

The Six Steps in A.A. Literature

There are four versions of the Six Steps in the printed literature.

In *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age* (pp. 160-161), Bill Wilson writes, "I was in this anything-but-spiritual mood on the night when the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous were written. I was sore and tired clear through. I lay in bed at 182 Clinton Street with pencil in hand and with a tablet of scratch paper on my knee. I could not get my mind on the job, much less put my heart in it. But here was one of those things that had to be done. Slowly my mind came into some kind of focus. Since Ebby's visit to me in the fall of 1934 we had gradually evolved what we called 'the word-of-mouth program.' Most of the basic ideas had come from the Oxford Groups, William James, and Dr. Silkworth. Though subject to considerable variation, it all boiled down into a pretty consistent procedure which comprised six steps. These were approximately as follows:

1. We admitted that we were licked, that we were powerless over alcohol.
2. We made a moral inventory of our defects or sins.
3. We confessed or shared our shortcomings with another person in confidence.
4. We made restitution to all those we had harmed by our drinking.
5. We tried to help other alcoholics, with no thought of reward in money or prestige.
6. We prayed to whatever God we thought there was for power to practice these precepts.

This was the substance of what, by the fall of 1938, we were telling newcomers. Several of the Oxford Groups' other ideas and attitudes had been definitely rejected, including any which could involve us in theological controversy. In important matters there was still considerable disagreement between the Eastern and the Midwestern viewpoints. Our people out there were still active Oxford Group members, while we in New York had withdrawn a year before. In Akron and vicinity they still talked about the Oxford Group's absolutes: absolute honesty, absolute purity, absolute unselfishness, and absolute love. This dose was found to be too rich for New Yorkers, and we had abandoned the expressions."

In the Big Book (on page 292 in the 3rd edition, and page 263 in the 4th edition), Earl Treat (who helped form the first A.A. group in Chicago) gives the Akron version of the six steps as they were taught in 1937.

"The day before I was due to go back to Chicago, a Wednesday and Dr. Bob's afternoon off, he had me down to the office and we spent three or four hours formally going through the Six-Step program as it was at that time. The six steps were:

1. Complete deflation
2. Dependence and guidance from a Higher Power
3. Moral inventory
4. Confession
5. Restitution
6. Continued work with other alcoholics

Dr. Bob led me through all of these steps. At the moral inventory, he brought up some of my bad personality traits or character defects, such as selfishness, conceit, jealousy, carelessness, intolerance, ill-temper, sarcasm and resentments. We went over these at great length and then he finally asked me if I wanted these defects of character removed. When I said yes, we both knelt at his desk and prayed, each of us asking to have these defects taken away Dr. Bob then led me through the restitution step, in which I made a list of all of the persons I had harmed, and worked out ways and means of slowly making restitution."

In a July 1953 *Grapevine* article titled "A Fragment of History: Origin of the Twelve Steps" (reproduced in *The Language of the Heart, page 200*) Bill wrote, "During the next three years after Dr Bob's recovery our growing groups at Akron, New York and Cleveland evolved the so-called word-of-mouth program of our pioneering time. As we commenced to form a society separate from the Oxford Group, we began to state our principles something like this:

1. We admitted that we were powerless over alcohol.
2. We got honest with ourselves.
3. We got honest with another person, in confidence.
4. We made amends for harms done others.
5. We worked with other alcoholics without demand for prestige or money.
6. We prayed to God to help us to do these things as best we could.

Though these principles were advocated according to the whim or liking of each of us, and though in Akron and Cleveland they still stuck by the Oxford Group absolutes of honesty, purity, unselfishness and love, this was the gist of our message to incoming alcoholics up to 1939, when our present Twelve Steps were put to paper."

Another version of the six steps appears in the pamphlet "Three Talks to Medical Societies by Bill W., Co-Founder of Alcoholics Anonymous," page 8 (this was a presentation given by Bill in April 1958 to the New York City Medical Society on Alcoholism). In describing the visit made by Ebby T to his home, Bill wrote, "Next Ebby enumerated the principles he had learned from the Oxford Group. In substance here they are as my friend applied them to himself in 1934:

1. Ebby admitted that he was powerless to manage his own life.
2. He became honest with himself as never before; made an 'examination of conscience.'
3. He made a rigorous confession of his personal defects and thus quit living alone with his problems.
4. He surveyed his distorted relations with other people, visiting them to make what amends he could.
5. He resolved to devote himself to helping others in need, without the usual demands for personal prestige or material gain.
6. By meditation, he sought God's direction for his life and the help to practice these principles of conduct at all times."