

The A.A. Tools of Recovery

A good old-timer named Don Helvey in Elkhart put together a short piece called the A.A. Tools of Recovery, which is still read at the beginning of many A.A. meetings in Elkhart, Mishawaka, South Bend, and other parts of the St. Joseph river valley region along with reading the twelve steps:

"ABSTINENCE: We commit ourselves to stay away from the *first* drink, one day at a time.

MEETINGS: We attend A.A. meetings to learn how the program works, to share our experience, strength and hope with each other, and because through the support of the fellowship, we *can* do what we could never do alone.

SPONSOR: A sponsor is a person in the A.A. program who has what we want and is continually sober. A sponsor is someone you can relate to, have access to and can confide in.

TELEPHONE: The telephone is our lifeline -- our meetings between meetings. Call *before* you take the first drink. The more numbers you have, the more insurance you have.

LITERATURE: The *Big Book* of Alcoholics Anonymous is our basic tool and text. The *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* and A.A. pamphlets are recommended reading, and are available at this meeting.

SERVICE: Service helps our personal program grow. Service is giving in A.A. Service is leading a meeting, making coffee, moving chairs, being a sponsor, or emptying ashtrays. Service is action, and action is the magic word in this program.

ANONYMITY: Whom you see here, what you hear here, when you leave here, let it stay here. Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of our program."

Many of the good old-timers, like Submarine Bill and Raymond I., believed that it was important to repeat these basic principles over and over, until newcomers had them instinctively drilled into their heads, and could repeat them almost like a litany. The first principle made it clear that the way an alcoholic kept from getting drunk was not to take even the first drink. The next five were the things that not only got people sober but kept them sober. Good sponsors like Bill and Raymond noted that those who relapsed and returned to drinking had almost invariably failed to do one or more of these five things in any serious and dedicated way. And the seventh principle was a constant reminder that A.A. meetings could not function properly unless members could talk about all of their feelings and anything that was bothering them, in an accepting and shame-free atmosphere, without worrying about whether it was going to be repeated outside of the group. That was a solemn pledge which the members of the group had to make to one another.

If we want to ask what was the basic foundation of A.A. in the St. Joseph river valley, it was the Twelve Steps and the Seven Tools of Recovery. Everything else was based on these.

The Grapevine and Bar-less

In the 1950's, according to Ellen Lantz's reminiscences, they always read from something at the Elkhart closed discussion meetings, and frequently used this reading to provide the discussion topic. She said that it had become very common during this period to use an article from the *Grapevine*, the magazine which was published by the New York A.A. office (it first began coming out in 1944, under the editorial guidance of Marty Mann and some of her friends). (NOTE 4) But Ellen said that they would also sometimes use an article from *Bar-less*, the little magazine which was published by the A.A. prison group. Some of these articles were written by people who were not prisoners. Ken Merrill, for example, the founder of A.A. in South Bend, wrote a very good article for the magazine once, about the way alcoholics get locked into behavior patterns during their childhood years, and because of a traumatic event or a general dysfunctional family situation, are unable to grow past that stage, and continue to throw two-year-old temper tantrums, or become lost in ten-year-old daydreaming fantasies of romance and heroism, or whatever, even after they are adults.

The First Principle

When I asked Brooklyn Bob, one of the South Bend old-timers, whether there were any rules in good old-time A.A. about what books A.A. people could and could not read, he just laughed and snorted, and said, "**We read anything we could get our hands on that might get us sober!**" Good old-time A.A. was a totally pragmatic program, not an authoritarian system of doctrines and dogmas and endless rules which had to be followed blindly, and were imposed upon the membership by self-important people who thought they had the right to boss other people around ("for their own good" was these arrogant people's standard alibi).

In early A.A., people simply experimented and tried various things, and if they worked, they recommended them to other members. As is always the case in A.A., the recommendations of people who had a good deal of time in the program were taken more seriously. Pragmatically, if they had that many years of sobriety, they must have been doing something right! So on matters of what sorts of books and writings should be read in meetings and made available for loan or purchase by groups and intergroup offices, people looked to the wisdom and experience of those who had time in the program and quality sobriety.

The Central Service Offices in South Bend and in Elkhart both still follow that principle. They have a variety of books on spirituality, recovery, and A.A. history available for loan or purchase -- books printed by various publishing houses and usually (but not always necessarily) authored by A.A. members. There are Al-Anon books as well. But the

selection of books which are provided is made on the recommendation of responsible people who have a good deal of quality time in the program.

They do not have the sort of pop recovery books that can lead newcomers seriously astray or involve them in psychologically dangerous schemes (like one notorious book encouraging people to "get in contact with their inner child" in a way which actually produced in some cases total psychotic breakdowns requiring long hospitalization in mental facilities). But the South Bend office has carried some materials which were purely psychological, such as offprints (distributed by the National Council on Alcoholism) of scholarly papers written by Dr. Harry M. Tiebout for psychiatric journals and journals on alcoholism studies. Tiebout was not an alcoholic, but he was one of the most important of the handful of psychiatrists in the early days who appreciated and understood and backed the new Alcoholics Anonymous movement, and his statements about how A.A. works are still extremely insightful today.

The commercial bookstore chains do not have good material for A.A. people on their shelves, and the small commercial operations which sell "recovery materials" such as t-shirts and coffee mugs cannot be totally depended upon to have quality literature for sale either. If groups and intergroups do not make good books available for A.A. members, no outside commercial venture is going to take over that responsibility. Learning that we have to be responsible for ourselves, instead of just depending on others and demanding "to be taken care of," is a vital part of recovery from alcoholism.

The Second Principle

The first principle was that A.A. groups and intergroups, as well as individual members, have to make their own responsible decisions about which books and writings are going to be helpful for recovering alcoholics. However, there was a generally assumed principle that seems to have been followed, not only in the St. Joseph river valley, but in early A.A. all across the United States and Canada: **It was usually assumed that any piece that was authored or sponsored by one A.A. group could automatically be used to read from in meetings by any other A.A. group which chose to do so.**

That was also a guiding principle followed at New York A.A. headquarters. On November 11, 1944, for example, Bobby Burger, the secretary at the Alcoholic Foundation in New York (what is today called the General Service Office) wrote a letter to Barry Collins, who had helped Ed Webster in assembling and publishing the Little Red Book (NOTE 5):

"Dear Barry,

. . . The Washington D.C. pamphlet [a.k.a. the Detroit Pamphlet] and the new Cleveland "Sponsorship" pamphlet and a host of others are all local projects, as is Nicollette's "An Interpretation of the Twelve Steps" [the Little Red Book]. We do not actually approve or disapprove of these local pieces; by that I mean that the Foundation feels that each Group is entitled to write up its own "can opener" and let it stand on its merits. All of them have

good points and very few have caused any controversy. But as in all things of a local nature, we keep hands off, either pro or con. I think there must be at least 25 local pamphlets now being used and I've yet to see one that hasn't some good points. I think it is up to each individual Group whether it wants to use and buy these pamphlets from the Group that puts them out.

Sincerely, Bobby (Margaret R. Burger)"

Bill Wilson felt the same way. In November 1950, he wrote a note to Barry Collins about *The Little Red Book* making the same basic point, only even more strongly. Such locally sponsored works "fill a definite need" and their "usefulness is unquestioned." Most importantly of all, Bill went on to say in that letter: "**Here at the Foundation we are not policemen; we're a service and AAs are free to read any book they choose.**" (NOTE 6)