

"Big Book Sponsorship"

1940's 12 Step Program of Recovery

A.A. Pioneer, Clarence H. Snyder was the first to initiate 'Big Book' sponsorship ("How It Worked: The Story Of Clarence H. Snyder and The Early Days Of Alcoholics Anonymous In Cleveland, Ohio" 1991.)

Fellowship of the Spirit

In the beginning, that is, in 1939, there were two Alcoholics Anonymous. Alcoholics Anonymous the book, and Alcoholics Anonymous the fellowship of the original 100 members. There was no difference in the approach to sobriety between them.

Shortly after the publication of the volume, Alcoholics Anonymous (1939), a.k.a "The Big Book", a third fellowship develops in Cleveland, Ohio (1940). This new fellowship is the first to use the Big Book as a part of their regular practice. A.A. pioneer, Clarence H. Snyder who was taken through the steps by Dr. Bob, modeled a style of one-on-one sponsorship in which a member of the fellowship experienced in the Twelve Step program would take a newcomer, under his wing, help him adjust to sobriety, and coach him through the Twelve Steps. The sponsor and newcomer would meet and work their way through the Big Book together, page by page.

Cleveland sponsors emphasized the Oxford Group's Four Absolutes (Honesty, Purity, Unselfishness, Love) and the importance of working with other alcoholics. Due to a sudden swell in membership, newcomers were often put to work taking other newcomers (both one-on-one and beginners classes) through the book before they have even finished the Steps themselves. Due to the same swell in membership, Cleveland's Big Book style sponsorship quickly becomes the most common form of AA.

Bill Wilson was constantly amazed at the growth and apparent success that Cleveland was having in sobering up alcoholics. He visited there every time that he went to Ohio. Bill later wrote in *A.A. Comes of Age*:

"Yes, Cleveland's results were of the best. Their results were in fact so good, and A.A.'s membership elsewhere was so small, that many a Clevelander really thought A.A.'s membership had started there in the first place. The Cleveland pioneers had proved three essential things: the value of personal sponsorship; the worth of the A.A.'s Big Book in indoctrinating newcomers, and finally the tremendous fact that A.A., when the word really got around, could now soundly grow to great size."

Clarence believed the difference between New York and Mid-West A.A. was the approach to sobriety. In Ohio the approach was, "Trust God, Clean House, and Help

Others." Clarence felt that the approach in New York was, "Don't Drink and Go To Meetings".

Emphasis on spirituality was what had made Ohio A.A. so successful, according to Clarence. He noticed that New York A.A. had but a few members who were maintaining any sort of abstinence from alcohol, and that most Ohio members had achieved what was to become permanent sobriety and had numerous, strong A.A. meetings in evidence.

Moreover, Clarence thought that if the primary purpose of A.A. were only to stop drinking and, in order to maintain that abstinence, only go to meetings, A.A. was doomed to failure.

Clarence remembered Dr. Bob once saying:

"There is an easy way and a hard way to recovery from alcoholism. The hard way is by just going to meetings."

Clarence stated that nowhere in the Steps of A.A. does it say one has to stop drinking. He was speaking of the A.A. statement that the only REQUIREMENT for membership is "a desire to stop drinking."

If an A.A. member puts the steps into their lives, beginning with the first three steps, they have admitted that they are powerless over alcohol, they could not manage their own lives, and that they had made a decision to turn their lives and their will over to the care of God. They were no longer in charge. A Power Greater than themselves had been asked to take over.

If an A.A. member is constantly, on a daily basis, fighting taking a drink, (i.e. Just for today I will not take a drink.) there is no one in charge but the A.A. member. There is no power greater than oneself. The A.A. book states:

And we have ceased fighting anything or anyone - even alcohol. pg. 84 A.A. 4th edition

Mid-West A.A. puts the reliance on God, a Higher Power, and not the A.A. meetings or other A.A. members. New York places reliance on a human power. The A.A. book clearly states:

That probably no human power could have relieved our alcoholism. pg. 60 A.A. 4th edition

Bill Wilson made numerous trips to Ohio to try and find out what they had that worked so well. He spoke with Clarence and with Dr. Bob and attended meetings. He tried to bring back the program of recovery as it was in Ohio to the New York members, but they would not assimilate the spirituality into their brand of A.A.

The 12 Step Program Today

Today, Alcoholics Anonymous, the Big Book is unchanged. The original, undiluted solution remains intact in the first 164 pages. The fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous however, is quite different and in many cases no longer represents a solution for the chronic relapser who has placed them self beyond human aid.

There is a wide assortment of Twelve Step guides and recovery literature available. Big Book sponsors claim a place of priority for Alcoholics Anonymous and often reject other works, including AA approved literature, as inadequate deviations from the original. Big Book sponsors also tend to place greater emphasis upon the spiritual aspects of the AA program. In meetings hosted by a network of Big Book sponsors, one is likely to hear a great deal about God and how God has transformed the lives of those who have worked the Twelve Steps as they are laid out in the Big Book.

"Inheritors of the Big Book sponsorship tradition find themselves a minority perspective within the rapidly growing recovery culture. Generally, Big Book sponsors are unhappy with the prevailing presentation of the Twelve Steps. Some see the recovery culture as: proliferating victim groups, a sort of endless Oprah Winfrey show that claims the A.A. Twelve Step method as its inspiration, but in which the real meaning of the Twelfth Step is lost amid an incessant whine about the injured self."

Quoted in "A.A. at the Crossroads," by Andrew Delbanco and Thomas Delbanco.
The New Yorker, March 20, 1995, p. 51.

Currently, recovery from alcoholism

or addiction breaks into three distinct camps:

1. Conversion Experience i.e. a spiritual awakening that separates you from the obsession to drink or use.
2. Re-socialization i.e. meeting makers make it, 90 meetings in 90 days, join a home group, and get involved in fellowship - here you are never cured but always recovering from addiction.
3. Psychological Therapy i.e. discussions groups where sharing your feelings and issues helps to alleviate the pain thus facilitating recovery.

Conversion vs. Re-socialization

From the Conversion Experience perspective, Re-socializationists are diluting the meaning of the Twelve Steps by not emphasizing a spiritual interpretation of the program. Conversionists point to the fact that many people in recovery could benefit from a Conversion Experience, but are unwilling to make the effort as long as they can 'get by' on meeting attendance. The fact that Re-socialization allows people to 'get by' and suffer from the mental obsession is seen as a weak approach by Conversionists; it keeps suffering people from getting real help, and it turns the program into a place where people get by without getting better.

From the Re-socialization perspective, Conversionists are seen as narrow-minded and possibly dangerous. Re-socializationists point to the fact that plenty of people are staying sober in the program without having to get religion or work the Steps. The fact that Conversionists are pushing their nearly religious view of recovery means that some people, who might otherwise stay in meetings, get turned off and don't come back. Some of these people probably go back to using and may even die as a result. For the Re-socializationists, anything that keeps alcoholics/addicts out of meetings is a bad influence on the program.

Re-socialization vs. Psychological

The Re-socializationists see the Psychological View of recovery as having a basic misunderstanding of the disease of addiction. Alcoholics drink because they are alcoholics, and drug addicts use drugs because they are drug addicts, not because they are trying to cope with pain. Addicts may be in pain, but this is probably the result of their disease, not the cause of it. Psychologists are also seen as having the wrong approach to dealing with addictions. While therapy might be helpful for many, real recovery depends on one addict helping another. This is because only someone with first-hand knowledge of the disease of addiction can really understand the condition of another addict.

People who hold the Psychological View of recovery see the practices of Re-socialization as insufficient to help people recover. Meetings are good for what they are, but meeting attendance alone is often not enough to help addicts deal with the underlying psychological causes of their using. People who have a dual diagnosis, who suffer from PTSD, who are severely depressed, or who have deep personal issues to work through will need more than meetings to successfully stay in recovery.

Psychological vs. Conversion

The Psychological View of recovery reacts strongly against the Conversionist idea that selfishness is the root of the addicts problems. The emphasis on selfishness is seen as bordering on abusive. According to the Psychological View, recovering people need to be affirmed and nurtured, not scolded or told that they are bad. In this View, addicts already have negative self-images, and focusing on selfishness can only serve to increase that negative self-image. For some in the Psychological View, the Conversion Experience View of recovery is seen as taking advantage of vulnerable people. People new to recovery are in an impressionable frame of mind, and Conversionists seem to be attempting to force newcomers into a religious point of view.

Conversionists see the Psychological View of recovery as causing more harm than good. In the Conversionist View, telling addicts to care for and think about themselves only increases their already high level of self-concern and selfishness. Furthermore, the Psychological emphasis on "feeling feelings" and "expressing pain" leads to a recovery environment dominated by narcissism and diseased thinking. In this View, an addict can never express his/herself enough to rid their psyches of the mental obsession to use. The Psychological View tortures recovering people by forcing them to obsess over their symptoms without offering a real solution to the basic problem of addiction.

More About the Conversion Experience View

The Conversion Experience View of recovery believes that this kind of radical change in the personality is necessary for true recovery to take place. The Twelve Steps are seen as a vehicle or tool for creating Conversion Experiences without the intrusion of organized religion. In the Steps, an addict can have a powerful experience, and interpret it however he or she pleases. The Conversion Experience is often referred to as a Spiritual Experience, and the program is called "spiritual not religious."

Working the Twelve Steps in a Conversion Experience style, the addict will surrender both their will and their life to a Power greater than them self that enables the addict to overcome their spiritual malady thus straightening out mentally and physically. A moral inventory is taken to root out and expose the addicts' primary trouble - selfishness. Amends and Twelfth Step work are designed to relieve the addict of self-concern and encourage a compassion for others. In this compassion, the Conversionists find themselves guided by a real and living Spiritual Power.

Meetings, in the Conversion Experience View, are a chance for recovered addicts to give testimony to the Power of the Steps and invite newcomers to work the Steps with a sponsor. Meetings are not a time to "share" or "check-in." Instead, they are a time for those who have had a Spiritual Awakening to offer their services to those who have not.

Outcomes anticipated for people in recovery are very high in the Conversion Experience View. People who work the Steps successfully, are expected to find emotional well-being, freedom from mental obsession, and a deep sense of peace that comes from having a spiritual purpose in life. As long as the recovered person continues to help others, his or her sense of well-being is expected to increase. The times of real pain and anguish that are to be expected in life (when a loved one dies for example) are expected to bring the recovered person deeper into dependence upon their Spiritual Source, and so, while painful, will improve the addict's spiritual life.

The Conversion Experience View exists in many of the Twelve Step fellowships, but is most commonly seen as the View of Alcoholics Anonymous members who strongly advocate the AA Big Book. They are sometimes called "Book Thumpers" or "Step Nazis," "Bookers or Muckers", these A.A. members have a reputation for being conservative and intolerant in the way they express their View. From their own point of view however, the Big Book advocates are trying to save fellow addicts from the pain of self-centeredness. In this way, they believe that they are expressing the spiritual truth of the Steps.

When Conversionists tell their stories, they are most likely to speak of the mental aspects of their addictions and place a strong emphasis on the personality change that they have experienced due to their experience of surrender to God.

What others have to say about Big Book Sponsorship

As they entered Step Twelve, many sponsors reported an initial burst of enthusiasm for working with others that received a negative response in mainstream AA. Due to the differences between the Big Book approach to the Twelve Steps and the way the Steps are treated in mainstream AA, aggressive Big Book evangelism is rarely well received. Sponsors reported that, following a period of conflict and controversy, they found a less aggressive way of approaching Twelfth Step work.

Several sponsors also mentioned the importance to them of the realization that they were not able to control the outcome of any other person's experience of the Twelve Steps. As many newcomers do not successfully complete the Twelve Step program, sponsors found that they learned to trust God with each prospect's care. Sponsors stated that sponsoring others was not about "fixing" people, but about letting God do what needs to be done in the context of two addicts working together.

"The Twelve Steps are a design to change you. They also bring you every Step closer to God." - Colby B.

"My first experience was I scared people. I just had this thing and I wanted to give it away. I was really intense about it. They call it being on fire." - Tom P.

"Wild horses couldn't hold me back. I was on fire to go help some people. Which I think is good. If you take somebody up through Step Eleven and they aren't desperate to work with somebody I think maybe I missed something. I don't use that always as a rule of thumb, but it is a pretty good indicator. Everybody's different, but if you've been saved from the gates of hell, you want to go help somebody else." - Ruth B.

"I've learned that I probably shouldn't go to regular meetings. It creates controversy even when you don't want it to. If we are asked to speak somewhere, we just talk about what we do and even that creates controversy, but still, we have to tell people what it is we are doing. I don't want to create arguments. I think that just makes things worse. I just want to be useful. I'm not trying to save the world. Nobody has to do this stuff if they don't want to. That's how I was at first, I thought, "Well, why doesn't everybody do this?" And now, "Because they don't want to. Leave them alone." - Mike B.

"My sponsor was the first person I'd ever met in AA who when I said things like, "Well, I don't know if I really agree with this or believe in these things," he said, "Alright. Check that out. Why should you take it on anyone else's word?" - Amy B.

"It's more challenging with people who are not really desperate. I tend to become much more laid back. "Hey, you want to do this? Have at it, man. You think you're going to get better hanging out with him? Go ahead." So it's suddenly a lot easier when I don't have a lot of rules for my sponsees." - Ruth B.

"Part of my job is to shut up and let them talk. By my nature I am a listener, or at least I have become one. I share my experience to a point if it's necessary to say, "Hey slick, no matter what you think, you're not alone here." If I tell them they need to make five meetings a week is that going to guarantee anything? That they are going to have a connection with God? I doubt it. I can't even tell them they need to work the Steps. That may not guarantee anything a connection with God. By the same token if they decided they want to do this, they have already begun the surrender process. They've made the decision. I haven't made it for them. Once I started this process I had to surrender and keep surrendering and I still surrender today. So why would I want to cheat somebody out of that great gift of active surrender?" - Jerry E.

"So far I've never seen anyone crash and burn from the mistakes I've made. Plenty of people crash and burn, but not from my mistakes. And if somebody's really working, the mistakes I make won't harm them. When one of my sponsees starts working with someone else and they are so afraid to make a mistake, I just tell them about all the mistakes I made, mostly with them. If we are both there with the Spirit of God it's going to work out fine." - Wanda C.

"It's very humbling to work and work and work with someone and then to have them just not call or disappear. I used to think I had to do this in a certain way or it wouldn't

work, and I didn't realize that it's God working through me. It's not my work, it is God's work. It's taken me a long time to realize it's not about me." - Julie F.

A Vision For You

Still you may say: "But I will not have the benefit of contact with you who wrote this book." We cannot be sure. God will determine that, so you must remember that your real reliance is always upon Him. He will show you how to create the fellowship you crave.

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

Abandon yourself to God as you understand God. Admit your faults to Him and to your fellows. Clear away the wreckage of your past. Give freely of what you find and join us. We shall be with you in the Fellowship of the Spirit, and you will surely meet some of us as you trudge the Road of Happy Destiny.

May God bless you and keep you -- until then. - pg. 164 A.A. 4th edition.

Sources:

Alcoholics Anonymous, 4th Edition

StepStudy.org

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