

The Man Behind the A.A. Revolution

Susan Cheever talks about her new biography of Bill Wilson, the man she says was made to found Alcoholics Anonymous

Interview by Paul O'Donnell

There have been several books and memoirs written about the founding of Alcoholics Anonymous by Bill Wilson and Dr. Robert Smith in the 1940s. But as Susan Cheever found when she was asked to write a profile of Wilson, there has not been an authoritative biography, until now. Cheever, the daughter of novelist John Cheever and the author of two memoirs of her own drinking life, has written a very personal portrait of Wilson, portraying him as a restless thinker who created A.A. the way an inventor might stumble on a revolutionary technology. We talked to her recently about her book and her subject.

Bill Wilson was a complicated person with an amazing story. How did you go about getting a handle on him?

There were a number of books about Bill Wilson, and by him, but a lot of the basic biographical tasks had not been done. I used everything that had been written, and I went to the archives at Stepping Stones [Wilson's home, now a museum], where I had the amazing luck of getting there before it had been indexed, so I could watch the process of archiving. There are a ton of letters. Bill and [his wife] Lois were great letter writers, and much of the early part of the book, when he's still drinking, are from their letters. Whenever you're inside someone's mind in the book, whether it's Emily Wilson's in the opening scene or Bill Wilson's in the Mayfair hotel, it's from their letters. I also went to [Wilson's birthplace] in Vermont. The more I hung out in East Dorset, the more I saw how important Yankee free-thinking and pure democracy and stubbornness is to the program of A.A. Dr. Robert Smith [A.A. co-founder] was also from Vermont.

What was it about that Yankee mindset that led to AA?

Well, a lot of threads start in Vermont that end up in the 12 steps and the 12 traditions of A.A. One is the idea that each person has an equal voice. That's enshrined in the bylaws. A.A. actually belongs to and is run by its own member. That whole idea of pure democracy comes right out of the Vermont town meeting.

Another thing is that a lot of New England was dry when Bill Wilson was growing up. They taught temperance in the schools. Bill Wilson actually had an education in how to stay sober and how not to stay sober. And of course there is the rampant spiritualism of the turn of the century in Vermont and New Hampshire and upstate New York. People were reaching out for a different kind of God, throwing over the Calvinistic, British Puritan God. Not just of humanism, but transcendentalism, which is also enshrined in the 12 steps.

Where do you find that in A.A.?

Well, "God as we understand him." That's Thoreau. That's Emerson. It seems to me that he took all these different strands--the religious, pure democracy, temperance, the

transcendentalist-humanist strand, which was buttressed when he married a Swedenborgian--and wove them all into this astonishing program which has changed the way we think about addiction. When I look at his life, I think, 'Wow, this was a machine designed for this job.' He came out of this weird stew of educational and spiritual tenets that ended up being the best treatment for alcoholism.

The temperance movement plays a crucial role. As a child, he refuses to take the temperance pledge and rejects religion altogether. How does he get from there to seeing a higher power as a central part of a sober life as an adult?

Well, I think that's the story. For him, God took the form of a specific entity. He flirted and maybe even slept with Catholicism in his later years. But he had learned that God was an extremely personal concept, and that you can never say to anyone, this is the kind of God you must have. Part of his genius was understanding that there are things no one person can prescribe for another if the person wants to help the other.

This is where he really shifted the way we think. He understood that being drunk wasn't a lack of willpower or discipline. He understood that the way to treat addiction is to court a change of heart with the utmost gentleness. That is a really revolutionary idea. That understanding came from his own desperate attempt to get sober, through trial and error--mostly error. He became, as his friend Aldous Huxley called him, "The Greatest Social Architect of the 20th century."

His insight was that drinking was not a moral problem?

Absolutely. He took the idea that alcoholics were bad people and changed it to the idea that alcoholics are sick people. It changed the way we view addiction. It changed the way we see human nature. He changed the way we see each other as much as Freud did, I think. Bill led us to see that what we think of as a failure of willpower is not that at all. It's a disease. He wasn't saying that you're not responsible for the things that you do when you're drinking. He was just saying that the way to stop drinking requires a change of heart.

How did he change his own heart?

As you watch his story unfold, you see all the pieces of his program fall into place. He would get one piece from talking to another drunk who had gotten sober. Then when he was in a group of people who didn't want to drink, he saw that the power of the group was a piece of it. Then he was able to think in terms of surrendering his power rather than in terms of getting more. It was as if he was always traveling further from or closer to a drink. Slowly he began to understand the things that brought him closer and the things that took him further away.

It's often called a religious program, and specifically Christian. It even makes forgiveness one of its paragons.

The program of A.A., as written by Bill Wilson and Dr. Smith, only has one purpose: to get you sober. That's it. To make you a better person, forget it. That was one of the things he came to understand in those years of trial and error. It has to be about only one thing.

So within the context of that primary purpose, forgiveness is a way to ready the heart for the change. Bill himself had a different view of forgiveness. One thing that's so moving about him is how he treated people who abandoned him with incredible courtesy and generosity. His parents abandoned him, financially, emotionally and physically, and they did it with incredible self-righteousness. Yet he was constantly writing them letters, sending them checks when he had no money, and inviting them to come and live with him. That's forgiveness. So as a person, and I guess we can say as a Christian, he was extremely forgiving, but in the steps of A.A., forgiveness is not meant to improve your soul, it's meant to get you sober.

But it is in a sense a faith-based program, and one the courts often order people into.
Well, they do that because it works. It's sort of the best thing we have by far. In some parts of the country, it's more Christian, because each A.A. meeting governs itself. So there are some A.A. meetings that are emphatically anti-Christian and there are some that are emphatically Christian.

But you don't object to it being called religious.

Well, that's another question. I object to that because they object to that. But I don't represent AA. I'm not an expert. And I would have trouble defining religion.

Some criticize AA for proclaiming it's the only way to get sober.

But it doesn't. It's like the Christianity charge. It's just not there.

In addition to his work with alcohol, Wilson left his mark on Wall Street. He essentially invented market research, didn't he?

That's true. While he was drinking.

Did his knack for business continue after he quit drinking?

His business skills were applied to try to make A.A. a going concern. He quit drinking in 1934, but it really wasn't until 1944 that it was clear that A.A. was a go. He spent ten years pouring all those skills, the endurance, the salesmanship, into making A.A. go forward. And even after he turned it over to its membership, he kept on searching for some kind of help for alcoholics, looking for a magic bullet. A lot of his friendship with Aldous Huxley was about what we now call psychopharmacology. He took LSD, which at the time was not a street drug, but he thought maybe it could help alcoholics. He thought vitamin B could help. So he continued to do a lot of searching and experimenting.

Which brings us back to how he viewed alcoholism. He said it was a disease, and he even looked for pharmacological solutions. But the only remedy he found was a spiritual one. How many diseases can you say that about?

The relationship with the body and the mind is complicated and mysterious. You say most diseases aren't spiritual, but many people believe they are. The question of where does disease leave the body and enter the spirit, or enter the mind or the brain--that's a question

I am not able to answer.

We're living in a 12-Step world now. Yet part of this story is how Wilson's program was once regarded with suspicion.

When AA was starting, it was thought of in many weird ways. There were years and years when it looked as if Bill Wilson was going to be the only successful recovering alcoholic. There's that famous scene where he complains to his wife, "You know, I've had 40 people get sober and they're all drinking again. This doesn't work." And she said, "Well it worked for one person--you." There were years were AA was lucky to be regarded as anything by anyone. I don't think Bill Wilson could have possibly have envisioned what's happened with those 12 steps of his. There hundreds of 12-Step programs saving millions of lives and millions of families in ways that I don't think he envisioned.

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