

Bill Wilson's 1969 U.S. Senate Testimony

The Impact Of Alcoholism

Hearings before the Special Subcommittee on Alcoholism and Narcotics of the Committee on Labor and Public Welfare, United States Senate, ninety-first Congress, first session, on examination of the impact of alcoholism, Thursday, July 24, 1969.

The subcommittee met at 9:30 a.m., pursuant to call in room 4232, New Senate Office Building, Senator Harold E. Hughes (chairman of the Subcommittee) presiding.

Present: Senators Hughes, Yarborough, Williams, Javits, Dominick, and Bellmon.

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Senator Hughes - For the next witness there will be no television. There will be no pictures taken. The next witness is Bill W., Co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous. Audio is fine. You may photograph the Senators or you may photograph Bill W. from the back of the head if you want to.

Bill, you may proceed with your statement as you desire.

STATEMENT OF BILL W., CO-FOUNDER OF ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS.

Mr. Bill W. - Mr. Chairman, Senators, we of AA, it is already apparent, are going to have reason for great gratitude on account of your invitation to put in an appearance here. For me this is an extremely moving and significant occasion. It may well mark the advent of the new era in this old business of alcoholism. I think that the activities of this committee and what they may lead to may be a turning point historically. This is splashdown day for Apollo. The impossible is happening. Like my dear friend Marty [Marty Mann], who has just spoken to you, I share with her the opinion that in this field of alcoholism we are now seeing the beginning of the achievement of the impossible.

Because of my appearance here as an AA member, I have to limit myself pretty much to statements about AA. But you must remember that as time passes in these hearings a great many AA's will be testifying as citizens, and they will be far more free to express opinions on the general field and their activities in it than I am.

So I take it that my mission here today will be to acquaint you with the resources that AA may reveal for treatment, for education and so on.

I shall start off by taking the dry part of my recital first: a few figures. Our national magazine, "The AA Grapevine," makes a brief and simple statement as to what AA is: "Alcoholics Anonymous is a fellowship of men and women who share their experience, strength and hope with each other that they may solve their common problem and help others to recover from alcoholism."

"The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking. There are no dues or fees for membership. We are self-supporting through our own contributions."

"AA is not allied with any sect denomination, politics, organization or institution, does not wish to engage in controversy, neither endorses nor opposes any causes. Our primary purpose is to stay sober and help other alcoholics to achieve sobriety."

Now, as a little more background for my presentation, let me present just a few figures. Our last census, that is to say, reports of our group sessions, shows that we have 15,000 AA groups throughout the world and an active membership of 285,000.

Besides the 285,000 there are hundreds of thousands -- maybe 200,000, for all we know, 300,000 recovered AA's on the sidelines who do not get caught up in the active statistics, people who have remained for the greater part sober, who are carrying AA attitudes and practices and philosophies into the community life.

So AA is much more in reality than a generator of mere sobriety, it is returning us to citizenship in the world.

Now, then, that breaks down these figures into something like this: groups in the United States, 9,000, active members, 148,000; groups in Canada, 1,500; members in Canada, 21,000; groups overseas, 3,300, membership, 62,000; internationalists, 344. We mean by that, people on ships, largely, who travel from port to port spreading the AA message.

We have 648 groups in hospitals, members in hospitals (and this means largely mental institutions), 18,500; and groups in prisons, 33,000. And lone members throughout the world, who correspond with the world headquarters, 522.

Those statistics are of interest, but they are scarcely inspiring, because they are not as yet connected with the flesh and blood of human experience. I think the best way of presenting some of that experience would be to relate to you certain fragments of AA history that have a particular bearing upon this occasion.

Oddly enough, and contrary to the information of most people, Alcoholics Anonymous, we see in retrospect, very definitely had its start in the offices of one of the founders of modern psychiatry. I refer to Carl Jung, who in the early 1930s received a patient from America, a well-known businessman. He had run the gamut of the cures of the time, and desperately wanted to stop and could get no help at all.

He came to Jung and stayed with him about a year. He came to love the great man. During this period the hidden springs of his motivation were revealed. He felt now with this new understanding, plus communication with this new and wonderful friend that he had really shed this strange illness of mind, body and spirit.

Leaving there, he was taken drunk, as we AA's say, in a matter of a month, perhaps, and coming back, he said, "Carl, what does this all mean?" Then this man made the statement that I think led to the formation of AA. It took a great man to make it.

He said, "Rowland, up until recently I thought you might be one of those rare cases who could be aided and made to recover by the practice of my art. But like most who will pass through here, I must confess that my art can do nothing for you."

"What," said the patient, "Doctor, you are my port of last resort. Where shall I turn now? Is there no other recourse?"

The Doctor said, "Yes, there may be. There is the off chance. I am speaking to you of the possibility of a spiritual awakening, if you like, a conversion."

"Oh," said the patient "but I am a religious man. I used to be a vestryman in the Episcopal Church. I still have faith in God, but He has little in me, I should think."

Jung said, "I mean something that goes deeper than that Rowland, not just a question of faith. I am talking about a transformation of spirit that can motivate you and set you free from this. Time after time alcoholics have recovered by these means. The lightning strikes here and there, and no one can say why or how. All I can suggest is that you expose yourself to some religious environment of your own choice."

The patient went to England. He became associated with the group of that day in later years called "Moral Rearmament," [the Oxford Groups] and to his great surprise he began to feel released from this hideous compulsion.

He returned to America. He had a place in Vermont. There he ran into a friend of mine about to be committed, a friend that we AA's lovingly call Ebby. Ebby, at the time a wealthy man, had just run his car

through the house of a farmer, into the kitchen, pushing in the wall, and when he stopped, out stepped a horrified lady from inside and he said, "How about a cup of coffee?"

This was the extent of his illness and he was about to be committed. The patient, Rowland, got hold of him, took him to New York, exposed him to the Oxford Groups, whose emphasis was upon admission of hopelessness, in a sense, on one's unaided resources a human being could not go too far.

Another was self-survey. Another was a species of confession, and then there was restitution and belief in a Higher Power.

That movement was rather evangelical, but AA owes it a great debt in what to do and also in what not to do.

Then, thinking of me, and I was about at the end of my rope, my friend visited me. In the previous summer I had been in a drying-out emporium in New York City, and there my doctor, who was to make a crucial contribution to AA, had said to my wife, "Lois, I am afraid, my dear, that I can do nothing. I thought that he might be one of those rare instances in which I could help him stay sober, but I am afraid not. He is the victim of a compulsion to drink against his will, and, as much as he desires, that compulsion I don't think can be broken; and this compulsion is coupled with what I call an allergy.

"It is a misnomer, but it is indicating that there is something wrong with this man physically. Therefore, the eternal dilemma has been this eternal compulsion to drink, to the point almost of lunacy, coupled with the physical allergy that guarantees insanity and death. I think you will have to lock him up."

After that treatment I came home and a few months later this friend appeared, sat across the kitchen table where there was a big pitcher of gin and pineapple juice. I was a solitary drinker of about two or three bottles of bathtub gin a day. The year is 1934.

Enters this friend of mine that I had known to be a very hopeless case.

At once it struck me that he was in a state of release, this just was not another drunk on the wagon. Then he told me this story, how he had felt this relief, the moment he had gotten honest with himself and adhered to their simple program, he began to feel this release, how much more he had gotten through his friend, Rowland. He told me the story about him.

Finally I put the question to him. I said, "Ebby, you say you don't want to drink, you are not drinking today. What does this mean?"

He said, "Well, I have got religion." I said, "Well, what brand is it?" So he revealed to me his story. I was deeply impressed, really, because here was somebody that I knew had lived in this strange world of alcoholism, where I, too, was a denizen. So this transmission of the fatal nature of this malady in many cases struck me. I think it caused a great personal deflation and laid the ground for what was subsequently to happen.

My friend went off. I didn't see him for a few days. In no waking hour could I forget the face across the kitchen table. Yet I gagged on this concept of a Higher Power, even in its lowest denominator.

So I finally decided I would go to the hospital, get detoxified. I appeared at the hospital. Dr. Silkworth began treatment. I announced that I had found something new, I thought, I wanted to get sobered up.

I could not have any emotional conversion. So after about 3 days detoxification, I found myself falling into a terrible depression. I felt trapped.

In other words, I was asking the impossible, to believe in a Higher Power, let alone cast my dependence on it on the one side, and yet my guide in science [Dr. Silkworth] was saying, "But medically you are pretty hopeless."

Out of this eventuated a very sudden spiritual awakening in which I was released from this compulsion to drink, a compulsion on my mind morning, noon and night for several years. I was suddenly released from it.

Mine was a rather spectacular experience. But it is quite identical to what happens to any good AA. In other words, their experiences are apt to take a longer time and they are not so sensational, but we do get the transforming effect on motivation.

With the experience came this thought: Why can't this be induced chain style? In other words, I can identify myself with another alcoholic through this kinship of suffering, then why can't that inflame him and perhaps he will be motivated and one can talk to the other.

I came out of the hospital, began to feverishly work with alcoholics. We had a house full of them. I was so keyed up with the paranoid side with my spiritual awakening; I even thought I had a kind of divine appointment about all the alcoholics in the world.

There was 6 months of complete failure. Finally I went to Akron on a business trip to see if I could regain my fortunes. I was away from my friends. The business deal fell through. I had hardly carfare home and all of a sudden the old desire to drink started to come back. I was frightened.

Then I realized that in talking and trying to help other alcoholics, even though the cases had all been failures, this had a great deal to do with my staying sober. These were the elements of the process and through a strange set of circumstances I was led to a physicist and from there to the doctor in town who was to become my partner in this thing.

He, too, when the nature of his malady was revealed to him in medical terms, one drunk talking to another, achieved sobriety that he had long since thought impossible.

Shortly after that, in one of the Akron hospitals, No. 3 got sober, and an AA group, the first one really, came into existence in June 1935 in Akron, Ohio. Then there was a return to New York and a group started there. A few people in from Cleveland began to come to the group meetings in Akron.

We grew very, very slowly, trial and error all along the line. If it seemed to work, get with it, if it failed, discard it. That was our practice until about 4 years later, after hundreds of failures; we found that we had a hundred people sober. At that time, having retired from the Oxford Group, and yet having no name actually, we just called ourselves a nameless bunch of drunks trying to help each other get well.

At that time we began to think in terms of a book, which supported by case histories would portray our approach. The book is called "Alcoholics Anonymous" and it was published when we had a hundred members.

Up to this time we had been virtually a secret society. Then we realized that we would have to be publicized. So we were very reluctant about this, what kind of people would come in?

We were publicized first by Liberty magazine, and flooded by 6,700 inquiries into a post office box in New York. We gave these inquiries to a few of our traveling people out of the small-established groups. Then came an experience in mass production of sobriety, which I think is most relevant to any presentation here.

Up until the fall of 1939, 5 years after I had sobered up, we had thought that the presentation of our case to the other alcoholics was up to the founding fathers or the elder hierarchy or whatnot. We thought it to be a very slow business indeed.

The idea of a mass revival was very far from our minds. The Cleveland Plain Dealer decided to publish a series of articles about us. There was a chap doing the articles who himself was an alcoholic. The poor devil never recovered, but he could talk our language.

These articles were placed in a box on the editorial page every 3 or 4 days and a supporting editorial was written. Then our friends of the press and the communications media began this benign process of bringing us customers.

At this time the group in Cleveland numbered only about 20 people. They were suddenly confronted with hundreds of frantic telephone calls to hospitals and people with or without money, people who were hospitalized this week, next-week were going with an older member to see somebody in the hospital. This thing pyramided so that in the succeeding year of 1940 these 20 had pyramided themselves into what had turned out to be several hundred sound recoveries.

Now this is the final suggestion, that the resources of Alcoholics Anonymous for mass society have hardly been touched. This set of figures shows in the last 10 years Alcoholics Anonymous membership has pyramided at the rate of only 8 or 10 percent a year, when in the early days, in the first decade, increases of 100 percent 500 percent 1,000 percent were very common. Therefore, we have a tremendous lot of people with whom to deal. This is partly due to the reluctance of the alcoholic himself.

Figures tell us that we have 5 million alcoholics in America. This means 5 million poor souls who are in all stages of this dissolution and in the early years scarcely one of these people can be brought to believe that he is actually beginning to be sick.

This rationalization can exist right through all sorts of evidence of sickness right down to the undertaker himself. It is this mass capability of the alcoholic to rationalize himself out of this predicament. This is one of the great obstacles to bringing alcoholics toward treatment. In fact this is the obstacle that all of the remarkable agencies we now have at work are running against, how do we get these people in?

It is a process of education, but what kind of education we simply don't know. Another part of the resistance of Alcoholics Anonymous stems from the fact that it has a spiritual content and a great many of our professional friends are apt to believe Alcoholics Anonymous is for the religiously susceptible only.

Well, this is a very mistaken impression. At last year's New York dinner, we were talking about this topic and it suddenly occurred to me that of the four speakers on the platform, only one of us four had any religious background whatever.

Why were they in AA? They were driven there because there was no other place to go, no other place to get well.

So these are the treatment resources.

How can the resources of experience which have to do with the other agencies and disciplines in the field be brought to this committee by our friends and by AA members who are also working in these areas? You have begun to surmise that in effect, we are coming out of the woodwork, we are in practically all of these efforts bringing the AA experience to them, making it available and that kind of experience can be made available by any members here in these committee hearings if they come here acting as citizens and recovered alcoholics [but not as AA members].

We have to do that as a protective thing for AA. Now we have great numbers of friends. Those, too, can be called upon and I notice that some are going to be available here. For instance here is Jack Norris, a nonalcoholic.

Many of you know him. He is chairman of our board of trustees. He is second in charge, or was until his retirement in the medical department of Eastman Kodak, the second industrial company to give the nod to AA and make use of the resources.

In Wilmington, for example, we have Dr. Glanto, the head of the medical department of the first company ever to make AA arrangements with AA. I think he would be quite happy to testify.

On our board we have Mr. Austin McCormick, one of the country's great criminologists, and I think he could throw much light on the situation. We have AA members beyond count.

So you have that sort of resource available for treatment and for experience.

Well, I think I am presenting this overlong and perhaps you gentlemen would like to ask questions at this point.

Senator Hughes - Bill, I thank you for yours bring us up to date on the beginnings and where you are now. I would like to ask some pointed questions. No. 1, I have never been in a prison institution, I have never been in mental hospital institution, where there was not an AA group in my years in public life, not only of the inmates but of people coming in from the outside who were conducting meetings in an effort to help these people recover. This is also true in the case of halfway houses, private treatment centers, and every public treatment center that I know of dealing with the alcoholic where there are Government programs sponsored by State, community, or county divisions. I take from your testimony that as a cofounder of AA you certainly believe that in any program this committee and this Congress might develop, that there would be a place and a willingness for AA members to work in recovery, education, and counseling of the ailing alcoholics, and prevention also?

Mr. Bill W. - I should think so. Of course, this is the pleasure of our friends. But certainly this experience is of great value and in respect of this communication one alcoholic is certainly of unique value.

Senator Hughes - I think what you indicated is what I expected. No. 1, we have available through Alcoholics Anonymous a resource of willing people whom you have indicated have the capabilities of multiplying not 100 percent, but 1,000 percent if they can get to the people.

Mr. Bill W. - If we can get to the people.

Senator Hughes - This is the essence of my question. Undoubtedly knowing the organization quite well myself, these people have dedicated themselves to doing the job of calling on alcoholics and assisting in any way they can in their recovery.

Mr. Bill W. - Yes. Of course, it ought to be observed at this point that the virtues of AA are not really earned virtues. It is a matter of do or die. Nothing is too good for the next sufferer. So our dedication is first based on the fact that our lives and fortunes have been saved and we want to share this with the next fellow, knowing that it is a part of the maintenance of our own recovery and life or death. So this is the source of the great dedication that you see among the AA.

Senator Javits - I would like to just join the Chair in what he has said and assure you, sir, from what I see here, we will do our utmost to utilize to the fullest these resources which you have so eloquently testified to.

Senator Hughes - Thank you very much, Senator Javits. Senator Yarborough?

Senator Yarborough - Mr. Bill W., I am astonished to learn that AA had its beginning in 1934 and 1935 and was very small until 1939. Because the escalation was so fast after that, so well known nationally now, that you have an idea this has gone on for generations.

Mr. Bill W. - When you consider the enormous ramifications of this disease, we have just scratched the surface. I think we should humbly remember this.

Senator Yarborough - The experience you personally described when this burden fell away from you, I have thought back in my reading, I know of only two other men who have had such a dramatic experience. One was Saul of Tarsus, on the road to Damascus and the other was Sam Houston, the great national hero. Sam Houston, who once was called by the Indians, Big Drunk, became, while he was a U.S. Senator, a temperance lecturer all over the United States. Congratulations on what you have done for so many hundreds of thousands who are in your debt and the millions I believe who will be reached in the not distant future.

Senator Hughes - Bill, I thank you kindly for your willingness to come forward as a co-founder of the fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous and express the basis of its founding, its willingness to cooperate, and the hope of people over the last few decades who have found their way through this. The Subcommittee

and the Committee are indebted to you for your willingness to do this. I want to express also the Chair's appreciation to the press for their cooperation in honoring tenets of your institution to retain the anonymity of your members.

Mr. Bill W. - I thank them, too, with you.

Senator Hughes - Thank you very much, Bill. The committee will recess until 1:30 p.m.

NOTE: Only four days before, the whole world had watched as Neil Armstrong and "Buzz" Aldren had walked on the moon. Just a few years later Buzz Aldren would participate with Senator Hughes and 50 other famous recovered alcoholics in "Operation Understanding" in Washington, D.C. They all identified themselves as recovered alcoholics in an effort to reduce stigma and increase public awareness that alcoholism is a treatable disease. This event gained extensive worldwide front-page newspaper, television and radio coverage.

(I am happy to make this testimony available. Bill assured the AA members who testified during the three days of hearings that it was perfectly permissible for them to testify "as citizens and recovered alcoholics" so long as they did not, in this public forum, reveal their membership in AA, which would have been a violation of the AA tradition. I was present at this hearing, at which both Bill Wilson and Marty Mann testified. I served on the Subcommittee professional staff from 1969 to 1980.

(Note that Bill said the man who wrote the Cleveland Plain Dealer articles was an alcoholic who never recovered.)