

BILL WILSON'S TALK AT GUEST HOUSE

(Transcribers note: The following address was delivered by Bill W. at Guest House, a treatment center for alcoholic priests in Lake Orion, Michigan, a few years before his death, possibly in 1968 or 1969. Where words are unintelligible, best guesses appear in brackets)

. Well, I like the informal discussion type of approach. It seemed to me that on an occasion like this questions have something of infinitely more value than a lecture or a story. But Ripp* suggested that I make some remarks here tonight, and I'm only too glad to do that.

(*Transcriber's note: probably refers to Austin Ripley, who founded Guest House in 1956.)

And coming down on the plane, I got speculating with myself about the early days of AA and about the meaning of them in terms of the grace of God. I read somewhere that if a grain of wheat which has been stored for centuries in a dry place is exposed to the right soil and the right climate and to enough light from above it will manifest life and it will unfold and it will grow. But this presupposes the right soil, the right climate and, above all, enough light.

Well, I think it's that way with AA. I remember, years back, when we first began to get publicity, and the first very large occasion was a feature piece done in the Saturday Evening Post which all at once produced us about six thousand members. This was in '41, and by then a number of medics had become close friends, some of them psychiatrists. And these fellows allowed their names to be used (a rather audacious step in those days, I assure you) their names were used in the Post article.

I make this point because, when later asked to testify on another occasion, they refused to do it, and these were the circumstances: the first gal that got sober in AA is one known to many of you as Marty, still very much a going concern in the educational field. Marty was a most difficult case. God knows we're all complex, but Marty was really a champ. And she had been under the care of a Dr. Foster Kennedy, a man of very wide repute in that time, worldwide renown, a neurologist. And he watched Marty as she was planted in the new soil. He watched her receive this light.

Well, he was tremendously impressed. He came to some meetings and soon he said to me, "Bill, would it be possible to have two or three of the psychiatrists in institutions who have seen recoveries of very grim cases, people that you say are friends of yours and who have testified for you in the Post piece, couldn't we get a group of this sort to come to the Academy of Medicine and explain what they have seen?" Well, we thought this was just great, because in those days there were few friends, indeed. So shoring by these people, by

reason of Dr. Kennedy, well, what could be better? So, one by one, we went to them, and we said "would they come to the Academy" and we supposed they would. After all, some of the Kennedy glory could brush off, and, you know, they were friends anyhow, and they'd proved it, so why not? And not a one would do it!

And, when pressed for their reasons for not doing it, each one of them separately said the same thing. In effect, each said, "Look, Bill. You folks have added up in one column more of the resources which have been separately applied to alcoholics than anyone else. For example: you have this kinship in suffering; you have possibilities of communication that others don't have; you have a crude form of self-examination or analysis and of catharsis; you have a great new outgoing interest; you reduce guilt by restitution and you have this great compelling interest in helping others.

"And then there is the religious factor. And then there is this factor of the hopelessness, so far as the resources of the individual are concerned, of this malady. Now this is a formidable list of forces, but we still can't come to the Academy."

"Well, why not?"

"Well," said they, "we see in AA, sometimes in weeks, in a few months, shifts in motivation that even the sums of these forces couldn't begin to account for, because we all too well understand the difficulties of this subtle compulsion. And the sum of them won't add up to the speed of these transformations in these very grim cases. So, for us, there is an unknown factor at work in AA. And, among ourselves, being scientists we call it the "X" factor. We believe you people call it the grace of God. And who shall go to the Academy to explain the grace of God to that body? No one can. And we simply won't."

So, I think it is just as futile as ever for any of us to presume to explain this matter of grace around which our entire galaxy of principles and activities gathers and clusters. We can't do that, but we can examine this matter of the soil and this matter of climate and this matter of illumination [for] which, for some reason or other, we have made ourselves ready. Clearly, God's grace is in and through all.

So, it might be said, "Why haven't alcoholics sobered many times more often through grace than they have? It's available. Why hasn't religion been more successful, numerically at least? Why hasn't medicine been more successful? How is it that laymen seem to be doing this thing?" So I would like to tell a story depicting, at least as it seems to me, what the soil is and what the climate is and what the light is, these things of which we have been placed in such treasured possession.

There is no doubt that in an ordinary sense of time AA began in the office of a psychiatrist, and we might be mindful of this when we criticize people in this profession. Of course, for most of us, the origin is two thousand years old, for some of us perhaps older. But I am speaking of the situation in an immediate sense: how was it precipitated? This too is a matter of conjecture, but here's how it seems to me.

There was a certain business man of great attainment. He's cut down by the grog, he runs the gamut of treatments in this country, and this would be in the year about 1932 when he was just about at the end of his tether. So, he went abroad and became a patient of Dr. Carl Jung.

And, as all of you know, Jung was one of the founding fathers of the "art" (I prefer that instead of "science") of psychiatry. And Jung, Adler, Freud were the three founding fathers, but, of these, only Jung seemed to think that man is something more than two dollar's worth of chemicals, a bundle of instincts and an uncertain intellect. Jung thought that man had something beyond this, that man has soul.

So our traveler had found a truly great human being, great, indeed, as events [spell or fell] out. He placed himself under that dear man's tutelage for a whole year, becoming more and more confident that the hidden springs of this baleful compulsion to drink were being understood and removed and cast away. He began to feel more free. There was no drinking while he was under treatment. At the end of a year, he left Carl Jung and in one month he was tight. And the bender was terrific.

So, in infinite despair, he came back to Carl Jung and said, "Is there anything now for me? You were my court of last resort." And this great man said, "Roland, I thought for a time after you first came that you might be one of those rare cases in which my art has been helpful. Otherwise I should not have encouraged you to stay. But, alas, I am obliged to conclude that you are not, and that there is nothing that I have to offer you. My art has failed you."

I need not say that, coming from a man of his eminence, this was a statement of beautiful humility. And the whole destiny of AA, you and me and all of us, has since hung on that sentence.

So then Hazard found that agony was added to despair, and he cried out, "But is there nothing else?" And this was the answer he got: "Roland, time out of mind, alcoholics have recovered here and there, now and then, through religious experiences, spiritual experiences let us say, or very truly through conversion (a naughty word for us AAs; we don't use it for obvious reasons).

"But," said the doctor, "this benign lightning seldom strikes, and no one can say where or when it will, or for the resuscitation of whom. So I simply would advise you to place yourself in a religious atmosphere, remembering the hopelessness of your doing anything about it on your own remaining resources alone, and cooperating with your associates and casting yourself upon whatever God there may be."

So Roland aligned himself with the Oxford groups of that time, a rather evangelical movement, rather aggressive (very easy it is to criticize). It was nondenominational, however, and it used simple common denominators of religions, simple moral principles. It called upon its members to admit that they could not solve the life problem on their own. It called upon them for self-examination. It called upon them for restitution. It called upon them for a kind of giving in the Franciscan manner, the kind of giving that demands no return in money, power, prestige and the like, the losing of one's self in the lives of others. Such was the nature of the crowd with which he became associated.

Unaccountably, to him, the obsession to drink left. And for some years he had no more trouble. At the time in the groups there were a few alcoholics sober. There is one now at Ann Arbor that goes back to that time, an old friend who never became an AA. Sobered up in the Oxford Groups.

So Roland returned to America. And the groups here in those days were headed by an Episcopal clergyman called Sam Shoemaker. And in his congregation and among the groups were two or three other alcoholics that, for the nonce, were staying dry.

And Hazard had a summer place near Bennington, Vermont. And these friends, one of them son of a local judge and himself an alcoholic, described the plight of a boy who was a school-time chum of mine, Ebby Thatcher. And Ebby had been deteriorating horribly. There were summer folks in the town above Manchester. Ebby had run his car into the side of the farmer's house, pushed the wall of the kitchen in, the door could still be opened to the car, Ebby stuck his head out and, to the poor woman cowering in the corner who hadn't been hit, he said, "Hey, what about a cup of coffee?"

Well, the town fathers had had it. They were going to commit Ebby for alcoholic insanity, so the judge's son and Hazard picked up the man who was to become my sponsor.

Meanwhile, I had gone the route with which you're all familiar. I had sobered up the summer before, scared to death by the verdict of my doctor, Dr. Silkworth, the one we have since named "the little doctor who loved drunks," and must have then because in his lifetime he dealt with some forty thousand of them as a hack doctor in a drying out place.

And he had an idea that this thing was an illness having several components: a spiritual illness, a moral illness and also a physical illness. And, perhaps oversimplifying, he was apt to describe an alcoholic as a person condemned by a compulsion to drink against his own interests, to drink in spite of his perfect willingness to stop, and that this drinking was coupled to an increasing sensitivity of the body which, if the drinking went on, guaranteed his insanity and, one day, his death. So this sort of a sentence had been spoken to Lois at long last by my doctor, Dr. Silkworth. So you see the soil was under preparation. We were beginning to learn a little more about climate. Ebby and my other friend Roland had received a considerable amount of light.

Well, I got drunk in about two months, even in spite of this sentence that I would have to be locked up or go nuts, maybe within a year. And then my friend Ebby, who had been brought to New York from Vermont, who had unaccountably sobered up for the time being in the Oxford Groups, came to visit me for I too was in great despair.

Despair is the primary ingredient, indeed, of this soil. In the medical jargon we might call it "deflation at depth." Some deflation, huh? So, Ebby came to see me. And he pitched at me this list of moral (you might say) cliches. Nothing so new about that. I was in favor of honesty. I was in favor of helping other people.

I was in favor of practically everything he had to say except one thing: I was not in favor of God, for I had received one of these magnificent modeled modern schoolings, scientific schooling, that assured that by a series of stages, picking up increments from somewhere as they went along, I could be traced back to a single piece of ooze in prehistoric seas. And this was my faith. And science was my god.

So along comes Ebby, and along comes Jung, for whom I had respect, and here was my doctor: Science can't do it; medicine can't do it; psychology can't do it. Religion? Sometimes. That was his story. But how could I buy religion? So I felt trapped. In other words, I was gripped in the trap which we every day construct for the drunk who approaches us saying, "Well, I think the group life must be great. Helping other people? I'm for it. But I couldn't get the spiritual angle (as our jargon has it)."

Now, as you know, this gentleman is the newcomer, like me, is being caught in this trap. When you and I talk to another alcoholic, and we identify ourselves as having been denizens of this strange world, and, having emerged, and we describe this malady in the terms of our god, Science, and THAT god pronounces the sentence of hopelessness upon us, the sentence, we are deflated at depth. And then we learn that now we have accepted our personal hopelessness, there still isn't any hope because we cannot go for the God business.

And this was the awful dilemma into which I was cast by my friend Ebby, bringing, on the one side, all of this bad news, but on the other side, the spectacle of his own release, and that was the word to use. He didn't say he was on the water-wagon; the obsession had just left him as soon as he became willing to try on the basis of these principles, and, indeed, as he became willing to appeal to whatever God there might be. And this was reducing the theological requirements an awful lot.

Well, I went on drinking about three weeks, and in no waking hour would I forget the face of my friend, a spectacle of release as I looked out through a haze of gin into his face, as he pitched this "synthesis" at me. So I thought, "well, I better go up to the hospital and get sobered up. A conversion experience is not for me: I'm an obstinate Vermonter.

Besides, I can't buy it. People say to me, 'Have faith.' And I believe I'd have faith if I could have it but I can't. But anyhow, I'll go and get dried up.

So I went to the hospital. I must have had a little optimism, because I came in with a bag of beer (I had tried to share it on the subway up). I was waving a bottle.

Dear little Dr. Silkworth came out and I yelled at him, "This time, Doc, I got it!"

He said, "I'm afraid you have, Bill. You better get upstairs and go to bed." And he looked very sad, for he loved me. So I went upstairs, and went to bed. I was there while I entered the D.T.s.

So, in about three days, I was all in the clear. But, the more sober I got, the more awful the despair, the depression. So, I think it was the morning of the third or the fourth day that my friend Ebby showed up in the doorway, and my feeling was ambivalent at once.

So I said, "Well, this is the time he's going to pour on the evangelism." And on the other hand I was saying, "Well, he should be looking for a job. Why is he up here at eleven o'clock in the morning to see me? He does practice what he preaches."

So, Ebby knew my prejudices, and so he waited for me to ask him again for that neat little formula through which he had achieved release. And dutifully he went through it: you got honest with yourself, with another person in confidence; you made restitution; you helped others; and you prayed to God as you understood Him (I think he might have even used that phrase).

And without much more ado, he was gone. No pressure. And again I couldn't have truck with the God business. And again the despair deepened until the last of this prideful obstinacy momentarily was apparently crushed out. And then, like a child crying out in the dark, I said, "If there is a Father, if there is a God, will he show himself?"

And the place lit up in a great glare, a wondrous white light. Then I began to have images, in the mind's eyes, so to speak, and one came in which I seemed to see myself standing on a mountain and a great clean wind was blowing, and this blowing at first went around and then it seemed to go through me. And then the ecstasy redoubled and I found myself exclaiming, "I am a free man! So THIS is the God of the preachers!"

And little by little the ecstasy subsided and I found myself in a new world of consciousness. And one of the early reflections in this world of great peace which stole over me was that all is well with God. I am a part of His cosmos at last. Even evil in His hands can be transmuted into good.

So I had been deflated at depth by a fellow sufferer who used the scientific verdict to deflate me, who used his ability to communicate to me through our kinship of common suffering, and who made the example of a person who practiced what he preached. So, then, for me, here indeed was the soil, here was the climate, and, God knows, the light was great.

Now, I venture this assertion [that every member] of AA has a spiritual awakening or experience of exactly this character. Certainly it is not for me to dicker with theologians, but let me say I prefer to think that there is no essential difference between what happened to me and what happens to each sound AA, excepting the time element.

Going back to those psychiatrists who said, "We can't understand this tremendous shift in motivation despite all your resources." Well, in my case the shifts ...[tape paused]. but the fruits have been the same. And one of the most terrible compulsions and obsessions known has been expelled from us almost wholesale. It's true, this happy synthesis of medicine, religion and our own experience in suffering, in recovery and sharing the grace of this, one with the next. So, fellas, there's my speech.

Q: Bill, is that light relative in the sense of illumination? It must be. Not every one of us has gone through the experience of ecstasy or any light shining or ...

OK. Maybe... You know, this is a curbstone opinion, but here's how I look at it. You go to AA meetings and somebody gets up, and this happens time after time, and he says, "Now, folks, I ain't got the spiritual angle. Yet. I'm making the group my Higher Power. They're sober

and I wasn't. So I got a Higher Power, I ain't got the spiritual angle the way you fellas did. And as for Bill's thing, well, he looks sane in other respects, but, you know.."

Now, this guy will get up there and tell a story of losing this compulsion and of its being cleared out of him and his being re-motivated in many other ways, just like those psychiatrists said, in a matter of months, or of six months or a year.

Now just take one of those fellows and try to imagine all of those shifts in motivation taking place within six months, or within six minutes instead of six months. I think, had this happened to that fellow, he too could have had ecstasy.

So I think it's a time element, and I personally see no great advantage in these tremendous experiences, save in my case only one. It did give me an instant conviction of the presence of God which has never left me from that moment, in spite of the worst I can do (and it's often been damned bad), and no matter what the pressure. And I feel that that extra dividend may have made the difference whether I would have persisted with AA in the early years or not.

Actually, it has some liabilities, and I've seen it in others who have had these experiences in AA, and there are quite a lot. And this is the penance, and I think you theologians give us some excuse for it too, of beginning to think that, because we have these tremendous illuminations, that WE are something special.

So, you begin to develop a kind of a paranoia alongside of a perfectly valid experience. And this is just what happened to me. I damned near botched up the whole works by coming out of this working furiously with drunks and, before anybody had been sobered up, I got so far off base as to loudly declare one time to an audience by no means spellbound that I was going to sober up all the god damned drunks in the world! Now THAT is pure paranoia if you ever...

So, don't long for the illumination. I think you're apt to have the experience that's appropriate

Q: Well, I'm not longing for it. I...

Well, some people do. You know: "Oh, my God! If I could only have one like Bill's!" Now, actually, this may be said very sincerely because this may be a guy who's slipping around, but he may be slipping around on account of the fact that he's a little schizy and needs some of them vitamin B3s, so now we'll put on Hawkins.

Moderator: Well, you got it from the horse's mouth, fellas. Very inspiring and illuminating, the things that Bill [tells] of how this all began. Now you've gone with him you know what the purpose of their meeting is here: is on niacin. And tomorrow we'll have Dr. Hoffer and Dr. Osborn and a couple of other people. But one of the most active in the field with some startling developments is Dr. Dave Hawkins in New York, and I'll read you a little bit of his background: both his Bachelor of Science degree and medical degree were received from Marquette University. He interned in Columbia Hospital in Milwaukee. He then graduated from [end of tape] Transcriber's note: According to "Pass It On," Dr. Humphry Osmond (not Osborn) and Abram Hoffer were English psychiatrists working in a mental hospital in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, principally with alcoholics and schizophrenics.

It was they who introduced Bill to LSD. Later, they gained some success in treating alcoholics by administering vitamin B3, also known as niacin. Bill felt strongly that this was the key to the "allergy of the body" that Dr. Silkworth had suspected, and spent the remaining years of his life actively promoting niacin therapy (much to the consternation of the AA fellowship).