

Impressions of A. A.

BY THE CHICAGO GROUP (1940's)

When membership in ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS was first suggested to us by an alcoholic friend, it was with considerable misgiving that many of us agreed to the association. Prior to reading the book ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS many of us had little conception of the alcoholic problem. We had the naive idea, common among persons whose drinking habits are similar to what ours once were, that an alcoholic was a social derelict -- a forlorn object of pity, without money, without position, without family and without friends. We have since learned that while such a condition is not uncommon it is not necessarily so.

The pass key to the door of understanding of alcoholism, as we members of ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS understand the problem, is the recognition and the admission on the part of the prospective member that he is an alcoholic. If he is not alcoholic, our group has nothing to offer him. If he is, an observance of our program will eliminate the alcoholic problem from his life. We have nothing to offer the controlled drinker. We are in no sense a temperance society. Neither are we crusaders in an anti-alcohol campaign. We have no quarrel with alcohol as such. Nor have we the slightest desire to cause controlled drinkers to abandon what to them is a pleasurable and entertaining diversion. We carry the torch for no one but ourselves.

In the formal sense we are not an organization at all. We have no officers, no dues, no obligations to any but

ourselves and to other alcoholics. We have no axes to grind, no selfish purposes to achieve, no ambition to serve other than to save ourselves from what to us was a consuming evil. We are not scientists. Most of us have little, if any, knowledge of the cause of alcoholism, nor do we as a group attempt to answer the age old inquiry "Why do I take the first drink?" We have made a study of ourselves in the light of the principals enunciated in our book-- the twelve principals which are appended hereto -- and through such study and a statement to others of the method of our study, we find that we can be helpful in aiding them to recognize their problem, if their problem is alcohol.

How then did we arrive at the conclusion that we were alcoholics? First, let us briefly define the term as we understand it. An alcoholic to us means an abnormal or an uncontrolled drinker. It is not so much the amount or the frequency of drinking as it is the effect of the drinks consumed. Within our Chicago group are those who for years drank as much as two quarts of whiskey a day. There are others whose monthly consumption might not exceed that much. There are those who drank daily for years to the point of intoxication, and others who would go months without so much as a glass of beer. There are those of high standing in the professional and business world and those from the flop houses of West Madison Street. There are those who have voluntarily subjected themselves repeatedly to numerous so-called "cures" some who voluntarily had themselves committed to psychopathic institutions and insane asylums; others who have experienced no more severe distress than an agonizing case of jitters. Those of us who had reached the depths of degradation prior to finding this program, and who had been long since become aware that we were alcoholics, frequently found it easier to accept the principals of A.A. than those who, by reason of less humiliating experiences, refused to acknowledge their problem.

But we are all the same in this respect; that, having started to drink, we had no self-control that would

indicate a stopping point. We do not mean by this statement to be understood as asserting that in every instance where we took the first drink, that we would necessarily end in drunken stupefaction. We do mean, however, that having taken the first drink, we did not know what might be the reaction. Pausing in our way from our shop or from our office to our home for a sociable drink at the corner saloon, it might be that we would stop with two or three drinks. Sometimes we did. But frequently we did not, and never did we know when we stopped for the first how many might follow. It might be a matter of ten minutes and it might be ten days. We also observed another identifying mark and that was whether we drank to excess on every occasion when we were subjected to the first drink, or whether on many occasions we were able to control the impulse short of satiety, our inclination was always toward the former course. We might by virtue of important responsibilities release ourselves from the urge which the first few drinks had engendered, but we were always resentful of the interference. There was no occasion, once the urge had been indulged, even though meagerly, that our preference was not to continue drinking. And whether we succumbed frequently or infrequently we were all alike in that on those occasions when the urge was in command no inhibiting factors could possibly intervene. Our sense of responsibility, our will power and our standards of value were gone.

It has been stated that the nervous system of certain individuals is allergic to alcohol; that this drug in even small quantities sets up a type of nervous disturbance which seems to require additional alcohol to satisfy its impulse. It well may be that certain individuals have the same nervous allergy for alcohol that certain other people have a physical allergy for some kinds of food. Whether this analogy be sound or otherwise, the fact remains that in the case of all of us, once we took the first drink, we had no definite assurance as to when the reaction would be. We were no longer masters of our destiny.

We know from experience that normal people do not so react to alcohol. Drink to them is a beverage or a pleasurable stimulant, but they recognize when they approach the point beyond which it ceases to be such and becomes a menace. We all know in our acquaintance men "who drink like gentlemen", and always during our drinking careers it was our ambition to so drink. We did not enjoy in sober contemplation making spectacles of ourselves. We dreaded the remorse of the "morning after" and we feared the terrible depression following a prolonged spree. We always felt, notwithstanding the unhappy experience of the years, that some day we could handle the stuff, but now we know that the alcoholic can never become a controlled drinker. Due to forces in his physical or psychic make-up, which we do not profess to understand, he cannot recognize or observe the danger signal.

Having recognized ourselves to be alcoholics within the above definition, the next step in our program suggested the question: Did we desire to stop drinking? Again we say that unless there is a sincere desire to abandon the practice, then our group has nothing to offer the alcoholic.

With us the desire to cease drinking was present. Years of uncontrolled drinking had made our lives unmanageable. The similarity of alcoholic experiences is amazing. The intimate exchanges of confidences, which seems to follow in group association such as ours, discloses that within certain limits we have all followed identical patterns; loss of home, of friends; self-deceit, recriminations, self-pity, envies, jealousies, dishonesty, resentments, lying, deceit and worse vices, we found common to all.

The desire to abandon the bottle must be, on the part of the neophyte in this program, something deeper than a superficial emotional revulsion from the miserable predicament into which a last bender brought him. There must be a sane, dispassionate, contemplative realization that the vices enumerated above are evil and that in our

case uncontrolled drinking is the soil in which they grow.

Then proposed itself the question -- how?

Many of us felt that we had exhausted all conceivable remedies; will power, medicine, pledges, cures, psychiatry. All had failed not once but many times.

What has ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS to offer that will power and science failed to afford us? We knew that we were powerless against alcohol; that we could neither help ourselves nor could the most intelligent of our fellowmen assist us, and in our extremity we came to the realization that most of us were beyond human aid. But wasn't there an avenue of escape that we had not explored? In our helplessness the assurance came to us that there was a power greater than ourselves, whom most men call God, who would help if humbly invoked. Before coming into this group a great many of us were agnostic, at least we were such in an academic sense. Many of us had had religious teaching in our formative years, -- some of us had none. But in the majority of our cases we had not found in religion a rule of life. We had seen much hypocrisy on the part of those who professed to be adherents of religious denominations. Our friends for the most part were those not given to religious thought or observance. When it was suggested to us as a step in this program that we turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him, there were many of us who rebelled, determining that as between the extreme of ruin from the bottle, and the boredom of evangelism, we preferred the former.

But as we inquired further into the subject, we came to the realization that the recognition of a Power greater than ourselves and upon whom we might call for help did not necessarily involve religion in a denominational sense. All that was required of us was a belief in God as we understood him. We found that once the barriers of prejudice are removed, that a practical concept of an intelligent God was not difficult for us. We have found, too, that many find comfort in the formal observation of teachings of the religion in which they were early

educated, and that what they considered agnosticism was in a large part a refusal to investigate. We are not required to accept any other person's idea of God. Within our group are found Jews, Protestants and Catholics, and there is no reason why Buddhists, Mohammedans, or adherents of any other religious faith might not be included. All that is required is a recognition of a Supreme Being which would help us were He sincerely petitioned. Our experience led us to believe that there are few, if any, civilized persons who have not a belief of some kind in a Supreme Being. The individual interpretations of this Supreme Being may differ widely, but to us the simplest acceptance of such Power involved a recognition of a first cause or, in other words, a Creator.

As everything that we observe about us in the world is an effect due to some cause, we found it easy to subscribe to the proposition that we also were effects in the greater scheme of things who owe our being to a cause. That cause we designated the Supreme Power. Inasmuch as we consider ourselves as intelligent beings, and see in every act of creation order and design denoting intelligence, we concluded that the being that caused us was of greatest intelligence -- a simple recognition that the Creator is greater than the creature. We became persuaded that this Creator, having the ability and being intelligent, would hear us in our extremity if we asked for help.

We further realized, however, that mere lip service was not sufficient and felt that in asking the Supreme Being for help, we should give something in return. What did we have to offer?

Each of us recognized that we had a conscience; that in each individual case conscience dictated what for us was right and what for us was wrong. This voice of conscience we interpreted as being a direction from the Supreme Being as to how and in what manner we should lead our lives. This conscience dictated to us that we should be honest with ourselves and in our dealings

with our fellowmen; that we should be tolerant and just and charitable; in a word, that we should do unto others as we would have them do unto us. We, therefore, petitioned God, as we understood Him, asking aid in conquering the disease which had led many of us to the brink of destruction and threatened to destroy us all, promising in exchange that we would, insofar as we were able, lead lives that were in accord with the dictates of our individual consciences. In accomplishment of this purpose we realized that it was necessary to take a complete moral inventory of ourselves; and to humble ourselves by admitting our past derelictions to the Supreme Being, ourselves and at least one other person.

Years of drinking found us with large debit balances to be liquidated. A moral inventory had indicated the extent of this indebtedness. Many of these obligations required physical repayment, but by far the greater and more important part were moral. We made a mental or physical list of these physical and moral creditors and determined insofar as we were able to make restitution. As our financial condition permitted we commenced, however modestly, to repay our physical debts. But slander, injustice, ingratitude, and the daily mental cruelties which we had practiced in most part on those who were closest to us, were more formidable. The liquidation of such we realized to be the work of a lifetime which could be accomplished only by eradicating from our lives those besetting vices, some of which were earlier referred to.

We realized that being alcoholics, we would continue to remain such for the rest of our lives; that the program of ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS was not a cure for alcoholism but was a rule of conduct which, if followed perseveringly in all the affairs of life, would keep us from the first drink. Too well did we know that we would never become controlled drinkers, but that the day we abandoned our program would find us at the exact point where we were when our drinking was arrested. From the foregoing it is to be concluded that the program of

ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS is not a cure. It is not a formula that may be grasped, applied and abandoned. Neither is it a discovery. It is the application in our daily lives of principles as old as the golden rule or the Sermon on the Mount. It is not advocated that the neophyte make a pledge to forever abstain from drink. Our approach is rather on a daily basis. We ask for help from a Power greater than ourselves in a quiet time each day as we take our moral inventory, and our prayer is for assistance during the particular day, or oftener as the individual case may require.

Finally, it became manifest to us that as part of our regeneration, assistance to other alcoholics who sincerely wished to be rid of their addiction was necessary. We have found group association to be of inestimable assistance. Only the alcoholic can adequately understand and sympathize with the other alcoholic's problem.

While we recognize that the essential aid to overcome our problem comes from a Power greater than ourselves, it is also manifest to us that the alcoholics are the human agents through which this Power is directed. Especially in the beginning do we lean heavily upon each other. We are like those who, having suffered and recovered from a usually fatal malady, contain within the blood stream, by virtue of prior infection, the anti-toxin which will be the only means of saving the lives of other unfortunate victims of the same disease.

Probably the most emotionally satisfying part of our program is the aid which we have been able to give to others. Much of this program is not easy for all. It involves acts of humility and sacrifice. But the feeling of elation each of us has enjoyed in the knowledge that we, and in most cases only we alcoholics, can aid other alcoholics, is deeply gratifying. Everyone of us who has had the experience of assisting a fellow-alcoholic in the solution of his problem has been definitely strengthened in the conquest of his own. The gratitude and the satisfaction of seeing wives reconciled, families reunited,

self-respect restored is an experience transcending in satisfaction most every other experience of our lives.

The Twelve 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 only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.
12. Having had a spiritual experience as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

Further information about the work of Alcoholics Anonymous may be obtained by writing to:

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