

28 Reading the A.A. message

Human beings, we are told, learn many things best by seeing and touching as well as hearing them; and reading about them reinforces the strength of such learning even further.

There are many good publications on alcoholism, and some not so good. Many of us have also profited by reading in other fields. But A.A. neither endorses nor opposes anybody else's publications. We simply offer our own.

Even drinkers who have never before been much for reading spend hours poring over A.A. material. It is undoubtedly the best way to grasp a broad, firsthand consensus of all A.A. wisdom, instead of just the hearsay of one time and place.

There are eight A.A. books and three booklets in a format similar to this one.

Alcoholics Anonymous

This is the basic textbook of A.A. experience.

A.A. as we know it is the outgrowth of this book, which was originally prepared by a hundred or so alcoholics who had learned to stay sober by helping each other. After a few years of sobriety, they recorded what they had done and gave the account this title. Our Fellowship then began to be called by the name *Alcoholics Anonymous*.

In this volume, the original A.A. experience is spelled out by those who did it first, then wrote about it. It is the primary source book of all basic A.A. thought for all of us—whether we read and reread it often or seldom. Most members get a copy as soon after coming to A.A. as they can, so they may take the fundamental A.A. ideas directly from the source, not hear of them second- or third-hand.

Members often refer to *Alcoholics Anonymous* as the “Big Book,” but not to compare it with any sacred text. Its first printing (in 1939) was on very thick paper, so it came out surprisingly fat and was laughingly dubbed the Big Book.

The first 11, basic chapters were written by Bill W., co-founder of A.A. It also contains many A.A. members' own stories, as written by themselves, and several appendixes of additional matter.

Simply reading the book was enough to sober up some people in A.A.'s early days, when there were only a few A.A. groups in the world. It still works that way for some problem drinkers in isolated parts of the world, or for those who live on seagoing vessels.

Regular readers of the book say that repeated readings reveal many deeper meanings that cannot be grasped at the first hurried glance.

Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions

A.A. fundamentals are discussed at even greater depth in this book, also written by Bill W. (It is sometimes nicknamed “The Twelve and Twelve.”) Members who want to study the A.A. program of recovery seriously use it as a text, in conjunction with the Big Book.

Written 13 years after *Alcoholics Anonymous*, this smaller volume explains principles of A.A. behavior, both individual and group. The Twelve Steps, guides to individual growth, had been discussed more briefly in the Big Book; the group principles—the Twelve Traditions—became crystallized through trial and error, after the first book was published. They characterize the movement and make it unique—quite unlike other societies.

Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age

This brief history tells how the Fellowship started, and how it grew for its first 20 years. It recounts the tale of how a small group of courageous, once-hopeless former drunkards—with all the odds against them—finally became securely established as a worldwide movement of acknowledged effectiveness.

As Bill Sees It

A reader of Bill W.’s pithiest paragraphs, from his voluminous personal correspondence as well as other writings. A subject index covers topics of interest to any problem drinker.

Dr. Bob and the Good Oldtimers

The life story of A.A.’s co-founder is interwoven with recollections of early A.A. in the Midwest, mostly in pioneer members’ own words.

“Pass It On”

This biography of A.A.’s co-founder is subtitled “The Story of Bill Wilson and How the A.A. Message Reached The World.” It also traces the development of the Fellowship; 39 photographs from A.A.’s history.

Experience, Strength and Hope

Fifty-six retired stories from the first three editions of the Big Book.

Daily Reflections: A Book of Reflections by A.A. Members for A.A. Members

A.A.s reflect on favorite quotations from A.A. literature. A reading for each day of the year.

Came to Believe

Subtitled “The Spiritual Adventure of A.A. as Experienced by Individual Members,” this is a collection of 75 members’ versions of “a Power greater than ourselves.” They range from orthodox religious interpretations through humanistic and agnostic views.

A.A. in Prison: Inmate to Inmate

A collection of 26 stories, some previously printed in AA Grapevine, sharing the experience of men and women who found A.A. while in prison.

Pamphlets

Many pamphlets and flyers on various aspects of A.A., some of them addressed to special-interest groups, are also published by A.A. World Services, Inc.

They have all been carefully prepared under close supervision by A.A. representatives from all over the U.S. and Canada, so that they represent the broadest possible consensus of A.A. thinking. It is impossible to understand all the workings of A.A. unless one is well acquainted with all these publications (complete listing on page 92).

In addition, the A.A. General Service Office produces a quarterly newsletter, *Box 4-5-9*, and several other bulletins, as well as a report on the annual General Service Conference of A.A.

Many A.A. members start and end each day with a quiet moment in which they read a passage of some A.A. literature. Poring over A.A. books and pamphlets represents “a meeting in print” for many members, and the range of A.A. information and inspiration summed up in them cannot be found anywhere else. Any A.A. reading starts a trail of A.A. thinking which leads away from a drink, so many A.A.’s always carry with them some piece of A.A. literature—not just because reading it can help ward off the kind of thinking that leads to drinking, but also because it can afford refreshment and entertainment for the mind at odd moments. A.A. literature not available at an A.A. meeting can be ordered directly by writing to: Box 459, Grand Central Station, New York, NY 10163. You may fax your order to (212) 870-3137, call (212) 870-3400, or e-mail: orders@aa.org.

AA Grapevine

Every month, a fresh collection of A.A. thought and humor appears in the print magazine while new stories are added weekly to aagrapevine.org. Almost all of the articles, graphics and cartoons are submitted by members of A.A., their contributions are not paid.

Whether in print, online or in audio, Grapevine contains inspiring

stories of experience, strength and hope, illustrations, news about A.A. and letters from A.A. members around the globe.

Individual and bulk subscriptions may be ordered online at aagrapevine.org or by writing to Grapevine, PO Box 16867, No. Hollywood, CA 91615-6867.

AA Grapevine also publishes La Viña, a bi-monthly Spanish-language magazine. For ordering information go to aagrapevine.org/español or write to La Viña, PO Box 15635, No. Hollywood, CA 91615-5635.

29 Going to A.A. meetings

Long before this booklet was even thought of, every single idea in it and many more suggestions for living sober were learned and *proved successful* by hundreds of thousands of alcoholics. We did this not just by reading, but also by talking to each other. At first, we mostly listened.

You can easily do the same thing, free, and you don't have to "join" anything.

What we did was simply go to meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous. There are over five million each year, in approximately 170 countries around the globe. And remember, you do not have to become an A.A. member in order to visit some A.A. meetings. If all you want to do is sort of "try out" A.A., you are entirely welcome to attend A.A. meetings as an observer and just listen quietly, without saying a word. You don't need to give your name, or you can give a phony one if you want to. A.A. understands. It doesn't record names of either members or visitors attending its meetings, anyhow. You won't have to sign anything, or answer any questions.

Feel free to ask some, if you wish. But many people prefer just to listen the first few times.

Like practically everyone else who has gone to an A.A. meeting, you'll probably be very surprised the first time. The people you see around you look mostly normal, healthy, reasonably happy, and successful. They do not look like old-fashioned cartoons of drunkards, bums, or fanatic, dried-up teetotalers.

What's more, you'll usually find us quite a friendly bunch, doing a lot of laughing—at ourselves. That is why, if you are hung-over, an A.A. gathering provides a cheerful environment for getting past the hang-over and beginning to feel much, much better.

You can be very sure that every A.A. member in that room deeply understands exactly how you feel, because we remember vividly our own hangover miseries, and how it felt the first time we ever went to an A.A. meeting.

If you are shy, kind of a loner—just like many of us—you'll find the A.A. members willing to let you pretty much alone if that is really what you want and it makes you more comfortable.

However, most of us found it much more beneficial to hang around for a bite and a chat after the meeting. Feel free to participate in the socializing, or "eyeball-to-eyeball sharing," just as much, or as little, as you wish.

Different kinds of A.A. meetings

Many A.A. members from all over the U.S. and Canada were asked for ideas for this booklet. Near the top in all their lists is the suggestion that one of the surest ways of avoiding drinking is going to various kinds of A.A. meetings. "That's where we learn all these ideas from each other," one member wrote.

If you want to stay sober, going to *any* A.A. meeting is, of course, safer than going to a bar or a party, or staying at home with a bottle!

Chances for avoiding malaria are best when you stay away from a swamp full of mosquitoes. Just so, chances of not drinking are better at an A.A. meeting than they are in a drinking situation.

In addition, at A.A. meetings there is a kind of momentum toward recovery. Whereas drinking is the object of a cocktail party, sobriety is the common goal aimed for at any A.A. meeting. Here, perhaps more than anywhere else, you are surrounded by people who understand drinking, who appreciate your sobriety, and who can tell you many means of furthering it. Besides, you see many, many examples of successfully recovered, happy, nondrinking alcoholics. That's not what you see in barrooms.

Here are the most popular kinds of A.A. group meetings, and some of the benefits derived from attending them.

Beginners (or newcomers) meetings

These are usually smaller than other meetings, and often precede a larger meeting. They are open to anyone who thinks he or she may possibly have a drinking problem. In some places, these meetings are a series of scheduled discussions or talks about alcoholism, about recovery, and about A.A. itself. In others, the beginners meetings are simply question-and-answer sessions.

A.A.'s who have used these meetings a lot point out that these are

excellent places to ask questions, to make new friends, and to begin to feel comfortable in the company of alcoholics who are not drinking.

Open meetings (anyone welcome, alcoholic or not)

These are likely to be a little more organized, a little more formal. Usually, two or three members (who have volunteered in advance) in turn tell the group about their alcoholism, what happened, and what their recovery is like.

An A.A. talk of this type does not have to follow any set pattern. Of course, only a tiny handful of A.A. members are trained orators. In fact, even those A.A.'s whose jobs involve professional speaking carefully avoid making speeches at A.A. meetings. Instead, they try to tell their own stories as simply and directly as possible.

What is unmistakable is the almost startling sincerity and honesty you hear. You'll probably be surprised to find yourself laughing a lot, and saying to yourself, "Yes, that's just what it's like!"

One of the big benefits of attending such open meetings is the opportunity to hear a wide, wide variety of actual case histories of alcoholism. You hear the symptoms of the illness described in many varying forms, and that helps you decide whether you have it.

Naturally, each A.A. member's experiences have been different from the others'. It is possible that sometime you'll hear someone recall favorite drinks, drinking patterns, and drinking problems (or drinking fun) very much like your own. On the other hand, the incidents in the drinking stories you hear may be quite unlike yours. You will hear people of many different backgrounds, occupations, and beliefs. Each member speaks *only* for himself (or herself), and voices only his or her own opinions. No one can speak for all of A.A., and no one has to agree with any sentiments or ideas expressed by any other A.A. member. Diversity of opinion is welcomed and valued in A.A.

But if you listen carefully, you will probably recognize familiar feelings, if not familiar events. You will recognize the emotions of the speaker as having been much like your own, even if the life you hear about has been radically different from yours.

In A.A., this is called "identifying with the speaker." It does not mean that the age, the sex, the life-style, the behavior, the pleasures, or the troubles of the speaker are identical to yours. But it does mean that you hear of fears, excitements, worries, and joys which you can empathize with, which you remember feeling at times yourself.

It may surprise you that you will almost never hear an A.A. speaker sound self-pitying about being deprived of alcohol.

Identifying with the speaker's past may not be as important as getting an impression of his or her present life. The speaker usually has

found, or is reaching for, some contentment, peace of mind, solutions to problems, zest for living, and a kind of health of the spirit which you, too, want. If so, hang around. Those qualities are contagious in A.A.

Besides, the reminders you get of the miseries of active alcoholism can help extinguish any lurking desire to take a drink!

At meetings like this, many A.A. members have heard the very tips on recovery they were looking for. And almost all members leave such a meeting so refreshed and so encouraged in their recovery that the last thing on earth they want is a drink.

Closed discussion meetings (only for alcoholics—or for people who are trying to find out whether they are alcoholics)

Some A.A. groups hold discussion meetings labeled “open,” so anyone is welcome to attend. More often, such meetings are described as “closed,” for members or prospective members only, so those who attend can feel free to discuss any topic that might trouble—or interest—any problem drinker. These are confidential discussions.

A member who has volunteered in advance may lead off the meeting by telling briefly of his or her own alcoholism and recovery. The meeting is then open for general discussion.

Anyone troubled by a particular problem, no matter how painful or embarrassing, may air it at a discussion meeting and hear from others present their experiences at handling the same or a similar problem. And yes, experiences of happiness and joy are shared, too. One surely learns in such discussions that no alcoholic is unique or alone.

It has been said that these meetings are the workshops in which an alcoholic learns how to stay sober. Certainly, one can pick up at discussion meetings a broad range of suggestions for maintaining a happy sobriety.

Step meetings

Many A.A. groups hold weekly meetings at which one of the Twelve Steps of the A.A. program is taken up in turn and forms the basis of the discussion. A.A.’s Twelve Traditions, the Three Legacies of A.A., A.A. slogans, and discussion topics suggested in A.A.’s monthly magazine, the Grapevine, are also used by some groups for this purpose. But other topics are almost never ruled out, especially if someone present feels an urgent need for help with an immediate, pressing personal problem.

In conjunction with the books *Alcoholics Anonymous* and *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, Step meetings afford perhaps the most easily grasped insights into and understanding of the fundamental principles of recovery in A.A. These sessions also furnish a wealth of origi-

nal interpretations and applications of the basic A.A. program—showing how we can use it, not only to stay sober, but to enrich our lives.

State, regional, national, and International A.A. Conventions and Conferences

Attended by anywhere from hundreds to more than 50,000 A.A. members, often accompanied by their families, these king-size A.A. gatherings usually are weekend affairs consisting of many kinds of session. The programs often include discussion workshops on varied topics, as well as talks by guest experts on alcoholism, and usually a banquet, a dance, entertainment, and time for other social or recreational activities, all the more highly enjoyed because they are alcohol-free. They show us how much fun we can have sober.

They also give us a chance to meet and learn from A.A.'s who live in other areas. For many members, these occasions become favorite holiday weekends, as well as highly prized, peak experiences in recovery. They provide inspiring memories to cherish on ordinary days, and often see the start of close, lifelong friendships.

Do we have to go to those meetings for the rest of our lives?

Not at all, unless we want to.

Thousands of us seem to enjoy meetings more and more as the sober years go by. So it is a pleasure, not a duty.

We all have to keep on eating, bathing, breathing, brushing our teeth, and the like. And millions of people continue year after year working, reading, going in for sports and other recreation, frequenting social clubs, and performing religious worship. So our continued attendance at A.A. meetings is hardly peculiar, as long as we enjoy them, profit from them, and keep the rest of our lives in balance.

But most of us go to meetings more frequently in the first years of our recovery than we do later. It helps set a solid foundation for a longterm recovery.

Most A.A. groups hold one or two meetings a week (lasting about an hour or an hour and a half). And it is widely believed in A.A. that a new A.A. member fares best by getting into the habit of regularly attending the meetings of at least one group, as well as visiting other groups from time to time. This not only provides a big choice of differing A.A. ideas; it also helps bring into the problem drinker's life a measure of orderliness, which helps combat alcoholism.

We have found it quite important, especially in the beginning, to attend meetings faithfully, no matter what excuses present themselves for staying away.

We need to be as diligent in attending A.A. meetings as we were in

drinking. What serious drinker ever let distance, or weather, or illness, or business, or guests, or being broke, or the hour, or anything else keep him or her from that really wanted drink? We cannot let anything keep us from A.A. meetings, either, if we really want to recover.

We have also found that going to meetings is *not* something to be done only when we feel the temptation to drink. We often get more good from the meetings by attending them when we feel fine and haven't so much as thought of drinking. And even a meeting which is not totally, instantly satisfying is better than no meeting at all.

Because of the importance of meetings, many of us keep a list of local meetings with us at all times, and never travel far from home base without taking along one of the A.A. directories, or accessing a directory online, which enable us to find meetings or fellow members almost anywhere on earth.

When serious illness or natural catastrophe makes missing a meeting absolutely unavoidable, we have learned to work out substitutes for the meetings. (It's amazing, though, how often we hear that blizzards in subarctic regions, hurricanes, and even earthquakes have *not* prevented A.A.'s from traveling a hundred miles or more to get to meetings. With a meeting to reach, getting there by canoe, camel, helicopter, jeep, truck, bicycle, or sleigh is as natural to some A.A.'s as using cars, buses, or subways is for the rest of us.)

As a substitute for a meeting, when attendance is impossible, we may contact A.A. friends on the telephone, by ham radio, or electronically; or we may participate in one of the many online meetings available on the Internet. If none of these methods is available, we may simply hold a meeting in our minds while reading some A.A. material or a story from the Grapevine.

For several hundred isolated A.A. "Loners" (such as armed services personnel far from home) and for seagoing A.A. "Internationalists" and "Homers," special services are provided free by the General Service Office of A.A. to help them keep in close contact with A.A. They receive the *Loners-Internationalists Meeting (LIM)* and lists that enable them to communicate with other members (by letters or e-mail) between the times they find it possible to go to regular A.A. meetings.

But many of those who are on their own do something even better when they find no A.A. group near enough for them to attend. They start a group.

The money question

Alcoholism is expensive. Although A.A. itself charges no dues or fees whatsoever, we have already paid pretty heavy "dues" to liquor

stores and bartenders before we get here. Therefore, many of us arrive at A.A. nearly broke, if not heavily in debt.

The sooner we can become self-supporting, the better, we have found. Creditors are almost always happy to go along with us as long as they see we are really making an honest, regular effort to climb out of the hole, even in tiny installments.

A particular kind of expenditure, however—in addition to food, clothing, and shelter, naturally—has been found extremely valuable in our first sober days. One of us has given his permission to print here his

Investment Counsel

In the first few weeks without a drink
 When the wolf is at the door,
 And the sheriff's at the window
 And you're sleeping on the floor,
 And life looks bleak and hopeless
 From a monetary angle,
 It's time to *spend*, in certain ways,
 To solve the awful tangle:
 That token or that bus fare
 To get you to a meeting,
 That dime to use the telephone
 For that necessary greeting,
 That nickel for "expenses"
 That makes you feel you matter,
 That dollar for the coffee shop
 For after-meeting chatter.
 All these are wise investments
 For the neophyte to make.
 This "bread," when cast upon the waters,
 Always comes back cake.

30 Trying the Twelve Steps

"When all else fails," said the old country doctor, "follow directions."

We have not talked about the Twelve Steps offered by A.A. as a program of recovery from alcoholism, and they are not going to be listed or explained here, because anyone curious about them can find them elsewhere. Their origin is striking, however.

In 1935, two men met in Akron, Ohio. Both of them were then considered hopeless drunkards, which seemed shameful to those who had known them. One had been a Wall Street hot shot; the other, a noted surgeon; but both had drunk themselves almost to death. Each had tried many "cures" and been hospitalized over and over. It looked certain, even to them, that they were beyond help.

Almost accidentally, in getting to know each other, they stumbled onto an astonishing fact: When each of them tried to help the other, the result was sobriety. They took the idea to an alcoholic lawyer confined to a hospital bed, and he, too, decided to try it.

The three then kept on, each in his individual life, trying to help one alcoholic after another. If the people they tried to help sometimes did not want their aid, they nevertheless knew the effort was worthwhile, because, in each case, the would-be helper stayed sober even if the "patient" kept on drinking.

Persisting at this avocation for their own benefit, this nameless little band of ex-drunks suddenly realized in 1937 that 20 of them were sober! They cannot be blamed for thinking a miracle had happened.

They agreed they ought to write a record of what had happened, so their experience could be widely distributed. But, as you can imagine, they ran into real difficulty in reaching agreement on what precisely had taken place. It wasn't until 1939 that they were able to publish an account they could all subscribe to. By then, they numbered about 100.

They wrote that the pathway to recovery they had followed up to then consisted of twelve steps, and they believed anyone who followed that pathway would reach the same destination.

Their number has grown to more than two million. And they are virtually unanimous in their conviction: "Practical experience shows that nothing will so much insure immunity from drinking as intensive work with other alcoholics. It works when other activities fail."

Many of us had long been booze-fighters. Time after time, we had stopped drinking and tried to stay stopped, only to return to drinking sooner or later and find ourselves in increasing trouble. But those Twelve Steps of A.A. mark our road to recovery. Now, we do not have to fight any more. And our path is open to all comers.

Hundreds of us had only a vague idea of what A.A. was before we actually came to this Fellowship. Now, we sometimes think there is more misinformation than truth about A.A. floating around. So if you have not looked into A.A. firsthand, we can imagine some of the distorted, false impressions you may have picked up, since we had so many of them ourselves.

Happily, you need not be misled by such misrepresentations and

rumors, because it is perfectly easy to see and hear the real A.A. for yourself. A.A. publications (see page 72) and any nearby A.A. office or meeting (see your local telephone directory or check G.S.O.'s A.A. website) are original sources of facts which surprised many of us. You need not take any second-hand opinions, because you can get free information and make up your own mind.

Really getting a fair picture of A.A. may be one instance in which willpower can be put to very good use. We know for sure that alcoholics do have tremendous willpower. Consider the ways we could manage to get a drink in defiance of all visible possibilities. Merely to get up some mornings—with a rusting cast-iron stomach, all your teeth wearing tiny sweaters, and each hair electrified—takes willpower many nondrinkers rarely dream of. Once you've gotten up with your head, on those certain mornings, the ability to carry it all through the day is further evidence of fabulous strength of will. Oh yes, *real* drinkers have *real* willpower.

The trick we learned was to put that will to work for our health, and to *make* ourselves explore recovery ideas at great depth, even though it sometimes might have seemed like drudgery.

It may help if you try to remember that A.A. members are not eager to question you. We may not even seem to be listening to you much, but spend more time laying on you the unvarnished facts of our own illness. We are in pursuit of recovery, you know, so we talk to you very much for our own benefit. We want to help you, all right, but only if you want us to.

It may be that problem drinking is, indeed, as some psychological experts say, an ailment characterized especially by egocentricity. Not all alcoholics are egotistical, although many of us have learned to see that tendency in ourselves. Others of us felt inferior most of the time; we felt equal or superior to other people only when drinking.

No matter which type we were, we realize now that we were excessively self-centered, chiefly concerned about *our* feelings, *our* problems, other people's reactions to *us*, and *our* own past and future. Therefore, trying to get into communication with and to help other people is a recovery measure for us, because it helps take us out of ourselves. Trying to heal ourselves by helping others works, even when it is an insincere gesture. Try it some time.

If you really listen to (not just hear) what is being said, you may find the person talking has quietly slipped inside your head and seems to be describing the landscape there—the shifting shapes of nameless fears, the color and chill of impending doom—if not the actual events and words stored in your brain.

And whether this happens or not, you will almost surely have a

good laugh or two in the company of A.A.'s, and you'll probably pick up a couple of ideas on living sober. If you want to use them, that is up to you.

Whatever you decide to do, remember that making these ideas available is one of the steps toward recovery for us.

31 Finding your own way

We hope this booklet has made it eminently clear that we don't consider drinking a frivolous subject. Alcoholism deserves and gets dead serious attention from us. We do not find jokes told at the expense of sick problem drinkers funny, except those we tell on ourselves from our vantage point of sobriety. We aren't amused when someone teasingly threatens to get drunk. That's like teasing about Russian roulette.

In spite of our serious attitude toward alcoholism, you will find we can usually talk with humor and detachment about our past and our recovery. This is a healthy approach, we think. Certainly, it does not weaken our resolve to get and stay well.

Most of us have seen death close up. We have known the kind of suffering that wrenches the bones. But we also have known the sort of hope that makes the heart sing. And we hope this booklet has conveyed to you more encouragement than pain. If you are a problem drinker, you already know enough about pain and loneliness. We'd like you to find some of the peace and joy we have found in meeting the reality of life's ups and downs with a clear head and a steady heart.

No doubt, we have made just a bare beginning in the business of living sober. Time and again, we learn additional ideas that can help.

As you stay sober, you are sure to think of new ideas not recorded here. We hope so. We also hope that when you do come up with fresh ideas on this subject, you will pass them on. Please do share. (You'll recall that the act of sharing can itself be helpful to you.) The more experience we can all pool, the more problem drinkers can be helped.

Some of us go back to drinking a time or so before we get a real foothold on sobriety. If that happens to you, don't despair. Many of us have done this and have finally come through to successful sobriety. Try to remember that alcoholism is an extremely serious human con-

dition, and that relapses are as possible in this ailment as in others. Recovery can still follow.

Even after setbacks, if you continue to want to get well, and remain willing to try new approaches, our experience convinces us that you have embarked with hundreds of thousands of companions on the path of a happy, healthy destiny. We hope we see you among us in person.

But whatever track you travel, along with us or on your own, you go with our strongest good wishes.