

Dr. Bob's Last Major Talk

Detroit, Michigan, December 1948

Although a good many of you have heard or have read about the inception of A.A., probably there are some who haven't. From that brief story, there are things to be learned. So, even at the risk of repetition, I would like to relate exactly what did happen in those early days.

You recall the story about Bill having had a spiritual experience and having been sold on the idea of attempting to be helpful to other drunks. Time went by, and he had not created a single convert, not one. As we express it, no one had jelled. He worked tirelessly, with no thought of saving his own strength or time, but nothing seemed to register.

When he came out to Akron on a business mission, which (perhaps for the good of all of us) turned out to be quite a flop, he was tempted to drink. He paced up and down the lobby of the Mayflower Hotel, wondering whether he had better buy two fifths of gin and be "king for a night," as he expressed it, or whether he had better not. His teachings led him to believe that he possibly might avoid difficulties if he found another alcoholic on whom to work.

Spying the name of our good friend the Reverend Walter Tunks on the bulletin board in the lobby of the Mayflower, Bill called him up and asked him for the name of some local member of the Oxford Group, people with whom he had affiliated and through whose instrumentality he had acquired sobriety. Dr. Tunks said he wasn't one himself, but he knew quite a number and gave Bill a little list of about nine or ten.

Bill started to call them up, without very much success. They had either just left town or were leaving town or having a party or had a sore toe or something. Anyway, Bill came down very near to the end, and his eyes happened to light on the name of Mrs. Seiberling - our good friend Henrietta. He called Henry and told her what he wanted, and she said, "Come right out and have lunch with me." At lunch, he went into his story in considerable detail, and she said, "I have just the man for you.

She rushed to the phone and called Anne and told her that she had just the fellow to be helpful to me, and that we should come right over. Anne said, "Well, I guess we better not go over today."

But Henry is very persistent, a very determined individual. She said, "Oh yes, come on over. I know he'll be helpful to Bob." Anne still didn't think it very wise that we go

over that day. Finally, Henry bore in to such an extent that Anne had to tell her I was very bagged and had passed all capability of listening to any conversation, and the visit would just have to be postponed. So Henry started in about the next day being Sunday and Mother's Day, and Anne said we would be over then.

I don't remember ever feeling much worse, but I was very fond of Henry, and Anne had said we would go over. So we started over. On the way, I extracted a solemn promise from Anne that 15 minutes of this stuff would be tops. I didn't want to talk to this mug or anybody else, and we'd really make it snappy, I said. Now these are the actual facts: We got there at five o'clock, and it was 11:15 when we left.

Possibly, your memories are good enough to carry you back to certain times when you haven't felt too good. You wouldn't have listened to anybody unless he really had something to tell you. I recognized the fact that Bill did have something, so I listened those many hours, and I stopped drinking immediately.

Very shortly after that, there was a medical meeting in Atlantic City, and I developed a terrific thirst for knowledge. I had to have knowledge, I said, so I would go to Atlantic City and absorb lots of knowledge. I had incidentally acquired a thirst for Scotch, but I didn't mention that. I went to Atlantic City and really hung one on. When I came to, I was in the home of a friend of ours in Cuyahoga Falls, one of the suburbs of Akron. Bill came over and got me home and gave me a hooker or two of Scotch that night and a bottle of beer the next morning, and that was on the 10th of June, 1935, and I have had no alcohol, in any form that I know of, since.

Now the interesting part of all this is not the sordid details, but the situation that we two fellows were in. We had both been associated with the Oxford Group, Bill in New York, for five months, and I in Akron, for two and a half years. Bill had acquired their idea of service. I had not, but I had done an immense amount of reading they had recommended. I had refreshed my memory of the Good Book, and I had had excellent training in that as a youngster. They told me I should go to their meetings regularly, and I did, every week. They said that I should affiliate myself with some church, and we did that. They also said I should cultivate the habit of prayer, and I did that - at least, to a considerable extent for me. But I got tight every night, and I mean that. It wasn't once in a while - it was practically every night.

I couldn't understand what was wrong. I had done all the things that those good people told me to do. I had done them, I thought, very faithfully and sincerely. And I still continued to overindulge. But the one thing that they hadn't told me was the one thing that Bill did that Sunday - attempt to be helpful to somebody else.

We immediately started to look around for prospects, and it wasn't long before one

appeared, in the form of a man whom a great many of you know - Bill D., our good friend from Akron. Now I knew that this Bill was a Sunday-school superintendent, and I thought that he probably forgot more about the Good Book every night than I ever knew. Who was I to try to tell him about it? It made me feel somewhat hypocritical. Anyway, we did talk, and I'm glad to say the conversation fell on fertile ground.

Then we had three prospects dumped in our laps almost simultaneously. In my mind, the spirit of service was of prime importance, but I found that it had to be backed up with some knowledge on our subject. I used to go to the hospital and stand there and talk. I talked many a time to a chap in the bed for five or six hours. I don't know how he ever stood me for five or six hours, but he did. We must have hidden his clothes. Anyway, it came to me that I probably didn't know too much about what I was saying. We are stewards of what we have, and that includes our time. I was not giving a good account of my stewardship of time when it took me six hours to say something to this man that I could have said in an hour - if I had known what I was talking about. I certainly was not a very efficient individual.

I'm somewhat allergic to work, but I felt that I should continue to increase my familiarity with the Good Book and also should read a good deal of standard literature, possibly of a scientific nature. So I did cultivate the habit of reading. I think I'm not exaggerating when I say I have probably averaged an hour a day for the last 15 years. (I'm not trying to sell you on the idea that you've got to read an hour a day. There are plenty of people, fine A.A.s, who don't read very much.)

You see, back in those days we were groping in the dark. We knew practically nothing of alcoholism. I, a physician, knew nothing about it to speak of. Oh, I read about it, but there wasn't anything worth reading in any of the text-books. Usually the information consisted of some queer treatment for D.T.s, if a patient had gone that far. If he hadn't, you prescribed a few bromides and gave the fellow a good lecture.

In early A.A. days, we became quite convinced that the spiritual program was fine if we could help the Lord out a little with some supplementary diet. Bill D., having a lot of stomach trouble, had stumbled across the fact that he began feeling much better on sauerkraut and cold tomatoes. We thought Bill should share that experience. Of course, we discovered later that dietary restrictions had very little to do with maintaining sobriety.

At that point, our stories didn't amount to anything to speak of. When we started in on Bill D., we had no Twelve Steps, either; we had no Traditions.

But we were convinced that the answer to our problems was in the Good Book. To some of us older ones, the parts that we found absolutely essential were the Sermon on the

Mount, the thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians, and the Book of James.

We used to have daily meetings at a friend's house. All this happened at a time when everybody was broke, awfully broke. It was probably much easier for us to be successful when broke than it would have been if we'd had a checking account apiece. We were, every one of us, so painfully broke that. . . well, it isn't a pleasant thought. Nothing could be done about it. But I think now that it was providentially arranged.

Until 1940, or maybe early in 1941, we held the Akron meetings at the residence of that good friend, who allowed us to bang up the plaster and the doorjambs, carting chairs up-and downstairs. And he had a very beautiful home. Then we outgrew that, so we rented the auditorium in King School, and the group I attend personally has been there ever since. We attempt to have good meetings, and I think we're usually successful.

It wasn't until 1938 that the teachings and efforts and studies that had been going on were crystallized in the form of the Twelve Steps. I didn't write the Twelve Steps. I had nothing to do with the writing of them. But I think I probably had something to do with them indirectly. After my June 10th episode, Bill came to live at our house and stayed for about three months. There was hardly a night that we didn't sit up until two or three o'clock, talking. It would be hard for me to conceive that, during these nightly discussions around our kitchen table, nothing was said that influenced the writing of the Twelve Steps. We already had the basic ideas, though not in terse and tangible form. We got them, as I said, as a result of our study of the Good Book. We must have had them. Since then, we have learned from experience that they are very important in maintaining sobriety. We were maintaining sobriety - therefore, we must have had them.

Well, that was the way things got started in Akron. As we grew, we began to get offshoots, one in Cleveland, then another one in Akron, and all have been continuing ever since. It is a great source of satisfaction to me to feel that I may have kicked in my two bits' worth toward getting this thing started. Maybe I'm taking too much for granted. I don't know. But I feel that I was simply used as God's agent. I feel that I'm no different from any of you fellows or girls, except that I was a little more fortunate. I got this message thirteen and a half years ago, while some of you had to wait till later.

I used to get a little peeved at our Heavenly Father, because He had been a little slow on the trigger in my own case. I thought I would have been ready to receive the message quite a while before He got around to presenting it. And that used to irritate me no end. After all, maybe He knows better than I. But I felt sure that I would have been glad to have anything presented to produce the sobriety that I thought I wanted so badly. I even used to doubt that at times. I would go to my good friend Henry and say,

"Henry, do you think I want to stop drinking liquor?"

She, being a very charitable soul, would say, "Yes, Bob, I'm sure you want to stop."

I would say, "Well, I can't conceive of any living human who really wanted to do something as badly as I think I do, who could be such a total failure. Henry, I think I'm just one of those want-to-want-to guys."

And she'd say, "No, Bob, I think you want to. You just haven't found a way to work it yet."

The fact that my sobriety has been maintained continuously for 13½ years doesn't allow me to think that I am necessarily any further away from my next drink than any of you people. I'm still very human, and I still think a double Scotch would taste awfully good. If it wouldn't produce disastrous results, I might try it. I don't know. I have no reason to think that it would taste any different - but I have no legitimate reason to believe that the results would be any different, either. They were always the same. I always wound up back of the dear old eight ball. I just don't want to pay the bill, because that's a big bill. It always was, and I think it would be even larger today because of what has gone on in the past 13 years. Being a bit out of practice, I don't believe I'd last very long. I'm having an awfully nice time, and I don't want to bump myself off, even with the "pleasures" of the alcohol route. No, I'm not going to do it, and I'm never going to as long as I do the things I'm supposed to, and I know what these things are. So, if I should ever get tight, I certainly would have no one but myself to blame for it.

Perhaps it would not be done with malice aforethought, but it would certainly be done as a result of extreme carelessness and indifference.

I said I was quite human, and I get to thinking every once in a while that this guy Bob is rather a smart individual. He's got this liquor situation right by the tail - proved it and demonstrated it - hasn't had a drink for over 13 years. Probably could knock off a couple, and no one would be the wiser. I tell you, I'm not trying to be funny. Those thoughts actually do enter my mind. And the minute they do, I know exactly what has happened.

You see, in Akron we have the extreme good fortune to have a very nice setup at St. Thomas Hospital. The ward theoretically accommodates seven alcoholics, but the good Sister Ignatia sees that it's stretched a little bit. She usually has two or more others parked around somewhere. Just as soon as that idea that I could probably polish off a couple enters my mind, I think "Oh-oh. How about the boys in the ward? You've been giving them the semi-brush-off for the last few days. You'd better get back on the job, big boy, before you get into trouble." And I patter right back and am much more attentive than I had been before I got the funny idea. But I do get it every once ma

while, and I'll probably go on getting it whenever I get careless about seeing the boys in the ward.

Any time I neglected them, I was thinking more of Bob than I was of the ward. I wasn't being especially loving. Those fellows had come there indicating their desire for help, and I was just a little too busy to give them much of my time, as if they had been panhandling on the street. Don't want to be bothered with the fellow? Ten cents to get rid of him - why, that's easy! He could even stand two bits - not because you love the fellow, but just to be relieved of the nuisance of his hanging on your coat sleeve. No unselfishness, no love at all indicated in that transaction.

I think the kind of service that really counts is giving of yourself, and that almost invariably requires effort and time. It isn't a matter of just putting a little quiet money in the dish. That's needed, but it isn't giving much for the average individual in days like these, when most people get along fairly well. I don't believe that type of giving would ever keep anyone sober. But giving of our own effort and strength and time is quite a different matter. And I think that is what Bill learned in New York and I didn't learn in Akron until we met.

The four absolutes, as we called them, were the only yardsticks we had in the early days, before the Steps. I think the absolutes still hold good and can be extremely helpful. I have found at times that a question arises, and I want to do the right thing, but the answer is not obvious. Almost always, if I measure my decision care-fully by the yardsticks of absolute honesty, absolute unselfishness, absolute purity, and absolute love, and it checks up pretty well with those four, then my answer can't be very far out of the way. If, however, I do that and I'm still not too satisfied with the answer, I usually consult with some friend whose judgment, in this particular case, would be very much better than mine. But usually the absolutes can help you to reach your own personal decision without bothering your friends.

Suppose we have trouble taking the First Step; we can't get quite honest enough to admit that John Barleycorn really has bested us. The lack of absolute purity is involved here - purity of ideas, purity of motives. Absolute unselfishness includes the kind of service I have been taking about - not the dime or two bits to the bum, but actually giving of yourself.

As you well know, absolute love incorporates all else. It's very difficult to have absolute love. I don't think any of us will ever get it, but that doesn't mean we can't try to get it. It was extremely difficult for me to love my fellowman. I didn't dislike him, but I didn't love him, either. Unless there was some special reason for caring, I was just indifferent to him. I would be willing to give him a little bit :fit didn't require much effort. I never would injure him at all. But love him? For a long time, I just couldn't do

it.

I think I overcame this problem to some extent when I was forced to do it, because I had to either love this fellow or attempt to be helpful to him, or I would probably get drunk again. Well, you could say that was just a manifestation of selfishness, and you'd be quite correct. I was selfish to the extent of not wanting Bob hurt; so, to keep from getting Bob hurt, I would go through the motions of trying to be helpful to the other fellow. Debate it any way you want to, but the fact remains that the average individual can never acquire absolute love. I suspect there are a few people who do; I think maybe I know some who come pretty close to it. But I could count them on the fingers of one hand. I don't say that in any disparaging manner; I have some wonderful friends. But I'm talking about the final aspects of absolute love, particularly as it applies to A.A.

I don't think we can do anything very well in this world unless we practice it. And I don't believe we do A.A. too well unless we practice it. The fellows who win great world awards in athletic events are people who practice, have been practicing for years, and still have to practice. To do a good job in A.A., there are a number of things we should practice. We should practice, as I've said, acquiring the spirit of service. We should attempt to acquire some faith, which isn't easily done, especially for the person who has always been very materialistic, following the standards of society today. But I think faith can be acquired; it can be acquired slowly; it has to be cultivated. That was not easy for me, and I assume that it is difficult for everyone else.

Another thing that was difficult for me (and I probably don't do it too well yet) was the matter of tolerance. We are all inclined to have closed minds, pretty tightly closed. That's one reason why some people find our spiritual teaching difficult. They don't want to find out too much about it, for various personal reasons, like the fear of being considered effeminate. But it's quite important that we do acquire tolerance toward the other fellow's ideas. I think I have more of it than I did have, although not enough yet. If somebody crosses me, I'm apt to make a rather caustic remark. I've done that many times, much to my regret. And then, later on, I find that the man knew much more about it than I did. I'd have been infinitely better off if I'd just kept my big mouth shut.

Another thing with which most of us are not too blessed is the feeling of humility. I don't mean the fake humility of Dickens' Uriah Heep. I don't mean the doormat variety; we are not called upon to be shoved around and stepped on by anyone; we have a right to stand up for our rights. I'm taking about the attitude of each and every one of us toward our Heavenly Father. Christ said, "Of Myself, I am nothing - My strength cometh from My Father in heaven." If He had to say that, how about you and me? Did you say it? Did I say it? No. That's exactly what we didn't say. We were inclined to say instead, "Look me over, boys. Pretty good, huh?" We had no humility, no sense of having received anything through the grace of our Heavenly Father.

I don't believe I have any right to get cocky about getting sober. It's only through God's grace that I did it. I can feel very thankful that I was privileged to do it. I may have contributed some activity to help, but basically, it was only through His kindness. If my strength does come from Him, who am I to get cocky about it? I should have a very, very humble attitude toward the source of my strength; I should never cease to be grateful for whatever blessings come my way. And I have been blessed in very large measure.

You know, as far as everybody's ultimate aim is concerned, it doesn't make much difference whether we're drinking or whether we're sober. Either way, we're all after the same thing, and that's happiness. We want peace of mind. The trouble with us alcoholics was this: We demanded that the world give us happiness and peace of mind in just the particular way we wanted to get it - by the alcohol route. And we weren't successful. But when we take time to find out some of the spiritual laws, and familiarize ourselves with them, and put them into practice, then we do get happiness and peace of mind. I feel extremely fortunate and thankful that our Heavenly Father has let me enjoy them. Anyone can get them who wishes to. There seem to be some rules that we have to follow, but happiness and peace of mind are always here, open and free to anyone. And that is the message we can give to our fellow alcoholics.

We know what A.A. has done in the past 13 years, but where do we go from here? Our membership at present is, I believe, conservatively estimated at 70,000. * Will it increase from here on? Well, that will depend on every member of A.A. It is possible for us to grow or not to grow, as we elect. If we fight shy of entangling alliances, if we avoid getting messed up with controversial issues (religious or political or wet-dry), if we maintain unity through our central offices, if we preserve the simplicity of our program, if we remember that our job is to get sober and to stay sober and to help our less fortunate brother to do the same thing, then we shall continue to grow and thrive and prosper.