing, so heartbreaking. Could we have been so wrong about the people we chose to spend our lives with? When they were drinking, they were strangers. Sometimes they were so emotionally distant that it seemed like a giant wall had been built around them.

And even if they didn't love their families, how could they be so blind about themselves? Where had their judgment, common sense, and willpower gone? Why couldn't they see that drinking was ruining their lives? And when anyone pointed out how dangerous drinking was, why would they get drunk again immediately?

These are some of the questions which race through the mind of every partner with an alcoholic loved one. Perhaps your partner has been living in that strange world of alcoholism where everything is twisted and exaggerated. You can see that your partner really does love you with their

better self. Some people are just incompatible, meaning they aren't meant to be together. But in cases where one partner is alcoholic and the alcoholic seems unloving and inconsiderate, it's usually because they are suffering and sick. It's the sickness making them act that way.

Try not to judge or punish your partner no matter what they say or do. They are a very sick, unreasonable person. Treat them, when you can, as though they have pneumonia. When they make you angry, remember that they are very ill.

However, there's an important exception to this rule. Some people really do have bad intentions, and being patient with them won't make any difference. An alcoholic who is like this may try to use what we've said in this chapter against you. Don't let them get away with it. If you are sure your partner is bad-intentioned, you may decide to end the relationship. Is it right to let this person ruin your life and the lives of your children? Especially when they have a way to stop drinking and treating you badly if only they were willing to put in the work?

Four types of problems

The problem you face usually falls into one of four categories:

One: Your partner may be a heavy drinker instead of an alcoholic. Their drinking may be constant, or it may be heavy only at certain times. Your partner might spend too much money on liquor. Drinking may slow them down mentally and physically, but they don't realize it. Sometimes they embarrass you and your friends. Your partner says they're positive they can handle their liquor, that it doesn't hurt them, that drinking is necessary to their business or work. They would probably be insulted if they were called an alcoholic. The world is full of people like your partner. Some will drink moderately or stop altogether, and some will not. If they keep drinking, they may become true alcoholics after a while.

Two: Your partner is showing lack of control because they can't stop drinking even when they want to. It's hard to predict what they'll do when they're drinking. They admit this is true, but say they are sure they can do better. Your partner has tried, with or without your help, some ways of moderating their drinking or staying dry. They may be starting to lose friends, and their work may be suffering. They are worried and starting to realize they can't drink like other people. Your partner sometimes drinks in the morning and through the day, to keep their nervousness under control. They feel guilty after drinking sprees, and tell you they want to stop. But when they get over the spree, they begin to think about how they'll just drink moderately next time. We think this person is in danger. These are the earmarks of a real alcoholic, but they haven't ruined everything—yet. As we say in our Fellowship, "They want to want to stop."

Three: Your partner has gone much further than partner number two. Though once like the drinker described in number two, they got worse. Their friends have slipped away, their home is a mess, and they cannot keep a job. Maybe you've gotten the help of a doctor, and begun to take your partner from hospital to hospital. They can admit that they're unable to drink like other people, but don't understand why. They cling to the idea that they'll find a way to stop on their own. They may have reached a point where they desperately want to stop, but cannot. Their situation brings up questions that we will try to answer for you. You can be quite hopeful in a situation like this.

Four: You may have a partner who seems totally lost to drinking. They have already been hospitalized for drinking. They are violent or appear totally out of control when drunk. Sometimes they drink on the way home from the hospital. Your partner may have had delirium tremens. Doctors may shake their heads and say you should have them committed. Maybe you have already had to take them to the locked ward of a hospital. This picture may not be as dark as it looks. Many of our partners were just as far gone. Yet they got well.

Let's now go back to partner number one. Oddly enough, they are often the most difficult to deal with. They enjoy drinking. It stirs their imagination. Their friends feel closer over a cocktail. You may even enjoy drinking with them when they don't go too far. You have passed happy evenings together chatting and drinking in your own living room. Or maybe you both like parties that would feel boring without liquor. We have enjoyed evenings like this ourselves. We know all about liquor as a social lubricant—a way to make any situation feel more relaxed.

If you want to help your partner, the first rule of success is that you should never be angry. They may become unbearable and you may have to leave them temporarily. If possible, though, leave without showing anger. Patience and calmness are extremely important.

Next, never tell your partner what to do about their drinking. If they decide that you are a nag or a killjoy, you'll have no chance of accomplishing anything useful. Your partner will use that as an excuse to drink more. They'll tell you they feel misunderstood. This may lead to many lonely evenings for you. Your partner may seek someone else to console them—someone other than a friend.

Make sure that your partner's drinking is not going to ruin your relationships with your children or your friends. It is possible to have a full life, even when your partner continues to drink. We know people who are unafraid, even happy in this situation. Do not set your heart on fixing your partner's drinking problem. You may not be able to do it, no matter how hard you try.

We know these suggestions may be hard to follow, but if you stick to them they will save you from heartbreak. Your partner may come to appreciate your reasonableness and patience. This may lead to a friendly talk about their alcoholic problem. Try to let them bring up the subject. Be sure you are not critical during such a discussion. Instead, try to put yourself in their place. Let them see that you want to be helpful rather than critical.

Talking about alcoholism with your partner

Before you talk about alcoholism together, you might suggest that your partner read this book. Or at least Chapter 3, “More About Alcoholism.” Tell them you have been worried about them. You think they ought to understand exactly what is happening to them. Say that you believe everyone should understand the risks of drinking too much. Show your partner that you have confidence in their power to stop or moderate. Say that you do not want to be a nag. Explain that you only want them to take care of their health. By presenting these ideas, you may succeed in interesting your partner in talking about alcoholism.

Your partner probably has several alcoholic friends or acquaintances. You could suggest that you both take an interest in those friends. Drinkers like to help other drinkers. Your partner may be willing to talk to one of them.

If this approach does not grab your partner’s interest, it may be best to drop the subject. But after that first friendly talk, your partner will usually bring up the topic again. You will need to be patient, but it will be worth the wait. Meanwhile you might try to help the partner of another serious drinker. If you act using these principles, your partner may stop or moderate.

Let’s say your partner fits the description of number two. The same principles that apply to partner number one still apply. But after the next binge, ask them if they would really like to stop drinking for good. Don’t ask them to do it for you, or for anyone else. Just ask whether they would like to.

Chances are they would. Show them your copy of this book and tell them what you have found out about alcoholism. Show them that, as alcoholics, the writers of this book understand. Tell them some of the interesting stories you have read. If you think they will feel uncomfortable with a spiritual approach, ask them to read Chapter 3. After that, they might be interested enough to continue.

If your partner is enthusiastic, your cooperation will be very meaningful to them. If they're lukewarm or think they're not an alcoholic, we suggest you leave them alone. Don't pressure them to follow our program. The seed has been planted in their mind. They know that thousands of people much like them have recovered. But don't remind them of this after they have been drinking. Doing that will just make your partner angry at you.

Sooner or later, you'll find them reading this book again. Wait until this has happened a few times and your partner decides to take action on their own. The more you hurry them, the longer their recovery will be delayed.

If you have a number three partner, you may be in luck. Since they're sure they want to stop, you can bring them this book with all the joy of a lottery winner. Your partner may not share your enthusiasm. Still, they are likely to read the book and may be willing to start the program immediately. If they don't, you will probably not have to wait very long. Again, try not to pressure them. Let them decide on their own. Cheerfully stand with them through more drinking sprees. Talk about their condition or this book only when they bring it up. In some cases it may be better to let someone outside the family offer the book. They can encourage your partner to take action without angering them.

You might think that people in the fourth group are hopeless, but that's not the case. Many people in Alcoholics Anonymous were like that. Everybody had given up on them. Defeat seemed certain. But people like that have had spectacular and powerful recoveries.

There are exceptions. Some people have been so destroyed by alcohol that they cannot stop. Sometimes alcoholism is made worse by other illnesses. A good doctor or psychiatrist can tell you whether these complications are serious. But no matter what happens, try to get your partner to read this book. They may react with enthusiasm. If your partner is already in the hospital but both you and your doctor believe they want to stop drinking, let them try A.A. (unless the doctor says it's too dangerous). We have been working with alcoholics in hospitals for many years. Since this book was first published, A.A. has helped thousands of alcoholics recover in hospitals of every kind. The majority have never returned. The power of God goes deep!

You may have the opposite situation on your hands. Perhaps you have a partner who is at home, but who should be in the hospital. Some people cannot or will not get over alcoholism. When they become too dangerous, we think the best thing is to force them to get help. But, of course, a trusted doctor should always be consulted. The partners and children of such people suffer horribly, but not more than the drinkers themselves.

Talking to others about your partner

If your partner is a drinker, you probably worry about what other people think. You may feel anxious about meeting with your friends. You withdraw more and more into yourself. You believe everyone is talking about what's going on inside your home. You avoid the subject of drinking, even with your own parents. You do not know what to tell the children. When your partner is drinking, you want to hide away from everyone you know forever.

We find that most of this embarrassment is unnecessary. While you don't need to discuss your partner's behavior in detail, you can quietly let your friends know about their illness. But you must be very careful not to embarrass or harm your partner.

When you have carefully explained to friends that your partner is a sick person, you will feel differently. Walls between you and your friends will disappear. You will feel their care and sympathy. You won't feel self-conscious or that you need to apologize for your partner. Your new courage, good nature, and lack of self-consciousness will greatly improve your social life.

The same idea applies in dealing with the children. Unless the children actually need protection from their alcoholic parent, don't take sides in any argument they have together. Focus on helping everyone reach a better

understanding. When you do this, you can lessen the terrible tension that grips the home of every problem drinker.

You have probably told your partner's boss and friends that they're sick when they were actually drunk. Now, try to avoid answering questions about this. Whenever you can, let your partner explain. Your desire to protect them shouldn't force you to lie. People in their life have a right to know where they are and what they're doing. Discuss this with your partner when they're sober and in good spirits. Ask them what you should do if they put you in this position again. But don't show anger about the last time they did so.

There is another overwhelming fear you may feel—that your partner will lose their job. You are thinking of the embarrassment and hard times that you and the children will have to live through. And you may have to do just that. Or you may already have done it several times. If it happens again, think about it in a different light. Maybe the hard times will turn out to be a blessing! This bad situation may convince your partner to stop drinking forever. Time after time, something that looked like a disaster has become a gift. Disaster often opens up a path to the discovery of a Higher Power.

Finding your own spirituality

In other parts of this book, we've talked about how much better life is when lived in a spiritual way. If God can solve the ancient puzzle of alcoholism, a God of your own understanding can solve your problems, too. We partners of alcoholics have suffered from pride, self-pity, vanity, and all the things that create a self-centered person. We were not above selfishness or dishonesty. As our partners began to apply spiritual principles in their lives, we saw how those principles might help us, too.

At first, some of us did not believe we needed this help. We thought we were perfectly fine people, able to become nicer if our partners stopped drinking. But it was a silly idea that we were too good to need a Higher Power. Now we try to put spiritual principles to work in every area of our lives. When we do that, we find it solves our problems, too. Living with less fear, worry, and hurt feelings is a wonderful thing. We urge you to try our program. When you find your connection to a Higher Power, you will also find a new attitude toward your partner. That new attitude will help them more than anything else.

If you and your partner find a solution to their drinking problem, you will be very happy. But all of your problems will not be solved at once. A seed has started to sprout in new soil, but growth has only begun. In spite of your newfound happiness, there will be ups and downs. Many of the old problems will follow you. This is as it should be.

The faith and sincerity that you both feel will be put to the test. These tests should be considered part of your education. You will be learning to live in a new way. You will make mistakes, but if you are determined they will not drag you down. A better way of life will come to you when these mistakes are behind you.

Some of your setbacks will be irritation, hurt feelings, and resentments. Your partner will sometimes be unreasonable and you will want to criticize them. Starting as a tiny speck on the domestic horizon, great thunderclouds of anger may gather. These family arguments are very dangerous, especially to your partner. Often you must take responsibility for avoiding them or keeping them under control. Never forget that resentment is a deadly force for an alcoholic. We do not mean that you have to agree with your partner whenever you have an honest difference of opinion. Just be careful not to disagree in a resentful or critical way.

You and your partner will find that you can deal with serious problems more easily than small ones. Next time you have a heated discussion, either of you should be able to smile and say, "This is getting serious. I'm sorry I got so upset. Let's talk about it later." If your partner is trying to live spiritually, they will also be trying to avoid disagreement or contention.

Your partner knows they owe you more than stopping drinking. They want to make good. Yet you must not expect too much. Their way of thinking and doing are habits formed over many years. Patience, tolerance, understanding, and love must become your mantras. Show your partner these things in yourself and they will be reflected back to you. Live and let live is the rule. If you both are willing to work on your defects, you won't need to criticize each other.

We partners of alcoholics can imagine the sort of person we would like our partners to become. It's very normal to assume that when they stop drinking, they will transform into this perfect partner. But in reality, they probably will not. Because just like you, your partner is just beginning to grow. Be patient.

Difficult feelings arise in the recovery process

Some of us have struggled with our resentment that love and loyalty could not cure our partners of alcoholism. We don't like to think that the contents of a book or the work of another alcoholic has accomplished in a few weeks what we have tried to do for years. At those times, we forget that alcoholism is an illness. We never had any power over it. Your partner will no doubt tell you that your patience and care are what led them to a place where a spiritual experience was possible. Without you, they would've given up long ago. When you have resentful thoughts, try to pause and count your blessings. After all, your family is reunited, alcohol is no longer a problem, and you and your partner are working together toward a shared future.

Another problem that may come up is your feelings about how much time your partner spends working on recovery. You may feel jealous of the attention they give to other people, especially alcoholics. You have been starving for their company, and now they spend long hours helping other people and their families. You feel your partner should now be yours.

The fact is that they need to work with other people to maintain their own sobriety. Sometimes they will be so caught up in helping others that you will feel abandoned. Your house may be full of strangers. You may not like some of them. Your partner may talk passionately about their problems, but not at all about yours. If you point this out and demand more attention for yourself, that will make things worse. It would be a real mistake to discourage your partner's enthusiasm for working with alcoholics. Instead, try to join in their efforts as much as you possibly can. Your partner's new alcoholic friends may have partners of their own. We suggest directing some of your energy toward them. They need the counsel and love of a person who has gone through what you have.

You and your partner may have been living alone for too long. Drinking often isolates the partner of an alcoholic. This means you probably need new interests and a great cause to live for, just as much as your partner. If you stay open to this, both of you will unlock a new sense of responsibility for others. You and your partner will begin to think of what you can put into life, instead of how much you can take out. Inevitably your lives will be fuller for doing so. You will lose the old life to find a new one that's much better.

Perhaps your partner will start the A.A. program and do well for a while, then come home drunk—just when things were going beautifully. If you believe they truly want to stop drinking, you don't need to be worried about this. Although it would be better if they didn't relapse, it's not the worst thing that can happen. Your partner will realize very quickly that they need to become even more serious about their spirituality. You don't need to remind them they have messed up. They will know. Cheer up your partner, and ask how you can help.

Any sign of fear or intolerance may hurt your partner's chance of recovery. If they feel weak or worried, they may decide that your dislike of their drinking buddies is an excuse to drink. At A.A., we never, never try to arrange a person's life to shield them from temptation. Drinkers always notice this. If you try to set up your partner's appointments or plans so they

won't be tempted to drink, they will know. Instead, make them feel absolutely free to come and go as they wish. This is important.

If they get drunk, don't blame yourself. Their Higher Power has either removed your partner's liquor problem ... or not. If not, it's better to figure that out right away. Then you and your partner can tackle the issue together. If a relapse is to be prevented, place the problem, along with everything else, in God's hands.

We realize that we have given you a lot of direction and advice. We may have sounded like we were lecturing. If that's the case, we are sorry, because we ourselves don't always enjoy people who lecture us. But what we have told you is based on experience, some of it painful. We had to learn these things the hard way. That is why we are anxious that you understand, and that you avoid these unnecessary difficulties.

So to you out there who may soon be with us—we say, “Good luck and God bless you!”

Chapter 9

THE FAMILY AFTERWARD

Some partners of alcoholics have offered advice about how to treat a loved one who is recovering. They don't believe someone who is recovering should be treated as if they were very delicate. And they also shouldn't be treated like a hero. Helping a partner get used to life without alcohol means doing the opposite of this.

All family members should meet on common ground, and act with tolerance, understanding, and love. This can be hard. The alcoholic, their partner, children, and other family members will each have their own ideas about how everyone should act. Each person believes their ideas are the right ones. But if one family member makes the rules and everyone else follows them, this leads to resentment. Soon everyone is unhappy.

Why? Is it because each person wants to be the decision-maker? Or because each person is trying to control the entire family? Or because—without realizing it—each person is trying to take from the family instead of giving to the family?

When an alcoholic stops drinking, this is just the first step. They are just beginning to move away from a stressful, unusual, and unhealthy way of behaving. It is hard, but families must try to be patient with the process.

A doctor once told us, “Years spent living with an alcoholic will probably make their partners and children feel anxious and unstable. In a way, the whole family is sick.”

We want families to realize that the journey they're taking won't always have smooth roads or good weather. At times, each of them will feel exhausted or fall behind the others. They will take shortcuts, wander off, and lose their way.

Because we've seen this happen, we want to tell families what to expect. We will tell you about the obstacles you'll find, and how to avoid them. We'll even tell you how to use those obstacles to learn important lessons. We know you want to feel happy and secure again. You remember when your alcoholic family member was loving, thoughtful and successful.

You compare your life today with your life many years ago, and feel unhappy in the present.

Here's what your situation might look like:

Some common family reactions

The family feels more and more confident about dad's recovery. The good old days will be back soon, they think. Sometimes they try to force dad to be his old self. They feel God owes them this. They are due for some good, easy times again. But dad has spent years acting in ways that damaged his career, marriage, friendships, and health. These things are all ruined. It will take time to clear away the rubble. The process is like rebuilding a city. Old buildings will eventually be replaced by beautiful new ones ... but those new buildings will take years to complete.

Dad knows this is his fault. It may take him many months of hard work to change his financial situation. But no one should criticize or blame him. He may never have much money again. But a wise family will admire him for trying, rather than focusing on what he is trying to fix.

Sometimes the family will feel like ghosts from the past are haunting them. This is normal. Every alcoholic's drinking career includes memorable situations. Some of them are funny, embarrassing, shameful or tragic. It's tempting to bury these skeletons in a dark closet and lock the door. The family may think that future happiness can only exist if the past is forgotten. We think this is wrong. This belief is self-centered, and goes against dad's new way of living.

Henry Ford, the founder of Ford Motors, once made a wise observation. He pointed out that experience is the most valuable thing in life. We think that's true, but only if we are willing to accept what we've done in the past. We only grow if we're willing to face and fix our mistakes, and transform them into strengths. Because of this, an alcoholic's past is one of the most valuable things they give to their family. Sometimes it's the only valuable thing they have to give!

One alcoholic's painful past can even help the families of other alcoholics. We think that each family that has experienced relief owes something to the families still suffering. If the time comes, each family member must be willing to talk about mistakes openly and honestly. Showing others how we were helped is what makes life seem worthwhile now. We remember that, with the help of our Higher Power, our dark past is the most valuable possession we have. It's the key to life and happiness for other people. With it, we can prevent misery for them. We may even prevent death for them with our stories.

It's possible to dig up past mistakes and turn them into present unhappiness. Some stories and experiences can become so painful they feel like a plague we cannot escape. For example, sometimes the alcoholic or their partner have had love affairs. In the first rush of spiritual experience, they may forgive each other. It feels like a miracle. But then, when some other argument or conflict comes up, one of them will bring up the affair. They use it as fuel or ammunition. They use it to hurt their partner as much as they can.

A few of us have had these experiences and they hurt us terribly. Partners have sometimes separated from each other until they felt able to forgive again. In most cases, the alcoholic partner makes it through these

separations without relapsing. But not always. So we think that events of the past should only be discussed when talking about them serves a good and useful purpose.

Secrets and stressful times

The families of our members don't keep many skeletons in the closet. Everyone knows about each other's alcoholic troubles. In regular life, this kind of sharing of secrets would create pain and chaos. It might create hurtful gossip, or cause people to laugh at the suffering of others. It might even cause someone to expose private information, for money or power. In A.A., these things don't happen very often. We talk about each other a lot, but we almost always do it in the spirit of love and tolerance.

Another principle we live by is this: We do not share the private or secret experiences of someone else unless we know they will feel okay about it. Usually, we just stick to our own stories. Any person may criticize or laugh at themselves, and other people may laugh along. But criticisms coming from another person create the opposite reaction. Family members should be especially careful about this. One careless, inconsiderate remark has been known to bring out the devil in their recovering loved one. We alcoholics are sensitive people. It takes some of us a long time to outgrow that troublesome trait.

Many alcoholics are passionate and intense. They may go to extremes. At the beginning of recovery an alcoholic will usually do one of two things. They will either become obsessed with fixing their financial problems immediately, or become so happy with their new life that they talk about it constantly. Either of these things will cause family problems. We know this because we've experienced it ourselves.

We think it can be dangerous for an alcoholic to focus only on money problems. At first, the family will feel relieved. It will seem like their money troubles are about to be solved. Then the family will be upset when

their alcoholic loved one ignores them to concentrate on work or business. Dad may be tired at night and distracted during the day. He may spend less time with the children, and get mad when anyone points this out. If he's not grouchy, he may seem quiet and boring. Not his usual happy and loving self. Everyone in the family feels disappointed, and tells dad how they feel.

When dad hears these complaints, he may put up an emotional wall. He is using every ounce of his energy to make things right. He is trying to recover his money and reputation, and thought he was doing well. But mom and the kids might not agree. They've been ignored and hurt by dad in the past. They feel they deserve more than he is giving them now.

They may want dad to shower them with affection. They expect him to give them the nice times they used to have before he drank so much. They want to see how sorry he feels for making them suffer. But dad doesn't give them these things. He feels resentment. He starts to communicate less and less. Sometimes he gets angry over the tiniest things. The family is so confused. They complain, and point out how he is failing at his spiritual program.

This kind of thing can be avoided. Both dad and the family are wrong, though both have good reasons for their feelings. Arguing will only make things worse. The family must accept that although dad has improved, he is still sick and still recovering. They should be thankful he is sober and able to be a part of regular life again. Let them praise his progress. Let them remember that his drinking did all kinds of damage that may take a long time to repair. If they sense these things, they will be more understanding about his periods of crankiness or depression. And those periods will disappear when there is tolerance, love, and spiritual understanding.

Dad also needs to understand that he is mostly to blame for what has happened at home. He may not be able to make things right in his lifetime. But he needs to see the danger of getting obsessed with money. Many of us have recovered financially, but we could not make money our priority. For us, material well-being always followed spiritual progress; it never came first.

Avoiding resentment

Since family life has suffered more than anything else, alcoholics are wise to work hard to fix things at home. They won't make progress elsewhere if they can't show unselfishness and love under their own roofs. We know there are difficult partners and families. But a person getting over alcoholism must remember they played a part in making their own families become difficult.

When family members start to see their own mistakes and admit them to the others, they pave the way for helpful discussion. The most useful family talks will take place without angry arguments, self-pity, excuses, or resentful criticism. Little by little, mom and the children will realize they are asking for too much. Dad will see he is giving them too little. Giving, rather than getting, will become their shared goal.

Now imagine that dad has had a life-changing spiritual experience at the beginning of his recovery. It may seem like he has changed overnight. He becomes very religious. He cannot focus on or talk about anything else. Once his sobriety becomes normal, the family may look at their strange new dad nervously. Later, they may feel annoyed with him. He talks about spiritual matters morning, noon, and night. He may insist that everyone in the family find God for themselves, and fast. Or he may seem like he doesn't care about them at all, and act like he's better than everyone else. He may tell mom that she doesn't know what religion is all about, even if she's been religious all her life.

When dad acts this way, the family may react angrily. They may be jealous of a God who has stolen dad's attention and love. They feel grateful that he's stopped drinking, but they might not like that a Higher Power could heal dad when they could not. They forget that no human power could help him. They might not see why their love didn't save him.

Their jealousy might turn another way. Dad isn't so spiritual after all, they say. If he's going to right his past wrongs, why is he focused on everyone in the world except his family? Then he says that God will take care of them. They start to think dad is losing his mind.

He's not as unbalanced as they might think. Many of us have experienced dad's joy and bliss. We have felt spiritual intoxication. Like a skinny, starving gold miner who has just struck gold. We feel unending joy once we are free from our frustrating lives. Dad feels like he has struck something better than gold. For a while, he may try to keep the treasure to himself. He doesn't see that he has access to an endless supply of riches. Riches that will only make him wealthy if he mines for the rest of his life and gives it all away.

If the family is patient, dad will see that he is taking his new beliefs too far. He'll know that his spiritual growth cannot take over his life. A spiritual life that doesn't include his family might not be so perfect after all. If the family can accept that dad's behavior is just a phase in his journey, it will pass. An understanding and sympathetic family will help dad grow beyond this stage.

The risk of continued family criticism

If the family criticizes too much, the opposite may happen. Dad may think that he was always on the losing side of arguments when he was drinking. Now he may act like he has become a superior person with God on his side. If the family continues to criticize, he may believe this even more strongly. Instead of healing with the family, dad may become more distant. He will believe he's got spiritual reasons for acting this way.

Even if the family disagrees with dad's spiritual activities, they should let him do what he needs to do. Even if he pays less attention to the family, they should let him focus on helping other alcoholics as much as he wants. During the first days of recovery, this will do more to keep him sober than anything else. Some of his behavior may be worrying or annoying, but we

think dad will be safer than an alcoholic who is focused on finances. He will be less likely to drink again, and anything is better than that.

Many of us have spent time thinking that our spirituality makes us superior people. Eventually, we see that this is childish. That attitude is replaced by a great sense of purpose, and a growing understanding of the power of God in our lives. We have come to believe we should keep our heads in the clouds with God, but our feet need to be firmly planted on earth. That is where other people are, and that is where our work must be done. These are the realities for us. And we know that we can have both a powerful spiritual experience and a life of sane and happy usefulness.

One more suggestion: Whether other family members are spiritual or not, it can help them to examine the principles their loved one has adopted. They will probably find these simple principles interesting and valuable, even when dad struggles to practice them himself. When the partner of an alcoholic begins their own sane spiritual program, it is incredibly helpful to that alcoholic. They benefit from seeing someone they love using A.A. principles with wisdom and care.

Staying flexible

There will be other big changes in the household. Liquor changed dad so much and for so many years that mom had to take over his responsibilities. During this time, mom was forced to treat dad like a sick or misbehaving child. Even when she wanted to help out she couldn't. Drinking made everything so much harder. Mom made all the plans and gave the directions to the family. When sober, dad usually did as mom asked.

Now that dad is starting to feel like himself again, he may try to take back his old role. This will cause trouble. To prevent conflict, the whole family needs to watch for this change. Everyone should come to a friendly agreement about it.

When one family member drinks, that keeps the whole family separate from the outside world. Dad may have stopped all his normal activities for years—clubs, sports, hobbies, and friendships. When he becomes interested in doing them again, the family may feel jealous. They may feel like they should own all of his time and energy now. Instead of finding new activities for themselves, mom and the children may demand that dad stay home with them. He has to make up for lost time.

At the very beginning, both partners need to accept that they will each have to compromise. Doing this will involve the family in an alcoholic's new life. Dad will be spending lots of time with other alcoholics, but he will do other activities, too. He may make new friends who don't know about his alcoholism, and will need to consider their needs. He may help out in the local community. Even if the family is not religious, they may choose a spiritual path at this time.

Alcoholics who have made fun of religious people will be helped by finding a faith community. Since a recovering alcoholic has had a spiritual experience, they have lots in common with religious people. They may not agree on everything, but they have some overlapping beliefs. If the alcoholic doesn't argue about religion, they can make new friends and find new ways to feel useful and happy. They may even bring new hope and new courage to faith leaders who do their best to help our troubled world.

This is just a suggestion. As far as we are concerned, no one should feel they have to join a faith community. As non-denominational people, we can't make up others' minds for them. Each person must decide on their own.

Finding joy in recovery

So far, we have been talking to you about serious, sometimes tragic things. We have been dealing with the worst parts of alcohol and alcoholism. But we aren't a bunch of sad, gloomy people. If newcomers saw that recovering

alcoholics had no joy or fun in life, they wouldn't join us. We absolutely insist on enjoying life. We try not to be too serious about politics, and we don't carry the world's troubles on our shoulders. When we see someone sinking into the quicksand of alcoholism, we give them first aid and offer to help however we can. We don't force them to listen to all of the stories from our own terrible experiences. Those of us who try to take on the troubles of other people end up feeling overwhelmed.

So we think happiness and laughter are useful and important. Outsiders are sometimes shocked when we burst into laughter about some tragic experience from the past. But why shouldn't we laugh? We have recovered, and have been given the power to help others.

Everybody knows that sick people and people who don't allow themselves to play never laugh. So we think each family should play together or separately, as much as they like. We are sure God wants us to be happy, joyous, and free. We cannot believe that this life is meant to be full of sadness and tears, although it used to feel that way for many of us. Now we know that we made our own misery. God didn't do it. So we take care not to go on creating more misery. If trouble comes to us, we use it as a reason to think about the wisdom of our Higher Power.

Now, a note about health. A body that's been badly hurt by alcohol can't recover overnight. Twisted thinking and depression can't disappear in the blink of an eye. We believe that living in a spiritual way is the most powerful way for an alcoholic to improve their health. We have recovered from serious drinking ourselves. We think of ourselves as miracles of mental health. But we have seen improvements in our bodies, too. Very few of us still look damaged from our drinking.

But this doesn't mean that we ignore our physical health. God has filled the world with smart doctors, psychologists, and other healthcare professionals. If you need their help, take your health problems to them. Remember that your Higher Power can do miraculous things, but you still sometimes need support from a good doctor or psychiatrist. Their help is often extremely important in treating a newcomer and helping that person continue to recover.

One of the many doctors who read the first draft of this book told us that eating candy or sweets can be helpful. He thought all alcoholics should have chocolate available at all times, in case they needed a burst of energy. He added that sometimes cravings for alcohol could be made less powerful with candy. Many of us eat sweets regularly, and find this helps us in controlling our cravings.

A word about sexuality. Alcohol increases some people's sex drives. Couples may find that when one partner stops drinking, they are less interested in sex. If they don't understand the connection to alcohol, this change may hurt and confuse them. Some of us have had this experience. But just a few months later, we were having better sex than ever before. Be sure to work with a doctor or psychologist if sexual troubles continue. But we don't know of many people who have had this problem for very long.

Alcoholics may find it hard to repair their relationships with their children. Back when they were drinking, the kids were young and sensitive to what was going on around them. They may be very angry at dad for his actions, and what he has done to mom. Children of alcoholics are sometimes slow to forgive their parents. They may stay angry for months, long after mom has accepted dad's new way of living and thinking.

Over time, they will see that dad has changed. When they are ready, they will let him know they are ready to accept him, too. When this happens, they can be invited to join in morning meditation. They can join family discussions without getting angry or upset. After this, positive changes will start to happen very quickly. Wonderful things often follow family reunions like this.

Whether the family becomes spiritual together or not, the alcoholic member has to become spiritual to recover. The others must accept this without any doubt. Seeing is believing to most families who have lived with a drinker.

Here is an example: One of our friends was a heavy smoker and coffee drinker. There was no doubt he smoked too much and drank too much coffee. Seeing this and wanting to be helpful, his wife started nagging him

to stop. He admitted he was overdoing these things, but told her that he was not ready to stop. His wife believed that cigarettes and coffee are somewhat sinful, so she kept telling him to quit. Finally, her behavior made him very angry. He got drunk.

Of course our friend was wrong—dead wrong. He had to painfully admit that, and find ways to reconnect with his spirituality. He became a helpful member of Alcoholics Anonymous, but he still smoked and drank coffee. Neither his wife nor anyone else judged him. She saw she was wrong to criticize him about this when his more serious problems were being cured.

We have three little mottoes that can be helpful to both alcoholics and their families. Here they are:

First Things First

Live and Let Live

Easy Does It.

Chapter 10

TO EMPLOYERS

When we think of managers who understand alcoholics, one A.A. member comes to mind. He has hired and fired hundreds of people. He knows how employers see and treat alcoholics. We believe his ideas will be helpful to other managers and bosses all over the world.

We will let him share his own thoughts with you:

I used to be an assistant manager at a company that employed 6,600 people. One day my secretary came into my office to say that one of my employees wanted to talk with me. Let's call this employee Mr. B. I told her to tell Mr. B I was too busy. Mr. B was an alcoholic, and had already done some things that worried me. I'd warned him about his behavior, and told him he had one more chance to do better.

Not long after that, Mr. B called me two days in a row, so drunk he could hardly speak. I told him he was fired.

Later on, my secretary returned to say that it was not Mr. B on the phone; it was Mr. B's brother. He wanted to give me a message. When I got on the phone, I expected the brother to beg for forgiveness. Instead he said, "I just wanted to tell you Paul jumped from a hotel window in Hartford last Saturday. He left us a note saying you were the best boss he ever had, and that this wasn't your fault at all."

Another time, I was opening a letter at my desk and a newspaper clipping fell out. It was the obituary of one of the best salesmen I ever had. After two weeks of drinking, he had put his toe on the trigger of a loaded shotgun—

when the barrel was in his mouth. I had fired him for drinking six weeks before that.

One more story: I picked up my phone to hear a woman's voice speaking. She was calling from Virginia. She wanted to know if her husband's company insurance was still active. Four days before that, he had hanged himself. I had been forced to fire him for drinking, even though he was brilliant, sharp, and one of the best organizers I had ever known.

All three exceptional men chose to leave this world because I did not understand alcoholism. I understand it now. In fact, I became an alcoholic myself! And if a caring person in my own life had not stepped in to help me, I might have ended my own life, too. My drinking made me unable to work. Since it takes real money to train a business executive like me, my drinking cost my employers huge amounts of money. The A.A. Fellowship sees situations like this as wasteful and never-ending. We think that employers everywhere could avoid these situations by learning to understand alcoholism.

Alcoholic employees frustrate their managers

Most modern companies feel responsible to help their workers stay healthy. Doing this for alcoholic employees is very difficult. Supervisors and managers may see these employees as foolish and irresponsible. If they are very talented, or if the supervisors are friendly with them, they may be able to keep their jobs. But not always. Some employers have tried to help in every way possible. Most are very patient and forgiving. Those of us who have been alcoholic employees know this. We don't blame our bosses for getting frustrated with us.

Here's an example: a friend of mine who works for one of the largest banks in the United States knows I have stopped drinking. One day he asked to

talk with me about a manager at the same bank. From what my friend told me, this manager was definitely an alcoholic. I felt like this was my chance to be helpful. I spent two hours talking about alcoholism with my friend. I explained the disease and described the symptoms. My friend just said, “Very interesting. But I’m sure this man will stop drinking. He just got back from a three-month leave. He seems fine now. Plus, the bank’s board of directors told him this was his last chance.”

I said that if this manager followed the usual pattern, he would go on a bigger drinking spree than ever before. I believed this was very likely to happen. Why not just introduce him to me, and let me introduce him to my recovering friends? That might give him a fighting chance. I reminded my friend that I had not had a drink in three years. And during those three years I’d had problems that would’ve made nine out of 10 men drink their heads off. Why not let this manager hear my story?

“Oh no,” said my friend, “This guy is either done with liquor, or he is out of a job. If he has your willpower and guts, he will just make himself stop.”

I wanted to scream in frustration. I had failed to help my banker friend understand. He simply could not believe that this manager was battling a serious illness. There was nothing I could do but wait.

Soon after, the manager got drunk again and was fired. After that, I contacted the man. I introduced him to A.A. He accepted the principles and program with almost no fuss. Now he is undoubtedly on the road to recovery. To me, this shows how few people really understand what alcoholics are going through. It also shows that employers could do more to help their sick employees.

Managers may have strong opinions

If you are an employer, manager, or supervisor who wants to help an alcoholic employee, start by thinking about your own drinking. You might be a hard drinker, a moderate drinker, or someone who never drinks. No matter what, you probably have some pretty strong opinions. You might even dislike alcoholics.

Moderate drinkers sometimes get more annoyed with alcoholics than people who never drink at all. They are people who drink occasionally and understand how their bodies and minds react to alcohol. But their experiences with alcohol are nothing like the experiences that alcoholics have. Moderate drinkers can choose to drink or not drink. They can go on mild benders, get up in the morning, shake off their hangovers, and go to work. For moderate drinkers, liquor isn't a real problem. They can't see why it would be a problem for anyone except people who are spineless and stupid.

When dealing with an alcoholic, you may feel annoyed that anyone could be so weak, stupid, and irresponsible. Even when you understand alcoholism better, you may have this feeling.

But think about the alcoholic who works for you. Is she brilliant, quick-thinking, imaginative, and likable? When she's sober, does she work hard and get things done? If she had this type of personality and didn't drink, would you want to keep her as an employee? Should she get the same treatment as other sick employees? Is it worth your time to help her? If your answer is yes, the following suggestions may help you.

Can you let go of the feeling that she acts this way out of habit? Or because she is stubborn or has a weak will? If letting go of that feeling is too hard, try re-reading Chapters 2 and 3. As a manager or supervisor, you will want to know the facts before you take action. These are the chapters where we discuss the alcoholic sickness in detail and reviewing them might help. If you re-read them and accept that this employee is ill, can you forgive her for what she has done in the past? Can you forget about the outrageous things she's done? Will you accept that she's been a victim of twisted thinking? And that alcohol is the cause?

I remember being totally shocked when a famous doctor in Chicago told me about how alcohol affects the brain. He had seen cases where the pressure in an alcoholic's spinal fluid built up and exploded into the brain. No wonder alcoholics act so strange and unreasonable. Who wouldn't feel confused and upset with an unstable brain? Normal drinkers don't experience this, so they can't truly understand the chaos that alcoholics feel.

Now think back to your alcoholic employee. She has probably tried to hide her professional and personal mistakes, including some really messy ones. They may be disgusting to you. You may struggle to understand how someone who seems so smart and capable could do such nasty things. But these mistakes are linked to the action of alcohol on her mind. Alcoholics may seem honest and trustworthy when they're not drunk, and do unthinkable things when they are drunk. This can happen when they are recovering from a drinking spree, too. Once they sober up, they will feel overwhelmed by shame. And almost always, these disgusting activities are temporary.

To be clear, we are not saying that all alcoholics are honest and trustworthy when they are not drinking. That simply isn't true. And if you trust a dry drunk, they may abuse your trust. When they see that you are trying to understand and help, they might take advantage of your kindness.

If you're sure your employee doesn't want to stop drinking, you can go ahead and fire her. The sooner the better. You aren't doing her a favor by keeping her on the payroll. Actually, firing her may end up being a blessing. It could be the wake-up call she needs. In my own case, nothing my company could have done would have stopped me from drinking. As long as I kept my job, I could ignore how serious my situation was. If they had fired me first and made sure I understood the solution explained in this book, I might have recovered faster. I might have come back to work after six months, no longer sick.

If you think your employee may want to stop drinking, there is hope. Many people do want to stop, and as their manager or supervisor you can help them. Treating them with understanding will benefit both them and you.

How to talk with an alcoholic employee

Let's say you have an employee in mind. He wants to quit drinking and you want to help him. If your desire to help is more about helping the business than helping him as a person, that's fine. Now you know more about alcoholism. You can see that he is mentally and physically sick. You are willing to overlook his past mistakes. Here's one way you could begin talking with him about his problem:

Say that you know about his drinking, and that it must stop. You might say you recognize his talents and would like to keep him as an employee, but cannot if he continues to drink. It will help to keep a firm attitude while saying this.

Next, reassure him that you don't want to lecture, moralize, or judge him. Say that if you did this in the past, it was because you misunderstood his problem. If it's the truth for you, tell him there are no hard feelings. At this point, it might help to explain alcoholism as an illness. Say that you believe he is a seriously ill person, and quickly add, "Since this illness may be fatal, do you want to get well?" Tell him you are asking because many alcoholics feel so warped and drugged they don't want to quit. But does he? Will he take every necessary step? Will he do anything to get well, to stop drinking forever?

If he says yes, does he really mean it? Or deep down inside does he think he is fooling you? Does he think that after rest and treatment, he will be able to get away with a few drinks now and then? We believe people should be thoroughly questioned about these things. Feel absolutely certain he is not lying to himself, or to you.

It is up to you if you want to mention this book. If your employee seems to think he can drink again someday, even beer, he doesn't really want help. You can fire him after his next bender. And as an alcoholic, he is almost certain to have one. Tell him this is your plan, and make sure he

understands you completely. You're either dealing with a person who can and will get well ... or you are not. And if not, why waste time with him? This may seem severe, but it is usually the best plan.

When you're sure that your employee truly wants to recover and that he will take action to do so, you can suggest the next steps. For most alcoholics who are drinking, or who are just getting over a spree, medical treatment is helpful. Sometimes it's absolutely necessary. Medical treatment can take many forms, and your employee's doctor can help make decisions about what to do. The purpose is to thoroughly clear the mind and body of the effects of alcohol. Your employee will do better if he is able to think straight and no longer craves alcohol.

If you suggest that your employee try some kind of treatment, you should consider offering to temporarily cover the cost. Be clear that you expect him to pay back this cost, or offer to deduct it from his paycheck. It is better for him to feel fully responsible for any treatment.

If your employee accepts your offer, point out that medical treatment is just part of the picture. Along with excellent medical care, he should understand that he must have a true change of heart. To get over drinking, he needs a transformation of both thought and attitude. All of us who have recovered had to focus on recovery above everything. And without recovery, we would have lost both our homes and businesses.

Are you fully and completely confident in his ability to recover? And can you promise him that you will treat this as a strictly personal matter? That his alcoholic mistakes and the treatment he will experience will never be discussed without his consent? You might want to talk to him when he comes back from treatment.

Ways to help

This book contains detailed suggestions that your employee may use to solve his problem. To you, some of these ideas will be brand new. You may not completely agree with the approach we suggest. We would never say that this is the only way to recover, but it has definitely worked for us. And after all, as an employer, you aren't looking for methods for recovery from alcoholism. You are looking for results. You want your employee to stop drinking. Even if your employee doesn't want to follow the program, reading this book will show him how dangerous it is to be an alcoholic. That knowledge won't hurt him a bit.

We suggest you discuss this book with your employee's doctor. If he reads this book during treatment, as soon as he's able, it may help him understand how ill he really is. This is especially true if he reads it when he is depressed.

We also hope the doctor will tell the patient the truth about his condition. When your employee is given a copy of this book, don't let anyone tell him he must follow its suggestions. He must decide that for himself.

As his boss, you are betting that your changed attitude plus the contents of this book will help him recover. In some cases it will, and in others it won't. But we think that if you keep trying to help, the successes you help create will be deeply rewarding. As our work spreads and our Fellowship grows, we hope your employees will reach out to us.

Until then, we are sure you can accomplish great things just using this book. When your employee returns from treatment, be sure to talk with him. Ask him if he thinks he has the answer. If he feels like he can discuss his problems with you—if he knows you understand and will not be upset by anything he says—that will be a huge help to him.

When you have this talk, try to stay calm if he tells you shocking things. For example, he may confess that he has been using company money for personal reasons. Or that he planned to take your best customers away from you. If he owes you money you may need to discuss repayment. In fact, he may say almost anything if he has accepted the A.A. solution. As you know,

our solution demands complete honesty. Can you let this go, like you would let go of a bad customer? Can you start fresh with him? If he does owe you money, you might wish to make a payment arrangement with him.

Can he talk with you openly as long as he does not gossip about business associates or criticize his coworkers? With this kind of employee, creating this trusting relationship will help you win his loyalty. An alcoholic's greatest enemies are resentment, jealousy, envy, frustration, and fear. Wherever people do business together there will be tension and office politics. Sometimes we alcoholics believe that people are trying to ruin our careers. Most of the time, this is not true. But sometimes our drinking will be used against us politically.

One example comes to mind. A cruel person had a habit of making friendly little jokes about his coworker's alcoholic drinking exploits. In this way he was spreading gossip in a very dishonest way. In another case, an alcoholic was sent to a hospital for treatment. Only a few coworkers knew about it at first, but soon the whole company knew. Naturally, this decreased the man's chance of recovery. Sometimes the employer can protect the alcoholic from this kind of talk. The employer cannot play favorites, but can always defend someone from gossip and unfair criticism.

Most alcoholics are energetic people. They work hard and they play hard. This means your employee should dedicate himself to recovery, fully and completely. In fact, as he begins to live a life without alcohol, he may overdo it. You may have to tell him he can't work 16 hours a day. You may need to encourage him to relax once in a while. He may wish to help other alcoholics, sometimes during business hours. If you can give him the flexibility to do this that will help. This work is necessary to maintain his sobriety.

The importance of trust and honesty

After your man has stopped drinking for a few months, you may be able to ask for his help with other alcoholic employees. This will only work if other employees are willing to talk with both you and someone else. An alcoholic who has recovered can even help someone in a higher or more powerful position. Since the recovered alcoholic has adopted a radically new way of living, he would never take advantage of his powerful coworker's trust.

Once he has begun to recover, trust your employee. Dealing with alcoholic excuses for so long will make you suspicious of everything. When his wife calls saying he is sick, you might assume he is actually drunk. If he is, and he's still trying to recover, he will tell you about it later. Even if it means getting fired. He knows he must be honest if he wants to live at all. He will appreciate knowing you are not worried about him—that you trust him, and aren't trying to run his life so he will never be tempted to drink. If he is following the program of recovery, he can go anywhere your business needs him to go.

If he does stumble, even once, you will have to decide whether to fire him or not. If you are sure he will not stick to the program of recovery, there is no doubt you should let him go. But if you are sure he is doing his best, you may want to give him another chance. But you should not feel like you are required to keep him on the payroll. You have already done your part to help him.

There is another thing you might want to do. If your organization is large, you might want to give your managers or junior leadership team copies of this book. Tell them that you are not trying to get anyone in trouble. Managers are often friends with their employees. For one reason or another, they may try to make excuses when these employees struggle with alcoholism. They mostly hope that things will get better on their own over time. Some of these leaders put their own jobs at risk trying to help serious drinkers who should have been fired long ago.

After reading this book, an executive can go to any of the people reporting to her and say something like this, "Listen. Do you want to stop drinking or not? You put me in a bad position every time you get drunk. It isn't fair to

me or the company. I have been learning something about alcoholism. If you are an alcoholic, you are a very sick man. You act like one. The company wants to help you stop drinking. If you are interested, there is a way out. If you take it, we will forget about the past. The fact that you went away for treatment will never be mentioned. But if you cannot or will not stop drinking, I think you ought to resign.”

Your executive may not agree with the contents of this book. That’s OK. She probably should not show it to her alcoholic employee. But if the executive reads this book, at least she will understand the problem. She will be able to talk with this employee, and do so in a way that is fair and square. She will have no reason to cover for an alcoholic employee ever again.

It boils down to this: No one should be fired just because they are an alcoholic. If they want to stop, they should be given a real chance. If they cannot or do not want to stop, they should be fired. There are very few exceptions to this rule.

We think this way of dealing with alcoholic employees will accomplish several things. It will help good people begin to recover. At the same time, it will help employers feel less guilty about firing people who cannot or will not stop drinking. Alcoholism may be harming your company by wasting time, people, and resources. We hope our suggestions will help you plug this sometimes-serious leak. We think we are being reasonable when we encourage you to stop this waste and give your employees a chance to do better.

When an A.A. member spoke with the vice president of a large industrial company, he said “I’m very glad you all stopped drinking. But the policy of this company is not to interfere with the habits of our employees. If someone drinks so much that their job suffers, we fire them. I don’t see how you can help us since we don’t have any alcoholic problem.”

This same company spends millions of dollars on research every year. They have a gym that employees can use. The company helps pay for employee insurance. They have a real interest in the well-being of their employees. But alcoholism ... well, they just don’t believe they have it.

Perhaps this is a typical attitude. We have seen plenty of business life, at least from the alcoholic angle. And we have to smile at this man's opinion of his company. He might be shocked if he knew how much alcoholism is costing his organization every year. That company may employ many alcoholics and potential alcoholics. We believe that managers of big companies rarely know how bad this problem is. Even if you feel your organization has no alcoholic problem, it might be worthwhile to take another look down the line. You may make some interesting discoveries.

Of course, this chapter refers to alcoholics, sick people, troubled individuals. What the vice president was imagining was someone who was constantly drunk. Or maybe someone who parties hard and gets extremely drunk often. For them, his policy will work just fine. But he doesn't see the difference between those types of drinkers and a typical alcoholic.

No one should expect that an alcoholic employee will receive a lot of additional time and attention. They should not be treated like a favorite. The right kind of person—the kind who recovers—will not want to be seen this way. They will not ask for extra help or special treatment. Far from it. They will work their hearts out and thank you until their dying day.

Today I own a little company. There are two recovering alcoholic employees who produce as much as five non-alcoholic employees. And why shouldn't they? They have a new attitude, and they have been saved from a living death. I have enjoyed every moment I spent helping them straighten themselves out.¹

¹Appendix VI of this book includes ways to get in touch with Alcoholics Anonymous. We would be happy to hear from you if you would like our help.

Chapter 11

A VISION FOR YOU

For most normal folks, drinking means fun, friendship, and carefree enjoyment. It means an escape from boredom and worry. It is joyful time spent with friends and a feeling that life is good.

But alcoholics who are in the final days of their heavy drinking don't feel this way at all. Any pleasure they used to take in drinking is gone. Good times are just memories. Those of us in this situation can't relive our most enjoyable moments anymore. This is painful for us. Many of us are heartbroken that we can't feel joyful and carefree while we drink. We are convinced that a miracle might happen, and we might suddenly have control over our drinking. That's one reason we keep trying and failing. We always think the next time we drink will bring that miracle of control.

As people in our lives became more disappointed and frustrated with us, we spent more time alone. We withdrew from society and from life itself. We became like people who lived in a country ruled by King Alcohol. The longer we lived in this crazy place the lonelier we became. Loneliness was like a fog that surrounded us, becoming thicker and blacker all the time.

Some of us visited dirty and dangerous places as we searched for other people who would understand and accept us. Whenever we did, we were relieved for a while. But then we would drink until we couldn't remember anything at all. And when we woke up, we had to face the hideous Four Horsemen of Alcoholism—Terror, Bewilderment, Frustration, Despair. Unhappy drinkers who read this page will understand exactly what we mean.

We have found a solution

Sometimes a serious drinker who is dry at the moment will say, “I don’t miss it at all. I feel better. Work is better. I’m having a better time than I did when I was always drunk.” As ex-problem drinkers ourselves, we smile to ourselves when we hear this. We know this person is just trying to keep up his spirits, like someone whistling in the darkness to cope with their fear. They’re fooling themselves. Inside, they would give anything to have six or seven drinks and get away with it.

They will try to do just that, since they are so terribly unhappy being sober. They can’t imagine their life without alcohol. And some day, they won’t be able to imagine life with alcohol or without it. They won’t want to imagine life continuing at all. A person who reaches this place will experience deep and extreme loneliness. We say they are at the “jumping-off place.” They will wish to end their life.

In this book, we have shown how we escaped that place ourselves. But now you may be thinking, “Yes, I’m willing to try. But does that mean my life will become boring and joyless? Like the lives of some righteous people I see? I know I have to live without liquor, but how can I do that? And will this new way of living replace liquor with something else? Something to help me feel happy and energized?”

Yes, there is a replacement and it will give you more than alcohol ever could. It is the Fellowship in Alcoholics Anonymous. It will help you find relief from boredom and worry. Your imagination will come alive. Life will mean something at last. The most satisfying years of your life lie ahead. This is how we feel about the Fellowship, and so will you.

“How will this happen?” you ask. “Where will I find these people?”

You are going to meet these new friends in your own community. Near you, alcoholics are dying helplessly like people on a sinking ship. If you live in a

large city or community, there are hundreds. High and low, rich and poor, these are future members of Alcoholics Anonymous. When you find and meet them, you will make lifelong friends. You will feel connected to them deeply and permanently because you will escape from the disaster of drinking together. You will walk arm in arm with them on your journey. And when you do this, you'll know what it means to give generously so that others may survive and rediscover life. You will learn the full meaning of "Love your neighbor as you love yourself."

It may seem unbelievable that these people will become happy, respected, and successful again. How can they recover from so much misery, disgrace, and hopelessness? Since these things have happened for us, we know they can happen for you. If you wish for them more than anything, and are willing to learn from our experiences, we are sure they will come. The age of miracles is now. Our own recovery proves that!

Our hope is that when this book is available to all of the world's alcoholics, drinkers who have lost hope will find it, read it, and follow its suggestions. We are sure that many of them will get back on their feet and keep going. They will reach out to other sick people, and Fellowships of Alcoholics Anonymous will begin appearing in each city and town, safe spaces for people who seek a way out.

How Alcoholics Anonymous has grown

In the chapter "Working with Others," you got an idea of how we help others return to health. Now imagine that you have helped several families adopt our way of life. You will want to know what you should do next. We think the best way to give you a glimpse into your future is to talk about the growth of the Fellowship among us:

Years ago, in 1935, a businessman traveled to a city in the western United States. It was a business trip, and it went badly. If it had gone well, he would have solved many of his financial problems. At the time, that seemed extremely important to him. But his business idea ended in a lawsuit, which resulted in many hard feelings.

Feeling bitter and discouraged, the businessman found himself in a strange place. His reputation was totally destroyed and he was almost broke. He had been sober for just a few months, so he felt physically weak and spiritually helpless. He saw that his situation was dangerous. He wanted so much to talk with someone. But whom?

One gray afternoon he walked through his hotel lobby, wondering how he could pay the bill. At one end of the room was a directory of local churches. At the other end, a door opened into an attractive bar. The businessman could see the happy crowd inside. He knew that in the bar, he would find friendship and relief. If he didn't have a few drinks, he might not have the courage to meet and talk with anyone new during his trip. He would have a lonely weekend.

Of course he couldn't drink, but why not sit at a table with a ginger ale? After all, he'd been sober for six months now. Maybe he could handle just three drinks—no more! Fear gripped him. The businessman knew he was on thin ice. He felt the old, deadly insanity—that first drink. With a shiver, he turned away and walked toward the church directory. Music and lively conversation still floated to him from the bar.

But what about his responsibilities? His family? What about all those other alcoholics who would die because they would not know how to get well? He knew there must be many of them in this town. He would call a minister. His sanity returned and he thanked God. He chose a church at random from the directory. Then he stepped into a phone booth and lifted the receiver.

The businessman spoke with a local religious leader, who connected him to a man who lived in town. This man had once been healthy and respected, but now he was drowning in alcoholic despair. It was the usual situation: He

couldn't pay the mortgage, his wife was ill, the children were distracted, and his debts were out of control. This local man desperately wanted to stop drinking but saw no way out. He had tried so many times to escape. He was painfully aware that he was somehow abnormal, but he didn't fully understand what it meant to be alcoholic.¹

When the businessman talked about his experience, the local man agreed that willpower alone could never stop his drinking for long. He also agreed that a spiritual experience was absolutely necessary. But he was scared to try it since it meant admitting his problem to people who might judge him. The local man explained how he lived in constant worry over people finding out about his alcoholism. Like so many of us, he believed that few people in his life knew he drank. The local man was also worried about his work. Why should he ruin what was left of his career? If he admitted to the people who paid him that he struggled with alcohol, he would just bring more suffering to his family. He would do anything but that, he said. However, he was interested in the ideas that the businessman described, so he invited the businessman to his home.

Some time later, right when he thought he was getting control of his drinking, the local man went on an unbelievable bender. For him, this was the spree that ended all sprees. He realized that he would have to face his problems and ask for God's help.

One morning he gathered his courage and decided to tell the people in his life about his problem. This included the people whose judgment he was most worried about. As the local man talked with them, he was surprised by how open and understanding they were. He learned that many of them already knew about his drinking. Stepping into his car, he began to visit all of the people he had hurt. He was so nervous that his body shook. He knew that having these conversations might ruin his career. But he had them anyway.

At midnight he came home exhausted, but very happy. He has not had a drink since then. As you will find out soon, this local man now means a

great deal to his community. The damage he caused by 30 years of hard drinking has been repaired in just four years.

Finding more fellows

The two friends continued to talk with each other, and continued to think about how they could find and talk with other alcoholics. But life was not easy for these two friends. Plenty of difficulties showed up. Both of them knew that they needed to stay spiritually active. They needed to keep talking to other alcoholics. One day they called the head nurse of a local hospital. They explained their need and asked if she could connect them to any other alcoholics.

She replied, “Yes, we’ve got a real winner for you. He’s just beaten up a couple of nurses. Goes out of his mind completely when he’s drinking, but he’s a sweet man when he’s sober. He’s been in here eight times over the last six months. He was once a well-known lawyer in town, but right now we’ve got him strapped down tight.”¹

Here was an alcoholic all right, but the businessman and the local man weren’t sure they could help him. Using spiritual principles to help alcoholics was still a new idea back then. But they said, “Put him in a private room. We’ll come talk to him.”

Two days later, a future member of Alcoholics Anonymous stared at the strangers beside his bed. His eyes were wide with confusion. “Who are you guys, and why am I in this private room? I was always in a ward before.”

They told him, “We’re giving you a treatment for alcoholism.”

Hopelessness filled the lawyer’s face as he replied, “Oh, that won’t work. Nothing can fix me. I’m a goner. The last three times, I got drunk on the way home from here. I’m afraid to go out the door. I can’t understand it.”

For an hour, the businessman and the local man told him about their own drinking experiences. Over and over, he would say, “That’s me. That’s me. I drink like that.”

The man in the bed was told about the disease he was suffering from. He heard about how it ruins the body of an alcoholic and twists his mind. They talked a lot about the thoughts and feelings they all had before taking that first drink.

“Yes, that’s me,” said the sick lawyer, “You guys know your stuff all right, but I don’t see what good it’ll do. You guys are both ‘somebody.’ I was somebody once, but I’m a nobody now. From what you’ve told me, I definitely can’t stop. I know that now more than ever.”

At this both the visitors burst out laughing. The lawyer said, “I don’t see how that’s anything to laugh about.”

The businessman and the local man spoke of their spiritual experience and told him about the program of action they followed.

The lawyer interrupted: “I used to be very involved in the church, but that won’t fix it. I’ve prayed to God on hangover mornings and sworn that I’d never touch another drop. But by nine o’clock I’d be drunk as a skunk.”

The businessman and the local man returned the next day, and found the lawyer feeling more hopeful. He had been thinking it over. “Maybe you’re right,” he said. “God ought to be able to do anything.” Then he added, “Though God sure didn’t do much for me when I was trying to fight against the booze all alone.”

On the third day, the lawyer asked for care and direction from his Higher Power, and said he was completely willing to do anything necessary to stop drinking. His wife came to visit, doubting but hopeful. She said she saw something different about her husband already. He had begun to have a spiritual experience.

That afternoon he put on his clothes and walked from the hospital a free man. He entered a political campaign, made speeches, went to all kinds of bars and restaurants, often staying up all night. He lost the election by only a narrow margin. But he had found God—and in finding God had found himself.

That was in June, 1935. He never drank again. He also became a respected and successful member of his community. He helped other people recover and returned to the faith he had left behind.

Now there were three alcoholics in that town who believed they needed to give to others what they had found, or be lost forever.

The fourth member, and beyond

After struggling to find other alcoholics, a fourth one finally turned up. He came through an acquaintance who had heard about the recovery program of the three men.

This fourth alcoholic was a reckless young man whose parents couldn't tell if he wanted to stop drinking or not. They were deeply religious people. They were shocked and worried by their son's rejection of God and the church. He suffered horribly from his drinking sprees, but it seemed like nothing could be done to help him. He agreed to go to the hospital, where he stayed in the very same room where the lawyer had recovered. He had three visitors. After a little while, he said, "The way you guys put this spiritual stuff makes sense. I'm ready to do it. I guess the old folks were right after all."

So one more was added to the Fellowship.

All this time, the businessman was still in that town. He was there for three months. He now returned home, leaving behind the local man, the lawyer, and the reckless young man. These men had found something brand new in life. They knew they needed to help other alcoholics if they wanted to remain sober themselves. But that barely seemed to matter. What mattered more was the happiness they found in talking with others. They shared their homes, their small savings, and gladly spent their free time with fellow sufferers. Any time of the day or night, they were willing to help an alcoholic get to the hospital, and willing to visit them afterward.

The Fellowship grew larger. They experienced a few upsetting failures with alcoholics who could not follow their suggestions. In those cases, they tried to bring the person's family into a spiritual way of living.

A year and six months later, these three men had succeeded with seven more. They spent lots of time together. Almost every night, someone's home was hosting a little gathering of people, all feeling happy and relieved.

These Fellowship members were constantly thinking about how they could share their discovery with other alcoholics. In addition to casual get-togethers, the Fellowship started gathering for a more formal meeting one night each week. These meetings were open to anyone and everyone interested in a spiritual way of life. On top of offering friendship and social connection, the main goal of these meetings was to provide a time and place where new people could bring their problems.

Outsiders became interested in the program. One husband and wife offered their large home as a gathering place for this odd crowd of people. This couple became so dedicated to the work that they turned their entire home into a place for A.A. members to find help. Many worried partners of alcoholics have visited this house to find loving and understanding companionship among people who understand their problems. Many husbands have visited to hear their wives explain what had happened to them. Many partners have visited to learn how to talk helpfully with their own loved ones.

Alcoholics who still felt tired and confused from being in the hospital have stepped through the door of that house into freedom. Many alcoholics who entered with questions left with answers. Picture one now, a woman. She is drawn to the happy crowd inside, who laugh at their own bad luck and understand hers. She was moved by the members who visited her in the hospital. She fully embraced the power of this way of life when someone inside the house told a story that sounded exactly like her own. The open expressions on everyone's faces, the light in their eyes, and the exciting and welcoming feeling in the house tell her that she is safe at last. The very practical approach to her problems, the complete lack of judgment, the casual feeling of the gathering, the cooperation, the deep understanding these people shared all make her feel at home. She will leave excited to think of what she can do now for an alcoholic friend and his family.

They knew they had a huge group of new friends. It felt like they had always known these strangers. They had seen miracles, and one was coming into their own lives. They had seen a better way to live, and done it by connecting with their Higher Power.

The Fellowship today

Over time, the house became too small to hold all of its visitors. Alcoholics would come from surrounding towns, and families drove long distances to gather there. A community 30 miles away from the house had 15 members of Alcoholics Anonymous. The people who gathered there knew that their Fellowship would continue to grow and grow. They were right.

But life among Alcoholics Anonymous is more than going to gatherings and visiting hospitals. The kinds of things we might do each day include fixing professional mistakes, helping to settle family arguments, explaining the troubled son to his angry parents, lending money, and getting jobs for each other. No one has sunk too low to be welcomed by us, as long as they

honestly want to recover. Social differences, arguments, and jealousies all get left at the door. In the Fellowship, we have all ridden on the same shipwrecked boat, only to be saved and repaired by God. Our hearts and minds are focused on the recovery of others. The things that matter so much to some people no longer matter to us. How could they?

The same thing is taking place in many cities in the eastern United States. In one of these cities there is a well-known hospital for the treatment of alcohol and drug addiction. One of our members was a patient there several years ago. Many of us have felt the presence and power of God in this building. We are also incredibly grateful to the doctor there. He has told us how strongly he believes in our work. Every few days, this doctor suggests our approach to one of his patients.

Since he understands our work, the doctor can do this carefully. He picks only patients he thinks are willing and able to recover on a spiritual basis. Many of us are former patients of his, and so we go there to help. In this same city, there are informal meetings like the ones we have described to you. At these meetings, people are making deep friendships. They are helping each other, just like those of us in the western United States are doing. There is a lot of travel between east and west. We believe the groups from both areas will help each other greatly.

Someday we hope that every alcoholic who searches will find the Fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous. In many cases this is already true. Some of us travel around to talk about the program. And those of us who travel for business or fun will visit local A.A. groups while we're away from home. This allows us to lend a hand, at the same time avoiding the temptation to drink while traveling.¹

That's how our Fellowship grew. And you can grow, too, even though you're just one person with this book in your hand. We believe and hope it contains all you will need to begin.

We know what you are thinking. You are saying to yourself: "I'm jittery and alone. I couldn't do that." But you can. You forget that you have just now

discovered a source of power much greater than yourself. Doing what we have done only requires willingness, patience, and hard work.

We know of an A.A. member who was living in a large community. He had lived there for just a few weeks when he discovered that the place probably had more alcoholics per square mile than any city in the country. The local police were very concerned. He got in touch with a well-known psychiatrist who was working on mental health issues in the community. The doctor was extremely eager to try anything that might help him handle the situation. So he asked our friend what he had in mind.

Our friend explained the Twelve Steps and the program to him. The doctor was so impressed that he agreed to try it on his patients and with other alcoholics at a nearby clinic. Then he contacted the chief psychiatrist of a large public hospital to choose even more participants from the stream of miserable alcoholics running through his door.

Our friend knew he would soon have more friends than he could count. Some of them might fall and never get up. But we know that more than half of the people we talk to will become members of Alcoholics Anonymous. After a few people in our friend's new city discovered the joy of helping others face life again, there was no stopping until everyone in that town had the chance to recover.

Still you may say: "But I don't know how to find people who understand Alcoholics Anonymous as deeply as the authors of this book." If you don't look for them, how can you be sure you won't find them? Trust in your Higher Power. God will show you how to find and create the Fellowship you are looking for.¹

Our book is meant to offer you suggestions only. We realize we know only a little. God will constantly show more to you and to us. Ask God in your morning meditation what you can do each day for the person who is still sick. The answers will come, if your own house is in order. But obviously you cannot give something you haven't got. Make sure that your relationship with God is strong, and great events will come to pass for you and countless others. This is the Great Fact for us.

Give yourself to God as you understand God. Admit your faults to God and to your fellows. Clear away the wreckage of your past. Give freely of what you find and join us. We will be with you in the Fellowship of the Spirit, and you will meet some of us as you trudge the Road of Happy Destiny.

May God bless you and keep you—until then.

¹This refers to Bill's first visit with Dr. Bob. These men later became co-founders of A.A. Bill's story is at the beginning of this book; Dr. Bob's story starts on page 142 .

¹This refers to Bill's and Dr. Bob's first visit to A.A. Number Three. This resulted in A.A.'s first group, at Akron, Ohio, in 1935.

¹When the first edition of the Big Book was printed, A.A. had approximately 100 members.

¹Alcoholics Anonymous will be glad to hear from you. Address: P.O. Box 459, Grand Central Station, New York, NY 10163. Website: [www .aa .org](http://www.aa.org) .

DOCTOR BOB'S NIGHTMARE

Doctor Bob is one of the co-founders of Alcoholics Anonymous. We consider our Fellowship to have begun on his first day of permanent sobriety, June 10, 1935.

Up until he died in 1950, he carried the A.A. message to more than 5,000 alcoholics, and also gave them his medical services free of charge.

Throughout his years of service, he was helped by Sister Ignatia at St. Thomas Hospital in Akron, Ohio, one of the greatest friends our Fellowship will ever know.

I was born in a small New England village of about 7,000 people. It was a place where everyone took pride in their morals and values. No beer or liquor was sold in the neighborhood, except the state-run liquor store. At that store, you might be able to buy a beer if you could convince the clerk you really needed it. Otherwise you'd leave empty-handed, with none of the magical liquid I believed could solve all human problems. People who ordered liquor by mail from Boston or New York were seen as untrustworthy by most of my neighbors. The town had plenty of churches and schools where I studied as a young boy.

My father was a well-known businessman, and both my father and mother participated in church activities. They were both smart, well-educated people. Unfortunately for me, I was their only child. This may have been one reason why I grew up selfish. And that selfishness played an important part in my alcoholism.

From childhood through high school, my parents forced me to go to church. This included Sunday school and evening service, Monday night youth group, and sometimes a Wednesday evening prayer meeting. Spending all

of that time studying made me reach a decision. I decided that once I left my parents' home, I would never, ever, go to church again. And I stuck to that decision for 40 years, with very few exceptions.

After high school I spent four years at one of the best colleges in the country. Drinking was the most popular activity there. Almost everyone seemed to do it. I did it more and more, and had lots of fun without much trouble. I seemed to be able to bounce back the next morning better than most of my fellow drinkers. Many of them were cursed (or perhaps blessed) with hangovers and upset stomachs. I've never had a headache in my entire life, which makes me believe that I was an alcoholic from the very beginning. My whole life was about doing what I wanted to do, without thinking about the rights or wishes of anyone else. This way of living became more and more important to me as the years passed. I graduated at the top of my class according to my fellow drinkers, but not according to the college dean.

The next three years I spent in Boston, Chicago, and Montreal working for a large manufacturing company. I sold railroad equipment, gas engines, and many other types of heavy hardware. During these years, I drank as much as I could afford and still never felt sick. Although I started to have morning jitters at times. Over those three years, I only missed one half-day of work.

A shaky start to medical school

My next move was to begin medical school at one of the largest universities in the country. While I was there, I made it my business to drink even more seriously than I had before. Since I was able to drink huge amounts of beer, I was made a member of one of the university's fraternities. Soon I was one of its leaders. Many mornings I started walking to class, but then turned and walked back to my fraternity house because of my jitters. Even though I was fully prepared for class, I didn't want to be called on to answer a question while I was so shaky.

This went from bad to worse until the spring of my second year. After a prolonged period of drinking that spring, I decided that I just couldn't complete my medical degree. So I packed my suitcase, headed south, and spent a month on a large farm owned by a friend of mine.

After a while, it felt like a fog had cleared out of my brain. I realized that quitting school was very foolish and that I had better return and continue my education. When I reached school, I discovered that my professors had other ideas about my future: They were ready to kick me out. I argued with them, and they finally allowed me to return and take my exams. I passed them all with good grades. My professors still insisted that I was not welcome at that particular university anymore. After many painful discussions, they finally gave me the credits I had earned. I transferred to a different leading university and entered as a junior that fall.

There, my drinking became much, much worse. The boys in the fraternity house where I lived felt like they needed to contact my father. He made the long trip to visit me at the university, and tried to convince me to stop drinking. It didn't work. In fact, I kept on drinking, and drank more hard liquor than I had before.

Just before my final exams, I went on a particularly intense drinking spree. When I went to take the tests, my hand shook so hard that I could not hold a pencil. I turned in at least three completely blank tests, resulting in failing grades. I did so badly that I had to repeat two more quarters while remaining sober, if I wanted to graduate. I managed to do this, proving to my professors that I could earn decent grades and behave myself when I needed to.

I did so well during that time that I was awarded a high-level medical internship in a western city, where I spent two years. During these two years I was so busy that I hardly left the hospital at all. This meant I could not get into any trouble.

When those two years were over, I opened an office downtown. I had some money, all the time in the world, and lots of stomach trouble. I soon discovered that a couple of drinks helped my stomach feel better, at least for

a few hours at a time. This made it extremely easy for me to go back to my old heavy drinking ways.

Poor health and prohibition

By this time my health was starting to get worse and worse. Hoping to get some relief, I checked myself into nearby hospitals at least a dozen times. I was stuck between a rock and a hard place now. If I did not drink, my stomach hurt me terribly. If I did drink, my nerves did the same thing. After three years of this, I wound up in the local hospital where they tried to help me. But while I was there, I would get my friends to sneak in a quart of liquor for me. Or I would steal any alcohol I could find inside the building. This meant that I got worse very quickly.

Finally, my father sent the doctor from my hometown to visit me. Somehow he convinced me to go back with him to my hometown to recover. I was in bed for about two months before I could leave the house. I stayed there for a couple of months and then returned to my medical practice. I think I was deeply scared by this experience, or by the doctor, or both. I did not touch a drink again until the country went dry.

In 1919, the 18th Amendment was passed making it illegal to sell alcohol. This amendment was also known as “Prohibition.” It made me feel quite safe. I thought that everyone would buy as much liquor as they could afford and then drink it until it was gone. This meant it wouldn’t make any difference if I did some drinking myself.

At that time, I didn’t know that the government had a huge supply of alcohol that doctors could prescribe to our patients. I also didn’t know that Prohibition would create bootleggers: People who made their own liquor and sold it illegally. I was wrong to think that alcohol would disappear from my life.

I drank moderately at first. But it didn't take long for me to drift back into my old habits.

Over the next few years, I became constantly afraid of two things. One was being unable to sleep, and the other was running out of liquor. I wasn't a rich man. I knew that if I did not stay sober enough to earn some money by working, I would run out of liquor. Most of the time, knowing this kept me from taking the morning drink that I craved so badly. Instead, I would take large doses of sedative medications to quiet my jitters.

Sometimes I would surrender to my morning craving and take a drink. Whenever I did this, I would be too drunk to work in just a few hours. If I got drunk in the morning, there was less chance I would bring home liquor in the evening. But if I didn't drink in the evening, I would spend all night tossing and turning and wake up in the morning with terrible jitters.

Over the next 15 years, I was smart enough to never go to work or see patients if I had been drinking. Sometimes I would hide out in members-only social clubs, or register at a hotel using a false name. But my friends usually found me, and I would go home if they promised not to judge or punish me.

If my wife was planning to go out in the afternoon, I would buy a large amount of liquor, bring it home secretly, and hide it around the house. In the coal bin, over doorways, over beams in the basement, and in cracks in the basement tile. I also used old trunks, chests, and containers to hide my liquor. I never used the water tank on the toilet because it seemed like too obvious a hiding spot. I found out later that my wife checked there often.

I used to put eight- or twelve-ounce bottles of alcohol in a fur-lined glove and toss it onto the back porch when the winter days got dark enough. The bootlegger I bought from would hide alcohol near my back steps so I could get it easily. Sometimes I would bring it in my pockets, but they were inspected at the hospital where I worked so that became too risky. I used to put it in four-ounce bottles and stick several in the tops of my socks.

I will not tell all of the stories of my hospital experiences. They would take up far too much space.

Worse and worse

As time went by, we saw our friends less and less. No one would invite us out because I would always get drunk. My wife never invited people to our home for the same reason. My fear of insomnia made me get drunk every night. But to get enough liquor for the next night, I had to stay sober during the day, at least until 4 p.m. This was my routine for about 17 years. It was a horrible nightmare: earning money, getting liquor, smuggling it home, getting drunk, morning jitters, taking large doses of sedatives to make it possible for me to earn more money, and so on. I used to promise my wife, my friends, and my children that I would stop drinking. Those promises never kept me sober a single day, even though I was very sincere when I made them.

If you're reading this and you want to try drinking only beer, here are my thoughts. When beer was made legal again, I thought that I was safe. I could drink all the beer I wanted. It was harmless; nobody ever got drunk on beer. So I filled my basement with it, with permission from my wife. Soon I was drinking at least a case and a half a day. I put on 30 pounds in about two months, looked like a pig, and was very short of breath. Eventually I realized that drinking beer made me so smelly, no one could tell what I had been drinking. So I began to drink straight alcohol in addition to beer. That went very badly, and ended the "beer experiment."

The turning point

Around the time of the beer experiment, I met a new group of people. I was drawn to them because they seemed so healthy, happy, and comfortable in the world. When they talked, they never seemed shy or embarrassed. They were always at ease no matter where they were. I never felt that way myself.

More than any of this, they seemed to be happy. I was uncomfortable and nervous most of the time. My health was failing, and I felt completely miserable. I could tell these people had something I did not have. Something that might truly help me. I learned that it was something of a spiritual nature, which did not appeal to me very much. But I thought it probably wouldn't hurt me. I thought about this spiritual path over the next few years, but still got drunk every night. I read everything I could find, and talked to everyone who I thought knew anything about it.

My wife became deeply interested in this group, and it was her interest that drove mine. However, I never thought that this might be an answer to my liquor problem. I'll never know how my wife kept her faith and courage during all those years, but she did. If she had not, I know I would have been dead a long time ago. For some reason, we alcoholics seem to have the gift of picking out the world's finest partners. I cannot explain why they should have to live with the torture we inflict on them.

Around this time a lady called up my wife. It was a Saturday afternoon, and she said she wanted me to come over that evening to meet a friend of hers. The lady thought this friend might help me. It was the day before Mother's Day, and I had come home completely drunk. I was carrying a big potted plant that I set down on the table. Then I went upstairs and passed out. The next day this lady called again. I felt horribly hungover but wanted to be polite. So I said, "Let's go meet this friend," and made my wife promise that we would not stay more than 15 minutes.

We entered her house at exactly 5 p.m. and it was 11:15 p.m. when we left.

I had a couple of shorter talks with this man in the days that followed, and I stopped drinking abruptly afterwards.

This dry spell lasted for about three weeks. Then I went to Atlantic City to attend a convention for work. I drank all the scotch they had on the train and bought several quarts on my way to the hotel. This was on Sunday. I got drunk that night, stayed sober on Monday until after dinner, and then got drunk again. I drank everything I could at the bar, and then went to my room to finish the job. Tuesday I started drinking in the morning, but tried to sober up by noon. I did not want to embarrass myself, so I checked out.

I bought some more liquor on the way to the train station. I had to wait quite a while for the train. I remember nothing from then on until I woke up at a friend's house, in a town near home. This friend called my wife. My wife sent the man I'd met on Mother's Day to get me. He came and got me home and to bed, gave me a few drinks that night, and one bottle of beer the next morning.

That was June 10, 1935, and that was my last drink.

As I write this, almost four years have passed. The question in your mind might be: "What did this man do or say that was different from what others had done or said?"

Remember that I had read a lot and talked to everyone who knew anything about the subject of alcoholism. But this man had experienced many years of serious drinking. He'd had all of the drunk person's experiences you could possibly imagine. And he had been cured by the very program I had been trying to use in my own life: the spiritual approach. He gave me information about the subject of alcoholism that was incredibly helpful. But more importantly, he was the first living human with whom I had ever talked who understood alcoholism from his own experiences. In other words, he spoke my language. He knew all the answers, and not because he had read about them. He had lived through them.

It is a most wonderful blessing to be relieved of the terrible curse of alcoholism. My health is good and I have regained my self-respect and the respect of my colleagues. My home life is happy and my business is as good as can be expected in these uncertain times. I spend a lot of my time teaching others what I learned.

I do this for four reasons:

1. Sense of duty.
2. It is a pleasure.
3. Because in doing this, I am paying my debt to the man who took time to pass it on to me.
4. Because every time I do it, I take out a little more insurance for myself against a possible relapse.

Unlike most of our group, I did not get over my craving for liquor during the first few years of abstinence. It was almost always with me. But I have never even considered actually drinking again. I used to get terribly upset when I saw my friends drink and I knew I could not. But I taught myself to believe that I was simply not allowed to drink. Long ago I had that privilege, but I had abused it so badly that it was taken away from me. So it doesn't do me any good to complain about it.

If you think you are an atheist, an agnostic, a skeptic, or have any other form of intellectual pride that keeps you from accepting what is in this book, I feel sorry for you. If you still think you are strong enough to beat your drinking problem alone, that's your business. But if you really and truly want to quit drinking alcohol forever, and sincerely feel that you need some help, we know that we have an answer for you.

It never fails, if you apply it with even half of the enthusiasm you apply to your drinking.

Your Higher Power will never let you down!

APPENDICES

[I. A.A.'s Twelve Steps](#)

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*IX. A History of This Book: Forewords From the First Four Editions of
Alcoholics Anonymous*

I. A.A.'S TWELVE STEPS

Here is a side-by-side chart showing the Twelve Steps next to a plain language explanation. The plain language explanation is not intended to rewrite or replace the Twelve Steps. It is here to help more readers understand and embrace the Steps.

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.
4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.
8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong, promptly admitted it.
11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying for knowledge of His will for us.
12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to other alcoholics, to help them as we had been helped.

***The plain language explanation is not intended to replace the Twelve Steps**

II. A.A.'S TWELVE TRADITIONS

Alcoholics Anonymous has helped its members move from misery to sobriety. It has helped many people choose life over death. A.A. can be just as meaningful and life-changing to all of the alcoholics it has not yet reached.

Because of this, we believe that making sure the program is effective and reliable is critically important. We alcoholics must work together and spend time together. Otherwise most of us will end up dying alone.

We believe that the “Twelve Traditions” of Alcoholics Anonymous help us create unity within the Fellowship. They answer questions like, “What is the best way for A.A. to work?” and, “How can A.A. best stay whole and continue into the future?”

On the next page, you’ll find A.A.’s “Twelve Traditions” in their so-called “short form.” This is the version that most members use today. It is a shortened version of the original “long form” A.A. Traditions that were first printed in 1946. The “long form” is more detailed and part of our history. You can read the “long form” on the pages following the “short form.”

A.A.'S TWELVE TRADITIONS (The Short Form)

Here is a side-by-side chart showing The Twelve Traditions next to a plain language explanation.

1. Our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends upon A.A. unity.
2. For our group purpose there is but one ultimate authority—a loving God as He may express Himself in our group.
3. The only requirement for A.A. membership is a desire to stop drinking.
4. Each group should be autonomous except in matters affecting other groups or A.A. as a whole.
5. Each group has but one primary purpose—to carry its message to the alcoholic who still suffers.
6. An A.A. group ought never endorse, finance or lend the A.A. name to any related facility or outside enterprise, lest it divide loyalties.
7. Every A.A. group ought to be fully self-supporting, declining outside contributions.
8. Alcoholics Anonymous should remain forever nonprofessional, but our service centers may employ special workers.
9. A.A., as such, ought never be organized; but we may create service boards or committees directly responsible to those they serve.
10. Alcoholics Anonymous has no opinion on outside issues; hence the A.A. name ought never be drawn into public controversies.
11. Our public relations policy is based on attraction rather than promotion; we need always maintain personal anonymity in the outside world.
12. Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our Traditions, ever reminding us to place principles before persons.

A.A.'S TWELVE TRADITIONS (The Long Form)

Here is a side-by-side chart showing The Twelve Traditions next to a plain language explanation.

1. Each member of Alcoholics Anonymous is but a small part of a great whole. A.A. must continue to live or most c
2. For our group purpose there is but one ultimate authority—a loving God as He may express Himself in our group
3. Our membership ought to include all who suffer from alcoholism. Hence we may refuse none who wish to recov
4. With respect to its own affairs, each A.A. group should be responsible to no other authority than its own conscien
5. Each Alcoholics Anonymous group ought to be a spiritual entity having but one primary purpose—that of carryi
6. Problems of money, property, and authority may easily divert us from our primary spiritual aim. We think, theref
7. The A.A. groups themselves ought to be fully supported by the voluntary contributions of their own members. W
8. Alcoholics Anonymous should remain forever nonprofessional. We define professionalism as the occupation of c
9. Each A.A. group needs the least possible organization. Rotating leadership is the best. The small group may elec
10. No A.A. group or member should ever, in such a way as to implicate A.A., express any opinion on outside cont
11. Our relations with the general public should be characterized by personal anonymity. We think A.A. ought to av
12. And finally, we of Alcoholics Anonymous believe that the principle of anonymity has an immense spiritual sign

III. SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE

Below is a plain language version of this section of Alcoholics Anonymous.

The words “spiritual experience” and “spiritual awakening” are used many times in the first edition of Alcoholics Anonymous. These terms refer to the personality changes that alcoholics must make to recover from alcoholism. These “spiritual experiences” and “spiritual awakenings” have come into our lives in many different forms.

The first edition of Alcoholics Anonymous led many readers to think that these personality changes or religious experiences must be sudden or extremely dramatic. Luckily, this is not true for all alcoholics.

In the first few chapters of Alcoholics Anonymous, people read about several sudden and startling changes. Many alcoholics read about these and believed that their recovery depended on having a similar experience. They thought they needed to create an immediate and overwhelming “God-consciousness” within themselves. And after that, they needed to experience an enormous change in feeling and attitude. When we wrote this book, we didn’t mean to make anyone believe that this type of dramatic experience was the only type that would work.

Many members do have transformations that are sudden and dramatic, but just as many do not. Most of our experiences are what psychologist William James calls “educational,” which means they happen slowly over time. Often friends of the newcomer notice a difference long before the newcomer notices anything. Eventually, the newcomer realizes that they have gone through a deep and meaningful change that affects how they react to life. They know that this change could not be the result of their own actions. This change may take place over a few months. But it is so intense that it would normally take years of hard work to achieve on their own.

Most A.A. members discover that a Power greater than themselves has helped them make this change. It is the connection to this Higher Power that has made the change so quick and so meaningful.

Most of us think that connecting with a Power greater than ourselves is the core of spiritual experience. Our more religious members call it “God-consciousness.”

We believe very strongly that any alcoholic who can honestly face their problems can recover. As long as they don’t close their mind off to all spiritual ideas. The only thing that can prevent them from recovering is being closed-minded, intolerant, or filled with angry denial.

We have found that very few people struggle with the spirituality of the program. Recovery requires willingness, honesty, and open-mindedness. All three of these are essential.

“There is a mindset that prevents people from accepting new information. It works well against all arguments and keeps people in the darkness forever. The mindset is contempt prior to investigation: deciding to dislike new ideas before you have learned anything about them.”

—(paraphrased from) Herbert Spencer

IV. THE MEDICAL VIEW ON A.A.

Below is a plain language version of this section of Alcoholics Anonymous. The quotes from experts that you see here have been simplified and paraphrased.

Since Dr. Silkworth first wrote about his support of Alcoholics Anonymous, other medical groups and physicians across the world have given their approval of our program. Below are some comments from doctors present at the 1944 annual meeting of the Medical Society of the State of New York, where a paper on A.A. was read aloud:

Dr. Foster Kennedy, neurologist: “Alcoholics Anonymous calls on two of the greatest sources of power known to humankind: religion and our instinct to gather with like-minded people. I think the medical profession needs to be aware of A.A. as a great treatment. If we don’t, we will be guilty of ignoring our emotions and losing the faith that moves mountains. Without both of these things, medicine can do very little to help people.”

Dr. G. Kirby Collier, psychiatrist: “I believe that A.A. is a unique group. They achieve the best results by following their own guidance and their own philosophy. Any program with a recovery rate of 50% to 60% is worth considering.”

Dr. Harry M. Tiebout, psychiatrist: “As a psychiatrist, I have thought a lot about the relationship of my area of expertise to A.A. I have concluded that the work psychiatrists do is often about preparing a patient to accept treatment or outside help. Now I believe the psychiatrist’s job is to break down a patient’s inner walls so that person can grow and thrive. This is also the purpose of the A.A. program.”

Dr. W. W. Bauer, speaking as a member of the American Medical Association in 1946, over the NBC network, said: "Alcoholics Anonymous are not activists or missionaries. They are not a group that tells everyone to stop drinking alcohol. They know that they must never drink. They help other people with similar problems ... In this situation, alcoholics are often able to stop thinking only about themselves. Learning how to depend on a higher power and to enjoy working with other alcoholics, they are able to stay sober day after day. The days add up into weeks, the weeks into months and years."

Dr. John F. Stouffer, Chief Psychiatrist, Philadelphia General Hospital, speaking about his experience with A.A., said: "The alcoholics we get here at Philadelphia General are mostly people who cannot afford to pay for private treatment. A.A. is by far the greatest thing we have been able to offer them. Even the alcoholics who sometimes come back to our hospital for treatment experience a deep and lasting change in personality. You would hardly recognize them."

In 1949, the American Psychiatric Association asked that one of the older members of Alcoholics Anonymous write a paper that would be read at the Association's annual meeting that year. This was done, and the paper was printed in the American Journal of Psychiatry in November 1949.

(For many years, this paper was available as a pamphlet called "Three Talks to Medical Societies by Bill W." Although this has been retired from publication, individual copies are available through the Archives of the General Service Office.)

V. THE LASKER AWARD

Below is the original text of this section of Alcoholics Anonymous.

In 1951, the Lasker Award was given to Alcoholics Anonymous. The citation reads in part as follows:

“The American Public Health Association presents a Lasker Group Award for 1951 to Alcoholics Anonymous in recognition of its unique and highly successful approach to that age-old public health and social problem, alcoholism ... In emphasizing alcoholism as an illness, the social stigma associated with this condition is being blotted out ... Historians may one day recognize Alcoholics Anonymous to have been a great venture in social pioneering which forged a new instrument for social action; a new therapy based on the kinship of common suffering; one having a vast potential for the myriad other ills of mankind.”

VI. THE RELIGIOUS VIEW ON A.A.

Below is a plain language version of this section of Alcoholics Anonymous. The quotes from experts that you see here have been simplified and paraphrased.

Faith leaders from almost every religious tradition have given A.A. their blessing.

Edward Dowling, S.J.,¹ who works for a Jesuit project called the Queen's Work, says, "Alcoholics Anonymous sits at the point where nature meets the supernatural. It helps people understand how feeling humiliated is a first step toward becoming humble. There is something spiritual about an art museum or a symphony, and the Catholic Church supports people enjoying these things. There is something spiritual about A.A., too, and Catholic participation in the program almost always results in struggling Catholics becoming better Catholics."

The Episcopal magazine, The Living Church, wrote: "The idea that Alcoholics Anonymous is built on is the truly Christian principle that people cannot help themselves unless they are helping others. A.A. members describe the program as 'self-insurance.' This self-insurance has helped fix the physical, mental, and spiritual health and self-respect of hundreds of people who would feel hopeless without its unique but effective therapy."

Speaking at a dinner given by John D. Rockefeller Jr. to introduce Alcoholics Anonymous to some of his friends, Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick remarked:

"I think that the A.A. approach has a psychological advantage that no other recovery program can copy. I believe that if the program is wisely handled,

it may grow and expand in positive ways that we can't possibly imagine right now."

1 Father Ed, an early and wonderful friend of A.A., died in the spring of 1960.

VII. HOW TO GET IN TOUCH WITH A.A.

In the United States and Canada, most towns and cities have A.A. groups. If you are anywhere in either country, you can find a local A.A. group by downloading the A.A. Meeting Guide App, searching the Internet for “Alcoholics Anonymous,” using the local telephone directory, or contacting local faith leaders. In large cities, groups often have local offices where alcoholics or their families may come to get help with interviews or hospitalization. These offices are called “intergroup associations,” and they can be found under the listing “A.A.” or “Alcoholics Anonymous” in telephone directories or on the Internet.

You can also access our monthly magazine and podcast by downloading the AA Grapevine app or visiting www.aagrapevine.org.

Alcoholics Anonymous has an international service center in New York City. This can be reached by mail at General Service Office, P.O. Box 459, Grand Central Station, New York, NY 10163. The General Service Board of A.A. (the trustees) administers A.A.’s General Service Office, A.A. World Services, Inc., and our monthly magazine, the AA Grapevine.

If you cannot find A.A. where you live, visit our website www.aa.org to find your nearest central office or “intergroup.” There you can find listings of local meetings, as well as those that meet online and are helpful for those with difficulty accessing physical meetings.

If you are a relative or friend of an alcoholic who doesn’t seem interested in A.A., you can write to the Al-Anon Family Groups, Inc., 1600 Corporate Landing Parkway, Virginia Beach, VA 23454-5617, USA. Or visit the Al-Anon website: www.al-anon.org. This is the global headquarters for the Al-Anon Family Groups, most of whom are partners and friends of A.A. members. This headquarters will give you the location of the nearest family

group and will, if you wish, correspond with you about your special problems.

VIII. A.A.'s TWELVE CONCEPTS (Short Form)

Here is a side-by-side chart showing The Twelve Concepts (Short Form) next to a plain language explanation.

A.A.'s Twelve Steps are principles for personal recovery. The Twelve Traditions ensure the unity of the Fellowship
I. Final responsibility and ultimate authority for A.A. World Services should always reside in the collective conscience
II. The General Service Conference of A.A. has become, for nearly every practical purpose, the active voice and the
III. To ensure effective leadership, we should endow each element of A.A.—the Conference, the General Service Board
IV. At all responsible levels, we ought to maintain a traditional “Right of Participation,” allowing a voting representative
V. Throughout our structure, a traditional “Right of Appeal” ought to prevail, so that minority opinion will be heard
VI. The Conference recognizes that the chief initiative and active responsibility in most world service matters should
VII. The Charter and Bylaws of the General Service Board are legal instruments, empowering the trustees to manage
VIII. The trustees are the principal planners and administrators of overall policy and finance. They have custodial control
IX. Good service leadership at all levels is indispensable for our future functioning and safety. Primary world service
X. Every service responsibility should be matched by an equal service authority, with the scope of such authority within
XI. The trustees should always have the best possible committees, corporate service directors, executives, staffs, and
XII. The Conference shall observe the spirit of A.A. tradition, taking care that it never becomes the seat of perilous

IX. A HISTORY OF THIS BOOK: FOREWORDS FROM THE FIRST FOUR EDITIONS

What you see below are plain language versions of the forewords that were printed in the original versions of Alcoholics Anonymous.

Foreword to the First Edition of Alcoholics Anonymous

We of Alcoholics Anonymous are a group of more than one hundred people who recovered from a seemingly hopeless state of mind and body. To show other alcoholics precisely how we recovered is the main purpose of this book. We hope that what we have written will be so convincing that anyone who reads it will accept it as true. We think our descriptions of our experiences will help everyone to better understand what it's like to be an alcoholic. Many do not realize that alcoholics are very sick people.

Another reason we wrote this book is because we are sure that our way of living can be helpful to all people.

It is important that we remain anonymous because we are a small group right now. We won't be able to handle the large number of requests that we expect to get once the book is published. Since most of us work full-time, we don't have the ability to do that. We want people to understand that the work we do with alcoholics is our calling, and we are never paid for it.

Whenever members of our Fellowship write or speak publicly about alcoholism, we ask them to not use their personal name. Instead, they can just refer to themselves as "a member of Alcoholics Anonymous."

We also ask people in the press and news media to respect this. If they don't, it will make our work much more difficult.

We are not a typical organization. We do not charge any fees or dues. For people to become members, they only need an honest desire to stop drinking. We are not tied to any one faith, sect or denomination. We also don't take official stands against anyone or anything. We simply wish to be helpful to those who suffer.

We are interested to hear from people who get results from this book, especially those who have started work with other alcoholics. We want to be helpful to anyone in that situation.

Questions from scientific, medical, and religious societies are welcome.

Foreword to the Second Edition of Alcoholics Anonymous

Numbers and statistics in this foreword refer to the Fellowship in 1955. Since the original Foreword to this book was written in 1939, a huge miracle has taken place. In the first edition, we shared the hope "that every alcoholic who journeys will find the Fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous at his destination. Already twos and threes and fives of us have sprung up in other communities."

Sixteen years have gone by between our first edition of this book and the second edition in 1955. During that short time, Alcoholics Anonymous has grown quickly into nearly 6,000 groups with many more than 150,000 recovered alcoholics as members. Groups can be found in each of the United States and all of the provinces of Canada. A.A. has taken root in Britain, the Scandinavian countries, South Africa, South America, Mexico, Alaska, Australia, and Hawaii. Overall, we have seen A.A. spring up in 50 foreign countries and U.S. territories. Some are just starting to take shape in Asia. Many of our friends encourage us by saying that this is just the beginning, the sign of a much larger future ahead.

A conversation between a New York businessman and an Akron doctor launched the first A.A. group in Akron, Ohio, in June of 1935. Six months earlier, the businessman had been able to stop drinking after having an intense spiritual experience. This happened to him after a meeting with an alcoholic friend who had been talking with a religious group called the Oxford Group. The businessman had also been helped by Dr. William D. Silkworth, a New York specialist in alcoholism. Dr. Silkworth is now considered to be a medical saint by A.A. members. The story of his own involvement in the early days of our Society can be found at the beginning of this book, in 'The Doctor's Opinion' on page 11. The businessman learned about the deadly serious nature of alcoholism from the doctor. Although he could not accept all the beliefs of the Oxford Groups, he was convinced some of them would help alcoholics. These included a moral inventory, confessing personality defects, making amends to people who had been harmed, helpfulness to others, and belief in and dependence on a Higher Power.

Before his journey to Akron, the businessman had worked hard with many alcoholics because he believed that only an alcoholic could help another alcoholic. Unfortunately, none of the people he tried to help gave up drinking. The businessman had gone to Akron on a business trip which had gone very badly. He was far away from home and feeling upset. He wanted to drink very much and became desperate. He needed to tell his story to another alcoholic as soon as possible. If he could talk to someone who understood exactly what he was feeling, that would help him. The alcoholic he spoke to turned out to be the Akron doctor.

The doctor had also tried many things to stop his drinking and so far nothing had worked. Like the businessman, this doctor had become hopeless. When the businessman shared everything that Dr. Silkworth had told him about alcoholism, the Akron doctor felt hopeful. Thinking about drinking as a sickness with a spiritual solution changed how he felt about alcoholism. It also changed how he felt about himself. He became sober, and never drank up to the moment of his death in 1950. This seemed to prove that one alcoholic could help another in ways that no nonalcoholic could. It also showed that the hard work that one alcoholic does with another was vital to permanent recovery.

Seeing how much it had helped them to talk to each other, the New York businessman and the Akron doctor were eager to start helping other alcoholics in the same way. They started meeting with alcoholics at the Akron City Hospital. The first man they spoke with stopped drinking immediately and never drank again. Along with the businessman and the doctor, he became “A.A. member number three”! All through the summer of 1935, more and more alcoholics began meeting and talking with each other at the Akron City Hospital. Some still drank, but others were able to stop completely. When the businessman returned to New York in the fall of 1935, the first A.A. group had already been formed, though no one realized it at the time.

Soon after, a second small group formed in New York. Another group started in Cleveland in 1937. The basic ideas of A.A. began to spread across the country and more groups were being formed. People who had struggled with drinking finally started to feel hopeful. A.A. was like a light in the darkness.

Seeing this progress, the struggling groups believed it was time to offer their message and unique experience to the world. This idea became reality in the spring of 1939, when this book was first published. The membership of A.A. was about 100 people at that time. The new and growing society didn’t have a name back then. After the book was published, it was called Alcoholics Anonymous, from the title of its own book. The experimental period ended and A.A. began a new phase of its growth and evolution.

Shortly after the book was published, many things began to happen. Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick, a well-known clergyman, read and approved of it. In the fall of 1939, the editor of Liberty magazine printed a piece called “Alcoholics and God.” Right after that, a rush of 800 requests for help arrived at the brand-new New York office of A.A. Each request was carefully and personally answered. Pamphlets and books were sent out. Businessmen from existing groups began visiting with these newcomers when they traveled for work. New groups started up. And to everyone’s great surprise, it became clear that A.A.’s message could be carried in the mail as well as in person. By the end of 1939, it was estimated that 800 alcoholics were on their way to recovery.

*In the spring of 1940, John D. Rockefeller Jr. hosted a dinner for many of his friends and invited A.A. members to tell their stories. News of this spread through the international press. Requests poured in again and many people went to bookstores to buy the book *Alcoholics Anonymous*. By March 1941, membership had shot up to 2,000. Then Jack Alexander wrote a feature article in the *Saturday Evening Post*. His article offered such a clear and urgent picture of A.A. that alcoholics in need of help began contacting us in truly overwhelming numbers. By the end of 1941, A.A. had 8,000 members. We were growing steadily and rapidly.*

A.A. had become a national institution.

Then our Society entered a scary but exciting period of growing pains. It was facing a tough challenge. Could large numbers of former alcoholics successfully meet and work together? Would they argue about membership, leadership, and money? Would certain members try to become powerful within the organization, or grow obsessed with getting famous? Would differences in beliefs split A.A. apart? Soon A.A. was experiencing these exact problems nearly everywhere and in every group. But this frightening period helped us see how important it was to continue our work. We had to stick together or die separately. We had to unify our Fellowship or give up on our work.

We discovered the principles by which individual alcoholics could live their lives. And at the same time, we began to develop principles by which A.A. groups and A.A. as a whole could survive and function effectively. We decided that no alcoholic person could be kept from joining A.A. We decided that our leaders would serve but never make and enforce rules. We decided that each group would be independent and that there would be no Twelve Step experts. We would not charge fees or dues. Our expenses would be paid for by voluntary contributions from members. We avoided creating rigid organization, even in our service centers. Our public relations would focus on attracting interested people rather than promoting A.A. We decided that all members should stay anonymous when speaking to the press, radio, TV, and films. And we would absolutely never say that we approve of other organizations, never create formal partnerships with other groups, and never get involved in public arguments.

These principles helped us create A.A.'s Twelve Traditions, which you can find on page 154 of this book.

These principles were not meant to be rules or laws, but they became widely accepted by A.A. members. In 1950, they were confirmed by our first International Conference held in Cleveland. Today the remarkable unity of A.A. is one of the greatest strengths of our Society.

While we were deciding how to handle our growing pains, public acceptance of A.A. grew by leaps and bounds. There were two main reasons for this: large numbers of members recovering, and large numbers of reunited families. These impressed people everywhere. Of the alcoholics who came to A.A. and really tried, 50% got sober right away and remained that way, and 25% sobered up after some relapses. The remaining 25% who continued to work with A.A. showed improvement. Other people came to a few A.A. meetings and at first decided they didn't want the program. But many of these people—about two out of three—began to return to meetings over time.

Another reason that more people began to accept A.A. was the work of our program's friends—friends in medicine, religion, and the press, together with many others who spoke well of us and spread the news. Without such support, A.A. would have made much slower progress. Some of the recommendations made by A.A.'s medical and religious friends can be found in this book.

Alcoholics Anonymous is not a religious organization. A.A. doesn't take a specific medical point of view. But we do cooperate with people who practice medicine and with faith leaders of all kinds.

Since anyone can be an alcoholic, A.A. members are as diverse as the people who live in the United States. This is also true in other countries. In terms of religion, our membership includes Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Hindus, Muslims, and Buddhists. More than 15% of us are women.

Right now, our membership is growing at a rate of about 20% each year. Since there are several million actual and potential alcoholics in the world, we know we have only begun to solve the problem. It's very likely that A.A. will only be able to help a certain percentage of alcoholics. When it comes to alcoholism recovery programs, ours is not the only one. But we hope that all people who are struggling to find an answer can find one in the pages of this book. And that they will soon join us on the high road to a new freedom.

Foreword to the Third Edition of Alcoholics Anonymous

By March 1976, when this edition went to the printer, the total worldwide membership of Alcoholics Anonymous was roughly one million, with almost 28,000 groups meeting in more than 90 countries.

Surveys of groups in the United States and Canada show that A.A. isn't just helping more and more people. It is also helping a wider and wider variety of people. Women now make up more than a quarter of our membership. For newer members, women are nearly one-third. Seven percent of A.A. members surveyed are under 30 years old. Many are teenagers.

This leads us to believe that the basic principles of the A.A. program are helpful to individuals with many different lifestyles, and also that the program has made recovery possible for people of many different nationalities. The Twelve Steps that summarize the program may be called los Doce Pasos in one country, les Douze Étapes in another, but they show people exactly the same path to recovery that was created by the earliest members of Alcoholics Anonymous.

Although we have seen a huge increase in the size and diversity of this Fellowship, the work we do is still simple and personal. Each day, somewhere in the world, recovery begins when one alcoholic talks with another alcoholic, sharing experience, strength, and hope.

Foreword to the Fourth Edition of Alcoholics Anonymous

The fourth edition of Alcoholics Anonymous was published in November 2001, at the start of a new millennium. Since the third edition was published in 1976, worldwide membership of A.A. has just about doubled. We now have two million or more members, with nearly 100,800 groups meeting in approximately 150 countries around the world.

Writing and publishing played a major role in A.A.'s growth. In the past 25 years, there has been a huge increase in translations of our basic literature into many languages. In country after country where the A.A. seed was planted, it has taken root. Slowly at first, then growing by leaps and bounds whenever literature is available. Currently, Alcoholics Anonymous has been translated into 43 languages.

As the message of recovery has reached larger numbers of people, it has also touched the lives of a wider variety of suffering alcoholics. When the phrase “We are people who normally would not mix” (page 17 of the fourth edition) was written in 1939, it referred to a Fellowship that was mostly men (and a few women) with similar social, ethnic, and economic backgrounds. Like so much of A.A.'s basic text, those words have proved to be far more visionary than the founding members could ever have imagined. The stories added to this edition show a membership whose ages, genders, races, and cultures have become more diverse. They also show that our Fellowship has touched virtually everyone that the first 100 A.A. members could have hoped to reach.

While our literature has protected the original A.A. message, changes in global society have driven us to create new customs and practices within the Fellowship. For example, A.A. members with computers can now participate in meetings online, sharing with fellow alcoholics across the country or around the world. In any meeting, anywhere, A.A.s share experience, strength, and hope with each other so they can stay sober and help other alcoholics. Computer-to-computer or face-to-face, A.A.s speak the language of the heart in all its power and simplicity.

A.A. Literature

A.A. Publications Order forms are available from the General Service Office of Alcoholics Anonymous, Box 459, Grand Central Station, New York, NY 10163. Telephone: (212) 870-3400. Website: www.aa.org

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