

The Factory Owner & the Convict

Hindsfoot Foundation Series on Alcoholics Anonymous History

The Factory Owner & the Convict

**Lives and Teachings of the A.A.
Old Timers Vol. 1**

Glenn C.

Second Edition

Copyright © 1996, 2005 by Glenn C., Archivist
Written for the groups in South Bend, Mishawaka,
Elkhart, and Goshen, c/o Michiana Central Service Office
814 E. Jefferson Blvd., South Bend, Indiana 46617

First edition 1996
Second edition 2005

Front cover: steel mills from the area of heavy industry in northwestern Indiana which stretched from Gary to South Bend and Mishawaka. From a poster designed by Carroll T. Berry in 1928 for the Chicago, South Shore & South Bend Railroad, courtesy of the Chicago Historical Society.

St. Joseph-Elkhart County Archives Project

**Stories, tapes, and reminiscences
collected with the aid of**

South Bend, IN: Bob F., Bob S., Gil L., Mary Pat L.,
Molly S., Pat R., Pat W., Phyllis T., and Raymond I.

Elkhart, IN: Ed C., Martha P., and Marty G.

Mishawaka, IN: Sharon K.

Also: Bill C. (Osceola, IN), D. Merrill (Oberlin, OH),
Frank N. (Syracuse IN), Juanita P. (Rolling Prairie,
IN), Rob G. (Niles, MI), and Stan E. (Edwardsburg,
MI)

Table of Contents

Preface

Part One. Introduction

1. My Story Is My Message

Part Two. Ken M.'s Early Life: From Rags to Riches

2. The Wounded Healer
3. Expelled from School
4. The Traveling Salesman Who Played the Organ
5. World War I: Interlude at Sea
6. Marriage to Helen and Move to South Bend
7. The Successful Young Factory Owner
8. Breakdown and Collapse

Part Three. Nick K.'s Early Life: From the Orphanage to the Penitentiary

9. The Brave Young Man Who Didn't Even Cry
10. Black Fig Wine and Jail Cells
11. The Murder of Joseph Desits

Part Four. Ken and Soo Found the South Bend Alcoholics Anonymous Group

12. Ken and Soo Start Their A.A. Group
13. The First Twenty Members

Part Five. Nick K. and the A.A. Prison Group

14. Joining Hands with the Convicts
15. Doing God's Time
16. Little Boys and Girls in Grown-ups' Bodies

Part Six. Bill H. and Jimmy M.: Winning Inclusion for Black Alcoholics

17. Jimmy's Bar
18. The Interracial Group
19. Meetings and Steps in Early A.A.
20. He Knew It Was a God

Notes

Preface to the first edition

This project was begun as part of the celebration of the Golden Anniversary of the Alcoholics Anonymous movement in South Bend, Elkhart, Mishawaka, and Goshen, Indiana in 1993. The present volume is the fruit of the following three years of research, and is presented, appropriately enough, at the Silver Anniversary meeting of the Michiana Regional Conference which brings A.A. members together from this region of northern Indiana and southern Michigan.

Preface to the second edition

In the Spring of 1993, the groups in South Bend and Mishawaka asked one of their members to assemble this material to preserve the memory of how A.A. had first begun fifty years earlier in their part of the country, in the cities and towns of Indiana and Michigan which cluster around the St. Joseph river valley and the southeastern shore of Lake Michigan. It was intended just as a local project. No one at that time imagined that anyone outside of this area would be interested in it.

But then a number of A.A. groups began making annual pilgrimages to South Bend from many miles away, some from the Chicago area coming for an entire month every year, and others traveling at times from Ann Arbor and Lansing in Michigan, and from Bloomington in southern Indiana. Their lives had been saved, they said, by people who had been trained at the feet of Nick and Brownie and their South Bend friends, who had come to their town

and started A.A. groups there, bringing with them the tradition and the spirit of early St. Joseph river valley A.A. And they told us that there were many others from even further away, in places like New York City and Florida, who would be making that same pilgrimage if they did not live at such a distance.

And then a few copies of this book began to travel to other parts of the country, and an ever-increasing number of calls started coming in for copies to pass around there too, and we began to realize to an even greater extent that we had something of more than just local interest. We were told that this collection of stories made sense of what the twelve step program was about in a way that people could understand and relate to in their part of the country also, better in its own way than anything they had read before. They told us that it gave a picture of the depths of the inner misery of alcoholism and addiction that struck a deep chord in their hearts. One good old-timer told us that “this book describes the way alcoholics actually think better than anything I have ever read.” Newcomers said that it opened their eyes and “made sense” out of what they were going through. Even more importantly, this collection of stories gave a clear and moving vision of the new hope which the twelve step program offered, and showed people how to begin walking the path that led to that new and blessed life.

Then psychotherapists who were treating people who had problems with alcohol and drugs began begging for copies too. They said they were loaning copies of it to their patients to read, because this book seemed to deliver the message which they most needed to hear, better than anything else they had come up with.

A very successful book which came out in 2001, *The Higher Power of the Twelve-Step Program: For Believers and Non-Believers*, was based on the message of the St. Joseph river valley A.A. teachers. Some of the key people in the development of

modern alcoholism treatment in the United States said that it was the first thing they had encountered which gave truly useful help to newcomers who were atheists and agnostics — people who up to that point had always been turned away by any kind of spiritual approach to recovery. And they too begged us to reprint the original stories of these Hoosier old timers.

It became clear that it was time to do another printing of the original historical account. This second edition has been divided into two volumes, with the second half given a separate title, *The St. Louis Gambler and the Railroad Man*. The first volume contains the stories of Ken M. (the factory owner), Nick K. (the convict), and Jimmy M., a woman who was one of the first two black people to come into the South Bend program. The second volume continues with the stories of Brownie (the St. Louis gambler), Ed P. (the railroad man), Ellen L., and Goshen Bill. The preparation of this new edition has provided an opportunity to revise an occasional very badly put together sentence or paragraph — the first edition was written rather hurriedly — and to add an appendix talking about the books these good old timers read, but this is otherwise the same book which was put together for our local Indiana A.A. groups nine years ago.

Last but not least, very special thanks must be given to Frank N. of Syracuse, Indiana, the northern Indiana A.A. archivist, who has walked every step of the way during those years, encouraging and supporting and contributing his own talents as an interviewer and researcher. If we measured his contribution only in terms of days spent and miles journeyed, that would be reason enough to thank him. But he is one who has truly thrown himself into the spirit and complete dedication of old time A.A., and has been above all the best friend anyone could ever have.

Part One

Introduction

Chapter 1

My Story Is My Message

These two volumes are a description of how alcoholics actually think and feel inside, about themselves and about their problems, and their accounts of the psychological and spiritual transformations which their lives underwent when they discovered the Alcoholics Anonymous program — told in the words of some of the earliest pioneers from one local region during the period of the rapid grassroots spread of the movement across the United States in the 1940's, 50's, and 60's. This two-part work also gives the personal sagas of some very memorable and colorful characters.

The first volume begins with the story of Ken M., who was co-owner and president of a large factory which he was able to make grow and prosper in the midst of the great depression era. But he was also a talented author and musician: he wrote fiction which he published in *Collier's* and the *Atlantic Monthly* and other prominent national publications; he could attend the symphony and come back home and play on the piano, from memory, all the major parts of one of the movements of a piece that had caught his interest.

Nick K., the convict, was a young man brought up mostly in an orphanage in New Mexico, chest deformed by rickets from the inadequate diet, serving a life sentence in the state penitentiary because one cold winter night he had plunged in a drunken fury into the sitting room of a house of ill repute and shot and killed a total

stranger whom his alcohol-blurred vision mistook for someone else. And yet he eventually gained his freedom and became one of the great spiritual teachers of A.A. in the surrounding area.

Jimmy M. was a young black woman who owned and operated a highly successful bar right across the street from the Studebaker automobile factory. She and Bill H., whom she later married, opened up A.A. in northern Indiana to people of all races. They quickly established contact with Earl R. and Bill W. the tailor, two of the well-known early members of the Evans Avenue group in Chicago, and helped create a tightly knit mutual support linkage of black A.A. groups extending along the southern shore of Lake Michigan.

The second volume, *The St. Louis Gambler & the Railroad Man*, opens with the story of Brownie, a dashing professional gambler and nightclub emcee, who came originally from the old riverboat city of St. Louis. There is also the moving story of Ellen L., an ordinary farm girl who got married and had two children; when she and her husband tried to start a gasoline service station they ended up losing the business and everything they owned; he then became a truck driver and she got a job as an accountant. There was nothing extraordinary or glamorous here, and yet a profound, simple wisdom shines through in her words.

Goshen Bill was a sometime Baptist preacher's son who was a school dropout, a schemer and a conniver who avoided steady, honest work like the plague, who woke up one morning sleeping off a drunk in the back of someone's dump truck, lying dirty and mucky in his own urine, and realized that he could not go on any longer. But Ed P. on the contrary was a steady, dependable railroad conductor, skilled at handling people and organizing. On the surface he had a very good job, a wife and little girl whom he dearly loved, and a comfortable home; but he could not stop drinking no matter

how hard he tried, and he finally became beset with the terrifying fear that he was going insane and was going to end up being locked up in the nightmare of an old-fashioned 1940's-style insane asylum for the rest of his days.

The telling of these interlocked personal tales is also an attempt to give some idea of how the early Alcoholics Anonymous program actually worked at the practical level. A.A. folk are hostile to detailed dogmatic systems and architectonic intellectual theories, because these lead people in the wrong direction: into even further rationalizations of the beliefs that are making them sick, into even more of the sterile intellectualizations that they use to block themselves from conscious awareness of their real feelings, and into endless *talking-about* instead of simple *doing*.

What Alcoholics Anonymous uses so effectively instead is what some contemporary biblical scholars call theology-as-narrative (or those who prefer could call it therapy-as-narrative or life-philosophy-as-narrative). The best healing can often come from simply listening to a story, and then seeing somewhere in the story a parallel or an analogy which you can then use as a new metaphor for your own life, something which suddenly opens a door through which you can pass into a realm of new awareness. A.A. believes that the best stories are true stories, and that healing occurs when a person listens long enough to other people talk honestly about their own lives.

So in Alcoholics Anonymous the rule is: *my story is my message*. Anything of value I have to tell you which might help you in living your life, can be best expressed by simply telling you honestly about myself. I must tell you about even the deeply shameful and humiliating things I was involved in, and I must tell you truthfully what I actually *felt* — resentment, self-pity, fear, worry and anxiety, loneliness, feelings of total failure, the desire to quit and just give up, and even suicidal urges — because the disease of

alcoholism strikes hardest at a person's innermost feelings about life and the world, and expresses itself most strongly in the thoughts and phrases and judgmental statements that appear over and over again in the inner dialogue with ourselves which tends to go on continuously in the human mind when it is not asleep or unconscious or totally preoccupied with some external task.

My story is my message: I cannot preach at you, because I certainly cannot tell *you* how to lead *your* life, and I certainly cannot deliver sweeping theories and generalizations and doctrinal assertions about life as such and the philosophical concept of God and topics of that sort. On the other hand, if I have been able to stop my compulsive, out-of-control drinking and stay sober, and even more importantly, have learned how to start experiencing some real joy and happiness in my life, and a sense of satisfaction at the end of the day — satisfaction just with how the day went for me — then I can also tell you what I thought and felt and did that produced that extraordinarily transformation in my life. And if something I say resonates within you at the level of your own feelings and experiences, or if you might like to try one of the things I did in my walk down the path of healing and new life, then just take it as a free gift from me and I will feel good about that.

A large part of the Big Book¹ of Alcoholics Anonymous is in fact composed of short personal narratives by dozens of recovered alcoholics describing their own experiences. The stories in the present volume are longer and more detailed than those, which may be helpful for some, but also give more in the way of personal descriptions about how the step-by-step healing process took place in the first years after the person entered A.A. They talk less about stopping drinking *per se*, and more about how each of these people learned to know the stranger inside his or her own heart, and about how each of them learned *to love that stranger who was me*.

The full healing process does not start until a person becomes willing both to talk and to listen. I must obtain the courage to start talking honestly about myself, but (equally hard) I must learn to truly *listen* to other people, going down below the surface dissimilarities of age and sex and race and education and employment, and learning to hear at the *feeling level*. What did this person *feel* in that situation that I have also *felt* in situations in my own life? It is by becoming aware at that level, that the slow healing process quietly goes on (usually well below the plane of full conscious awareness). We find ourselves somehow feeling better, and we are surprised. We do not know how it happened, but it *did*. It is a *catharsis*, as Aristotle called it, a cleansing that somehow washes our spirits clean so that they can be clothed with the fresh garments of new life.

This book is also an attempt to give a glimpse of one of the most important eras in the history of the Alcoholics Anonymous movement, the period that lay between the initial formation of the first two A.A. groups in Akron and New York City during the later 1930's, and the publication of a more detailed account of the twelve step program in the *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* in 1953.² There are already excellent biographies of both Bill W. and Dr. Bob, the two men who were the great public leaders of A.A. at its beginning, and more recently an excellent biography has appeared of Sister Ignatia, whose ideas may in fact have been almost as important as those of the other two.³ These are nevertheless to some degree institutional histories, designed in part to describe the growth of the first organized central structures of the new movement.

But the A.A. movement that began to expand across the United States after the appearance in 1939 of the Big Book (the first full scale description of the program) was to a surprising degree spread by people who had little or no personal association with Bill W. or Dr. Bob or the two initial A.A. groups in Akron and New York City,

or even much close contact with any pre-existing A.A. groups at all. And of course, during the first decade of the period covered in this volume, they did not even have access to the *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, which added a good many useful details to what the Big Book had talked about.

So in the 1940's, all across the United States, in various towns and cities, two people would obtain a copy of the Big Book and start an A.A. group where they lived, and then start independently re-inventing the understandings and insights that were necessary for the practical success of their program of sober living. But because there was a good deal of interchange between widely scattered groups by way of travelers, people on business trips, people who moved because of jobs or divorces, and so on, in spite of the wide dispersion of the little nuclear groups, the program remained surprisingly homogeneous in its growth all across the country. That in particular is what makes this book of more than just regional interest, and something beyond an isolated work of local *pietas* towards the sacred ancestors in our own little valley.

This volume is an attempt to look at one pioneering A.A. community in the 1940's, 50's, and 60's, but one which was a very typical example: The setting is the middle portion of the St. Joseph river valley, where that stream winds from the rolling green countryside and gleaming red and white barns of northern Indiana into the pink-flowering fruit orchards and then the scrubby, sandy dune land of southwestern Michigan, finally to empty into the rolling waves of the international shipping lanes of Lake Michigan itself. A set of bustling, industrialized cities — South Bend, Mishawaka, Elkhart — line the banks of the river itself with enormous brick factory buildings interspersed with many miles of fine homes and parks filled with playing children and shaded by enormous oaks and maples that turn brilliant golds and scarlets in the fall, and then, as

part of the overall area, one can journey over to the rather quieter city of Goshen, lying up the Elkhart river a few miles from where it flows into the St. Joe, and look up at the ornate brick two-story storefronts of the old-fashioned small-town main street and breathe in the quiet atmosphere of a characteristic American small town.

This so very typical American mix of city and country, of sophistication and simplicity, of churches in one block and bars crowded with hard-drinking, ready-fisted railroad and factory workers in the next, is the locale where this group of A.A. pioneers set up their new Alcoholics Anonymous program. But something very much like this book could just as well have been written about any number of places in the United States during this same period, all the way from the east coast to the west. This particular setting for the book was chosen because the material — some particularly useful written documents, quite a few excellent tape recordings of leads and reminiscences, and some surviving old timers who preserved a host of warm memories of the old days — was readily available, and there was enough to turn some of the early leaders there into *real people* whom, it is to be hoped, you can get to know personally in these pages.

The characters who appear here are quite unique individuals, to say the least — some of them very colorful personalities who delighted in doing outrageous and unconventional things — but the *essential* message that they developed to pass on to the next generation was nevertheless little different from what people much like them were working out simultaneously in New England, in the deep south, in the plains states, or over on the west coast during these same decades.

Most importantly of all, thousands of suffering alcoholics and their spouses and relatives who listened to these particular people talk found that their lives started to be healed in some strange way

that they could not fully account for. Their words were preserved because those who listened to them found that listening to them *worked*. Before they had been miserable, filled with pent-up rage and resentment and self-pity, in despair, feeling that they could no longer cope, obviously destroying themselves and not even caring that this was what they were doing. After listening to these people, they found themselves first filled with a tiny shred of some strange new hope, then getting a taste here and there of a magnificent new vision of the world around them, and finally being filled with a sense of peace and joy and strength and deep inner serenity, where they felt themselves walking in the sunlight of the spirit instead of in the darkness of confusion, shame, and soul-destroying anxieties and fears.

Perhaps a very small amount of this can still come through when their words are recorded on the printed page and read many years later, because they were absolutely delightful people, a group of totally fascinating characters, who sometimes got themselves involved in almost unbelievable stunts, and who lived lives that were often marvelously oblivious to conventional norms of behavior. But once you got them started talking, they were always fun to listen to.

Let yourself have fun. That will be the first step in your healing. Read them through first *just to enjoy their stories*, because every one of them knew how to tell a good tale and hold people entranced. I think I can promise you that these people, and some of their stories, are the sort that you will never forget, and that you will find yourself the richer for it.

Part Two

Ken M.'s Early Life: From Rags to Riches

Chapter 2

The Wounded Healer

Ken Merrill, at the age of fifty-one, was undergoing a complete psychological breakdown: drinking himself to death, filled with crippling, bizarre phobias and nameless anxieties. When he came to the threshold of a door, he had to stand stock still, force himself to place one foot over into the next room, then (with visible effort) make himself bring the other foot over. There were periods when he was deathly afraid to venture on more than a few streets of the very city where he lived, and when — in spite of his love of driving his marvelous, shiny Packard out into the countryside to stop beside the road and sit and stare enraptured at some scene of beauty — his unbearable anxieties forced him back down into his dark inner well of isolation. It made no sense, but he was too afraid.

He was a man of extraordinary talents: He could attend the symphony orchestra and come home and play (simply by ear and memory) all the parts of one of the orchestral movements on the piano at home. He had published numerous short stories in major national magazines like *Collier's*, the *American Mercury*, and *Scribner's*.⁴ Even more amazingly, he had taken over the presidency of a factory in an industrial town at the height of the Great Depression, and had not only made that factory flourish and prosper economically, but had won the total devotion and loyalty of all his factory workers and their families.

But the unreasoning dread and anxiety that now swirled through his mind was driving him into an alcohol-drenched insanity, and no one could control his bizarre behavior any longer. A man who seemed to have everything was destroying himself, totally and utterly, apparently without reason.

He not only found his way out of this snake pit of the inner psyche, he was subsequently responsible for leading numerous other men and women out of this living hell. He was the classical Wounded Healer — the man whose own torments enabled him to have an empathy and understanding of the downtrodden and discarded that no one could have who had not walked through that nightmare of fear and despair himself.

His full name was Kenneth Griggs Merrill. He was born in Saint Paul, Minnesota on July 9, 1891, the second son of John Francis Merrill (1858–1934) and Annie Humphrey Davy (1864–1935). Queen Victoria still ruled England at that time, and women wore the long dresses of the Gay Nineties. In the United States the last of the frontier was closing — the Oklahoma territory was opened for settlement shortly before Ken was born. Billy the Kid had already been killed in 1881, Jesse James in 1882 — the days of cowboys and outlaws were over a decade before Ken was born. The new violence and confrontation was being produced by steel workers' and railway workers' strikes and labor leaders like Eugene V. Debs.

The year before Ken was born, a serious depression began to affect the world economic situation, culminating in the Panic of 1893. Jobless and homeless people wandered over America as hoboes and tramps. Until he was about seven years old, Ken lived there in St. Paul in an isolated house overlooking a shanty town knocked together by some of these bums and vagrants, and the beginnings of his childhood traumas began at that time.

Ken's father John was a Yale University graduate, a well-educated and talented man, who numbered some extraordinarily wealthy and successful men among his personal friends. But he himself seemed unable to make a go of it, or even maintain a stable job for long. He drifted from one employment to another, taking on positions as an accountant and working ineffectively to make his fortunes as a professional singer. He made very little money, and was rarely home. In the evenings he was usually out singing some place. He was not a sympathetic or attractive man — he delighted, for example, in playing up to other women in front of his long-suffering wife.

The story "Poor Daddy" which Ken published in the *American Mercury* in 1954 seems to be autobiographical, and gives us an insight into the atmosphere of wariness, fear, and hypervigilance which surrounded his early childhood at all times:⁵

A sudden swift flash of recollection — as vivid as a curtain rolling up on a brightly lit stage — brought back a childhood setting I had not envisioned in many years. This setting, laid in St. Paul, Minnesota, at the turn of the century, revealed a stark, bare box of a house, set on a desolate, treeless, windswept bluff high above the Mississippi. A mile from the nearest habitation, it was appallingly alone. Far below on the river bank was a railroad switchyard, where swarms of bums were booted off the rods daily. Upon the bosom of the stream itself plied steamers and barges from St. Louis and St. Joseph, which were everlastingly casting off without sundry members of their sodden, vagrant crews — men who, lost in the shambles of a shanty town bordering the tracks, had found competition with the riff-raff from the nearby logging camps too interesting to leave.

A fine place to leave an unusually handsome woman alone! Alone with four small children, during the long days while Father was on his accountant's stool in the city, the long evenings while Father was out singing with his quartet. Mother, however, immediately evolved a defensive routine. From the kitchen she could watch the path to the dirt road. The moment she saw a tramp approaching, she'd blow a whistle and all four of us would tumble into the house, slam the door and lock it. Mother would mount guard. As soon as the man knocked, she'd call: "If you're hungry, I'll set out a bit. But don't move off the path or I'll shoot . . ."

It wasn't long before the bo's put some sort of hex sign on the gate, for after a while we were seldom molested by anyone setting foot on the path. But the occasional prowlers who scrambled up the bluff and, unseen, approached the front of the house, were something else. They really frightened us. But Mother handled them pretty well by the simple expedient of answering the door with a loaded Colt 38 in her hand. They were surprisingly polite . . .

The lighting of the scene changed; there were evening shadows . . . It is after supper and we are all seated around the dining room table under the golden light of an ornate hanging kerosene lamp — warm and comfortable with the sense of intimacy and security that only a circle of light, outlined against the darkness, can give. Father, as usual, is off with his quartet to add a few sorely needed dollars to his clerk's salary. Mother is reading *Oliver Twist* aloud.

(I am to hear all of Dickens' novels read before I am twelve. During that same period I am to become acquainted with *Vanity Fair* and *The Rose and the Ring*, with *Treasure Island* and *Kidnapped*, with *The Sign of the Four* and *The Speckled Band*, with *The Last of the Mohicans*, with *Moby Dick* and a host of other stories that were a part of the birthright of a child in that era.)

In the middle of the table is a bowl of apples, and at each place a smaller bowl of popcorn which we eat with fine calculation that the last half hour may not find us rationless. Mother's place at the table looks the same as ours — with one addition. Nestling beside her plate is the loaded revolver.

Now Mother has just come to the part where Fagin is delivering young Oliver over to Bill Sykes, and, having more than a little dramatic talent, is putting spine-tingling conviction into it:

“Take heed, Oliver, take heed,” said the old man, shaking his right hand before him. “He’s a rough man as thinks nothing of blood when his own is up. Whatever falls out, say nothing, and do what he bids you! Mind!”

Quivering with a pleasurable, vicarious terror, I raise my eyes to the blank, black surface of the window opposite me — and am transfixed with horror. There, nose flattened against the pane, is a face, bestial, degenerate. A blotchy purplish face with bloodshot eyes, and loose wet lips draping snagged teeth. And he’s looking at me!

Too scared to scream, I just sit there staring. I see his gaze shift to my mother and his eyes widen into an unspeakable leer. But it doesn’t last long. His glance follows her shapely arm downward. Suddenly his expression changes. Consternation, fear, flight, register in split-second succession — and he is gone!

I look at Mother. Her hand is idly fingering the handle of the gun, and she reads on, unperturbed.

The face of the giant drunk at the window frightens the little boy into frozen immobility (for small children, the giants of fairy tales are simply the adults who loom over their tiny figures with unstoppable strength) The out-of-control drunk is the ultimate symbol for him of hopeless terror and helplessness in the face of

irrational evil and destructiveness. And yet, at the age of fifty-one, this is precisely what the little boy had grown up into — the out-of-control drunk — that which he feared most.

You can only defeat the monsters, the little boy became convinced, by remaining always hypervigilant, by fleeing into some place inside, where you have walls surrounding you and isolating you from the horrors without: at any moment while you are playing, the frightening warning whistle may be blown, and then you must run for your life, panting for breath, to huddle behind safe, locked doors. You can only defeat the giants by having a loaded pistol, or by showing your willingness to attack them with mindless physical violence, or by being smarter and cannier than them.

Ken's father would punish him when he was little by locking him into a dark closet, or by placing him on a giant wardrobe, too tall for him to jump off or climb down from. The little boy began to develop compulsive rituals: when he bounced a ball, he had to bounce it three times, and do it exactly right each time. If he made a "mistake" in the ritualized behavior, he had to bounce the ball nine times, getting it right this time, or something nameless and dreadful would happen. If he made a mistake on any of these nine times, he had to repeat the bouncing eighty-one times. When he was older, this spread into other behaviors, like switching on and off electric light switches.

Ken Merrill wrote an article in 1965 (under the pseudonym Junius Senior) called "Drunks Are a Mess," for a magazine called *Bar-less* (written for recovering alcoholics in prison, as part of a program for alcoholic convicts which he had himself helped start). In this article he lays out, in layman's terms, his own theory of the ways in which early childhood trauma, and getting blocked in one's normal psychological growth at a certain point, could result in alcoholic behavior in adulthood.

Alcoholism is a disease of dual nature — both mental and physical. When I say mental I do not mean that alcoholics are crazy, because they are not. But the mind is the seat of the emotions, and emotionally they are pretty sick.

Perhaps the best way to get a picture of the nature of alcoholism, is to follow the progress of the average case. The writer has dealt with thousands of alcoholics, in his eleven-year membership in Alcoholics Anonymous and has seen very few exceptions to the following.

The average alcoholic is a man who during the years of absolute innocence, from, say, three to eleven, found himself in a home environment where for some reason he felt “affectionally” rejected. Not wholly loved, protected, and wanted. Denied the birthright of every child to be clasped to the bosom of his family, with bonds of unwavering love.

It is important to note that there may be no overt signs of gross abuse. There are parents who can go through the motions of appropriate child care, and who preside over homes that appear to be ideal in all the surface ways, but who do not have the ability themselves to be warm and nurturing — usually because one of their parents did not know how, and gave them no model of good parenting to build on. Small babies especially are radically dependent on a source of reliable, all-embracing affection, and the absence of this may be shown in nothing more than the feeling-tone of the parent when the baby is being held.

If a small baby cannot “trust” the holding arms which enfold it, during the pre-Freudian period before the infant can even distinguish between itself and its parent, there are apt to be spiritual problems later on associated with any attempt to lower himself or herself into

the all-embracing Ground of Being — the feeling of floating in the giant Ocean of Love which is God is all too apt to be a terrifying feeling instead of our ultimate solace and comfort.

This feeling of being an outsider, as it were, in one's own family, can be caused by many situations within the home. Divorced parents, battling parents, drunken parents, a sordid and humiliating poverty of such depth that a child never knows upon leaving for school in the morning whether there will be a roof over his head when he returns at night, the desolate sense of exclusion which follows the showing of marked favoritism, for a brother or sister. The discovery of a parent in a scandalous or criminal episode — which is much more common than we care to admit. Being the last child in a very large family where sooner or later a desperately weary mother lets the cat out of the bag — “son you weren't wanted in the first place.”

A parent welching on a deal with a kid — “do so and so for a year and I'll give you a bicycle,” and the night before the award is due: “You got mud on your shoes, now you can't have that bicycle.” Spiteful, mean gestures behind which even a child perceives parental hostility.

Tavern-hopping parents who, when compelled actually to stay home for one evening by a childish illness, show only too plainly they consider him a damned nuisance. A physical handicap, such as undiagnosed poor eyesight, making a boy clumsy about the house, inept at games, slow in school; from his standpoint an object of scorn in everything he does.

But of all other causes put together, none equals the sinister potency, in creating future alcoholics, of a harsh, cruel, disciplinarian type of father, coupled with an over-soft, over-affectionate, over-possessive mother. A mom who conspires with sonny to evade papa's wrath, who carries her protectiveness into fields beyond the home, and

attempts ceaselessly, and usually successfully, to insulate the child from the normal, wholesome buffets of ordinary childhood experience. It becomes a hideous circle. The more impossible rules the father lays down for the child to follow, the more failures accumulate, the more bitter the father's persecution, the more maudlin and sentimental the mother's attempts to protect and compensate. Between them, believe me they do a job.

One of Ken M.'s most important observations is that the future alcoholic characteristically becomes "blocked" at a particular age, and does not grow emotionally past that point. So we see such things as the terrified three-year-old or the thoughtlessly impulsive ten-year-old girl in the body of a young woman in her twenties, or the twelve- or sixteen-year-old boy caught in the body of a middle-aged man, but still reacting to events emotionally as though he were still a shy, frightened pre-adolescent trying desperately to please everyone around him, or an angry, rebellious mid-teen.

Whatever the cause of this sense of rejection, it has a dire effect upon the child. For it apparently serves to fix, arrest, freeze his emotional growth, in certain parts of his personality, at the age level during which the experience occurs. Which simply means that when the future alcoholic matures later intellectually and physically, he still remains a child of four or seven or nine in certain parts of his personality. Here are a few examples of childish traits which can be found in practically all alcoholics:

A tantrum type of temper which, natural and usual in a child of four to seven, leads to tragic consequences in a man of forty. Let me illustrate. Five years ago when my youngest daughter was seven she came to me one afternoon at 5:30 and said, "Daddy, I want an ice cream cone."

“No darling,” I replied, “You see, it’s just half an hour before dinner and it might spoil your appetite.”

“I want an ice cream cone,” she persisted.

“Not this time, dear.”

Whereupon she made a very typical seven-year-old remark. “I don’t think you love me anymore. I guess I’ll run away.”

Kid stuff of course. But let’s look at that remark through cold adult eyes, and note the shocking disproportion between the provocation, and the penalty the child invokes. As for provocation she has been told very kindly that she can’t have a five-cent ice cream cone at a totally unreasonable hour. But the penalty she invokes is to threaten to terminate housing, warmth, clothing, food, care and love — in other words, in childish language, she is threatening to destroy herself.

Now let’s move up to an alcoholic of forty. He has a job — also a wife and three children. In addition it is Monday morning, and he has a hangover. But he is still young enough to snap out of it to a certain extent, so he now manages to get down to the job. He puts on his mechanic’s apron, starts up his machine. A few moments later the foreman comes along, reaches over and picks up a part.

“Look here, Joe,” he says, “I’ve told you many times this thread should go $3/8$ of an inch further around the shank.”

The alky, black with fury, snatches off his apron, rolls it in a ball, throws it in the foreman’s face and snarls “Nuts to you! I quit!”

Again note the terrible discrepancy between the provocation and the penalty. The provocation is that he has had a mistake of his own doing called to his attention, and not too unkindly. The penalty he invokes is to cut off the means to provide housing, food, warmth, and clothing for himself, a wife and three children. This is not the righteous

indignation of an adult. It is a child of seven destroying itself because he can't have an ice cream cone.

There are many other childish traits found in most alcoholics:

Brutal cruelty while under the influence — a condition where a guy, when alcohol has removed conscious control, reverts to that few months period in every little boy's life during which, unless watched, he will pull the wings off flies, tie cats' tails together, or mutilate small pets. In childhood it is a passing phase actually rooted in the fact that as yet the thought that pain can be suffered by others has not yet dawned in the consciousness of the child. The vast majority of people, as they develop, put it behind them. But if the person is fixed, by some psychological caprice, at that age level, he goes back to it every time he gets drunk. But now he's definitely dangerous.

Unreasonable jealousy is very common to the alcoholic. All the welfare workers in the world explaining the falseness of his bitter accusations will do no good. For this thing is not rooted in reason. It is a subconscious inner hell, created by a mother or father who, in making a child feel rejected, has set up such a sense of personal unworthiness within him that deep down inside he doubts his ability to holding the affections of *anyone*. So when he drinks he imagines that the last barrier to adult rejection has been passed — that his wife is carrying on with another.

A selfishness which completely excludes consideration of anyone else is present in almost all alcoholics. It is so complete that it mystifies most of those who know him. "The guy must be crazy," they say. Well he isn't. He simply was condemned to live out his years at a six-year-old emotional age level — a time in a kid's life when it is normal, natural and a part of development to be totally preoccupied with self. Thackeray showed rare prescience when he wrote, one hundred years ago, words to

this effect. “If you think your child of six loves you, just remember that he could be totally reconciled to your death by a tu’penny lollipop.” No, there is no evil, no malice in an alcoholic’s selfishness, merely ghastly pathos that he should have to meet adult relationships without the ability to see beyond oneself at all.

Most alcoholics, when drinking, go through a stage they refer to as **sitting on a pink cloud**. You see them alone down at the end of the bar lost in ecstatic contemplation of an all-conquering future. Is this psychotic — the indulgence of one who has lost touch with reality? I think not. He’s just a boy of ten sitting on the limb of an apple tree dreaming of being a white knight on a charger.

Ken, already deeply traumatized by the precarious existence in the isolated house above the Mississippi river, then went through a series of changes of cities, schools, and neighborhoods. When he was around seven (c. 1898) they left St. Paul, Minnesota and moved to Rockford, Illinois. Then when he was ten (in 1901) they moved to Chicago and found a place in the West Pullman district on the extreme south side. When he was twelve (in 1903) they moved further uptown to the Morgan Park neighborhood. This immediately pre-pubescent period is as crucial in terms of creating lasting psychological distortions as the first two or three years of life. In other words, it is one of the two really big critical periods in psychological development. When he was sixteen (in 1907) they relocated yet again, to 9621 Charles Street, where he started at Calumet High School. Sixteen is not a good age either for boys — rebelliousness is at a height, along with trying “to prove your adulthood” by being obnoxious and critical.

The boys and girls in the new neighborhood and the new school have already-formed bonds and relationships — they automatically

and unconsciously react to exclude the newcomer simply as someone who is strange and unfamiliar. The marginal among the “old-timers” will try to humiliate and degrade the stranger if they think they can find any opening, in the attempt to bolster their own weak position. Even if the new kid can break through this, there is no legacy of shared memories going back for years. Children of the military and Methodist pastors’ children — “army brats” and “P.K.s” (preachers’ kids) — make moves like this and survive psychologically, but that is if they have a basically sound family situation with dependable parents to rely on.

Ken did not have this in his childhood — he was already radically insecure before they made the first move when he was seven. He talks particularly about the traumas of adolescence for the young alcoholic-in-the-making in his 1965 article for *Bar-less*:

Our future alcoholic arrives at what one might call the social age and begins to go out to parties, dances, and meetings at the church hall, the lodge hall, the union hall. He’s easy to recognize. He’s the guy you see sitting in the corner, perspiring, in a frenzy of uneasiness. His whole state of mind could be summed up in seven words: “Nobody cares whether I’m here or not.” He doesn’t feel wanted. He feels that he’s not “one of the gang.” He’s afraid to ask that pretty girl across the room to dance. Nobody laughs at his jokes. He never says the clever things. Nobody likes him, and so on.

And why? Don’t you see that he has transferred his sense of rejection by his family as a child, to a rejection, now, by the whole human race? He is desolate. We have a saying in A.A. that the difference between an alcoholic and a normal drinker is that the alcoholic doesn’t drink to feel good but to quit feeling miserable.

Well, sooner or later, some kind-hearted fellow seeing that he is not having a good time, slips about three fingers of red eye into a glass, walks over, hands it to our boy and says, "Look, Joe, you're not enjoying yourself. What you need is a drink." Whereupon the kid downs it.

About eight or ten minutes later, to his infinite wonder, he finds that he was mistaken about being unwelcome. He is convinced that everybody loves him. He hops up, walks over to that same pretty girl: "Come on Susie, let's dance." On his way around the hall he passes some big tough guy, of whom he is ordinarily terrified, gives him a resounding slap on the shoulder: "Hiya Jake, haven't seen you around for a long time!" He has a wonderful evening and his only reaction is, "Gosh, where have they been keeping this stuff!"

Why did alcohol do this to him? Because alcohol is not a stimulant, as is commonly believed, but an anesthetic. It progressively puts to sleep the various layers of consciousness and one of the first layers to go "bye-bye" is this desperate sense of uneasiness which all alcoholics suffer in the presence of mixed company.

The greatest reality of life does not consist of a variety of physical objects. The greatest reality in life is *people*. And here is a young man who has made his adjustment to the greatest reality in his life, people, through alcohol. There are two things wrong with this. First the size of the dose has constantly to be increased as the fellow develops tolerance for alcohol. Secondly having solved his greatest problem, people, through alcohol he now uses the same adjustment on the other realities of life, namely responsibilities.

Ken's difficulty with people started coming to a head when he entered high school there in Chicago at the age of sixteen. It was not making his grades that apparently caused him his trouble, but dealing

with his fellow high school students in a rough school in a notoriously rough city.

Chapter 3

Expelled from School

Like many alcoholics, Ken in his teens turned to fighting. This is fear-based, whether the young person admits it to himself or not. The people around seem overwhelming threats. At the slightest challenge or slight, the alcoholic (continually alert and hypervigilant) feels that he must respond with totally crushing force, or he will be stomped into the earth. Some go around with threatening clothes, posture, and facial expressions at all times — an “in your face” pose — out of the fear that if they relax, let their guards down, smile, and be friendly to anyone, the other person will sense their “weakness” and smash them.

So after around two or three years at high school, Ken was expelled. He himself said many years later that it was because he had stopped working in all his classes except for English, but family members have said that it was for getting in fights. He did admit that he had turned into the kind of teenager who walked around trying to look tough, and that he and the boys he was associating with were involved in some kind of relatively small-scale theft, like shoplifting clothes.

The only job he could find after being thrown out of school was a rather menial position at a factory that made tags — hardly a stimulating job! His mother was an incredibly well-read and educated woman. His father (regardless of what he had or had not

done with his education) was a graduate of Yale University. And here Ken was, not even able to finish high school. Not yet out of his teens, and his life seemed doomed to what was, by his family's standards, failure and disgrace.⁶

There was perhaps another, additional reason why Ken had rebelled against the high school. Ken was a genuine genius, in a wide sweep of areas — music, writing, psychotherapy, business — and this particular high school seems to have been one of the worst in the city of Chicago at that time. He was bored to death, and contemptuous of most of his teachers, who may have been far more competent than he gave them credit for, but were slowwitted compared to him.

Ken was also a person of extraordinary sensitivity to the moods and feelings of people around him — it was the only way he had survived in his temperamental family. His intuitiveness could appear as an almost telepathic ability, though of course it was built, not on any supernatural powers, but on observations of body language, slight changes in facial expression, watching peoples' eyes, listening to the *tone* of their voices and observing the implications of their choice of words and metaphors.

Most people put up what the cognitive therapists call “screens” which block them from perceiving much of the constant flow of other peoples' inner emotions. These people perceive only the surface level of what others are saying and doing, and combine this with learned pragmatic behaviors which enable them to cope surprisingly well (most of the time) with the world around them. Ken did not have up these normal all-blanketing screens. When he was around people, he was exposed to a constant barrage of emotional storms, acutely aware of the repressed hostility, concealed aggression, and surreptitious con games of those around him, which he could feel at an acute level. His family had taught him no

appropriate ways for dealing with what he intuited so clearly. To make matters worse, most of the people around him would deny that they were actually feeling what he knew he apprehended — he was seeing down below the level of their own denial mechanisms. And so those who are like Ken start to doubt their own knowledge: what's wrong with me that I don't see what other people tell me is "really" there?

Small civilian passenger airplanes are constructed in such a way that it is very difficult to crash one. If you make a mistake, all you have to do is let go of the controls, and the aircraft is engineered to automatically right itself in most situations. On the other hand, they achieve this high stability at the sacrifice of high performance. A jet fighter plane on the other hand gets its enormous speed and maneuverability at the expense of stability. It is extremely easy to send one totally out of control. Flying one of these high performance airplanes through some combat maneuvers requires at least as much delicate control as circus acrobats have to learn in order to walk a tight wire across the top of the circus tent without losing balance and falling off, or swing on a trapeze and let go and grab another performer's hands on another swinging trapeze forty yards away.

The combination of Ken's intellectual genius and sensitivity to feelings, coupled with the absence of the ordinary screens that most of us have, gave him a psyche that could, if aimed right, make him capable of truly extraordinary accomplishments. But it was also frighteningly easy to send him into a tail spin and plunge him crashing into the ground. There was no way that he could ever have an "easy ride" through life — you need a nice, slow, stable cargo or passenger aircraft for that — but it is to his credit that by the end of his life, he had figured out how to use his rare talents to benefit thousands of other people, and to literally save the lives of many of

them. The only way the Wounded Healer can ever save himself is by saving others and giving himself to others.

At this point in Ken's life, eighteen years old and expelled from high school, one of his high school English teachers, a man named William W. Bell, intervened and — at one level at least — turned the troubled young man's life around. Bell got Ken to start educating himself, in his own way and at his own pace. He arranged for a man named Patterson from the University of Chicago to give him some tutoring in the evenings, and later he sat in on courses at a Chicago branch of Northwestern University (although these were apparently either noncredit, or he was sitting in on an unofficial status, since the university has Ken's name nowhere in their records).

Ken wrote about it many years later in an article called "A Teacher Made the Difference" in the *Journal of the National Education Association* in 1954, subsequently reprinted in the January 1955 edition of *Senior Citizen* magazine:

The high school I attended forty-five years ago in Chicago was a miserable place, the poorest in the city. Perhaps the teachers were sent there as to a sort of disciplinary barracks for infractions of the professional code. There were a *few* exceptions to the dreary and sullen mentors who disgraced its mouldy classrooms, and one of them was my English teacher, William W. Bell. Around him revolves my story.

At the time I entered high school, my father's affairs were at their lowest ebb. There was barely enough money for car fare — the high school was six miles from our home — and no margin was left for school books and writing materials. Only the generosity of a neighbor who gave me worn suits and shoes enabled me to dress with even a semblance of respectability. I worked after school, and all

day Saturdays and Sundays, as an errand boy for a druggist, so normal teenage social life was denied me.

Considering the monotony of my existence at the time, I do not, in my mature years, sit in too stern judgment upon myself for falling into bad company in my sophomore year. When a youth finds himself barred from the good life, he sees something very attractive in the hard courage, the cynical detachment, and the arm-twisting philosophy of tough guys.

At least, among them poverty was no disgrace, and their lawless forays enabled them to get the things that to a 15-year-old represent the outward symbols of self-respect. There are phases in adolescence during which the desperate necessity of wearing a certain type of tie or cap or sweater, like the other fellow's, outweighs immature moral judgment.

During my junior year I deteriorated still further. With the exception of my English classes (which seemed a separate world, completely insulated from the miseries of life) I abandoned even a pretense of keeping up with my studies. Even in as bad a school as this, it could not go on. In May of that third year, two months before my seventeenth birthday, I was expelled from the Chicago school system.

I went to work in a dirty factory situated on the south side of Chicago, where I was paid \$10 a week. The employees — approximately 250 men and 200 women — were a rough lot. I'd fancied myself as a tough guy up to this time, but I found I was a baby compared to them. Of course, the only self-defense was to become as tough as they were.

It is difficult to set down in words my state of mind that fall. I was just 17 and a dreadful apathy had descended upon me, to which chronic and overwhelming fatigue was not the least contributing factor. It seems

incredible in this enlightened day that as short a time ago as 1908, management required workers to put in ten hours a day five days a week and six hours on Saturday! It was inhuman. Dull smoldering resentment was added to my dragging weariness and the hopelessness of my outlook. Looking back, I know that within five months of being thrown out of school I had traveled a shocking distance down the road to complete demoralization.

At this point, the good and kindly teacher intervened as an agent of God's grace to prevent Ken M. from plunging totally to the bottom at that point — and perhaps also to insure that he would have the tools he would need later on to do his own great work for God. When we start living the life of faith (as St. Augustine learned in putting together his *Confessions*) we discover to our surprise that God and his providence were there all along, even when we ourselves were in total ignorance of him and thought that we had been abandoned by the universe, to float all alone on a sea of troubles, clinging by our own frail strength alone to a splintered plank or two, like Odysseus lost at sea.

It must have been some time in October, because the smell of burning leaves in the air is strongly associated with the recollection. I received a letter from my old English teacher, Mr. Bell, asking me to meet him the following Saturday night at a band concert in Hamilton Park. He was very eager, he wrote, to talk to me. Surprised and flattered — a 17-year-old boy is always sensitive to attention from an adult — I wrote back that I would be there.

When I met him, instead of listening to music, we went for a walk. For two solid hours we crunched around the cinder track of the athletic field while we talked. He was, I suppose, about 36 at the time, of light muscular build, with a rhythmic springy stride, and it was a pleasure to fall in

step beside him that early autumn evening. Occasionally, for emphasis, he laid a thin strong hand upon my shoulder, as missionary zeal brought vibrant sincerity to his voice. With kindness, with urgency, sometimes with sternness, he exhorted me, and I listened with wonder — but not once did it occur to me that this was the most important night of my life.

What he said was substantially this: “My boy, that you have been removed from high school in your junior year is fate. But for you to accept this as the termination of your education would be folly. The first is not altogether your fault; the second, however, is entirely your responsibility.

“You must not stop here; you *must* go on. The whole world of the intellect is still there for you to explore, and you must cross its borders. You have a bent in that direction. Such talent as you have must not wither, it must not die! Even the leaden weight of factory fatigue must not pull it down. You’re young; you’re strong; nothing is beyond your reach if only you want to lay hold on it!”

With mounting enthusiasm, he went on to tell me that he had spoken of me to Professor Patterson of the University of Chicago, who had agreed to tutor me evenings for a trifling sum. “He’s interested in you,” said Mr. Bell excitedly, “he can give you much more — so much more than *I* ever could!”

Then he took up the subject of spare time and sketched a graphic picture of the activities it could accommodate if one only had fixity of purpose and a deep conviction that God expects each one of us to develop the best that is in him. “Evenings! Lunch hours! Saturday afternoons! Sundays!” he cried. “You have a wealth of time to spend as you will. Hoard it and spend it well — spend it well . . .”

As I listened, the trancelike dullness of mind which had come upon me with the shock of leaving school lifted. My youth rose to his inspiration. I resolved then and there to

follow his counsel, to let nothing interfere, to be worthy of his confidence in me, to learn, learn, learn, and some day to come into my intellectual heritage, whatever that might be.

I remember clearly his last words to me that night. In the heat of earnestness he had removed his hat, and his face, raised to the stars, looked almost luminous.

“Look up!” he called out suddenly, “Look *up*! LOOK UP!” With that he seized my hand in a quick tense grip, turned, and was gone. I never saw him again.

The next evening found me ringing Professor Patterson’s doorbell, and from then on for twelve years — with two or three out for naval service in World War I — I pursued my studies with unflagging ambition and innumerable interruptions.

Always I was working full time at my job, but always I was studying too. I wasn’t just trying to put myself through school — I had to help support a mother and two sisters at the same time.

Sometimes being tutored, sometimes taking university extension courses at night, sometimes correspondence school — I plugged away. I sailed through my high school and college mathematics; I extended my horizons with history; I studied Spanish.

Somewhere along the way I took a wonderful course in advertising, which later enabled me to place a foot upon the first rung of the executive ladder. (I found time for that one by getting up every morning at five for two years — which gave me two hours before breakfast to study!

But my first interest all this time was English. After making up my high school and university work, I barged right on into graduate courses at the downtown branch of Northwestern University, where Professor Smart was coaching aspiring writers, and, with his boundless vitality, wit, and charm, keeping his class in a perpetual fever of enthusiasm.

Many years later, a member of the Merrill family who was writing up a short biographical sketch of Ken checked at all the universities mentioned in this story, and found that Ken's name did not show up on the roster of a single one of them as ever having been officially enrolled in any course. With no money for tuition, and no time to do the formally required assignments within the official time frame of a single semester, the young man apparently simply charmed the teachers into letting him sit in on classes when he was able, and into looking at the work he was able to turn in, all without a single mention to any university administrator or official permission to be in any of these classrooms! It is a measure of the young Ken's ability, and his obvious thirst for real learning, that the teachers willingly gave of their time and energy to fill his cup over and over from the fount of knowledge. And what they gave Ken, he genuinely learned — his published writings and later accomplishments prove this.

Edgar Allen Poe, we remember, quit after attempting one semester at the University of Virginia, and Albert Einstein had to go to a Technische Hochschule because no university would admit him — you do not have to have a university degree after your name to be a truly educated person.

Ken himself explained the situation in the story he wrote: he did not have the credentials, but he had what truly mattered, the actual education:

I never accumulated any credits — my life permitted no scholastic routine. Several subjects in ordinary curriculums had to be excluded altogether. Most of this period I was traveling on business, at least six months out of the year, but between trips I took up where I had left off and just kept on going. Even my spare time on the road was not

altogether wasted — a hotel bedroom or parlor car [on a railroad train] is a grand place to catch up on required reading.

I am conscious of an irreparable loss in never having know the normal companionships of college. I still have the rough edges that I know the forthright intimacy of undergraduate life would have rubbed off. I look back with a sort of vicarious nostalgia on the fun I might have had.

There is at first something acutely surprising about this statement. At the age of 63 when he was writing this, Ken M., in spite of his accomplishments, his erudition, his obvious style and sophistication and social standing, still had an inferiority complex about “never having gone to college” in the traditional sense. Many a recovering alcoholic describes himself as “an egomaniac with an inferiority complex,” and this sense, down deep, of *never* having been truly “good enough” at *any* point in their lives seems to be a regular part of the alcoholic mentality, a lingering presence perhaps of the toxic shame incorporated in their childhoods, when nothing they ever did seemed to be totally good enough for their parents or caregivers.

In South Bend, Indiana, where Ken later ended up, there were a surprising number of factory workers, from Polish, Hungarian, Belgian, or Indiana farm backgrounds, who (unlike Ken) never left their lathes and presses and drills, but who (like him) were self-taught: amazingly well-read and knowledgeable individuals, who knew how to think deeply, and who had a truly humane attitude toward life, in the deepest classical and Enlightenment sense. One of the things A.A. perhaps did for Ken later on, was to allow him real friendships with people like that — people like himself, who did not, or could not due to circumstances, follow the stale, stultifying rules of ordinary middle class society.

As someone who has makes his living teaching college students, I can only say that Ken's ideas about undergraduate life contained a certain amount of fantasy. If he had been able to attend college full time, of course he could have learned more. But among the students you usually get, you deeply treasure the rare few who genuinely love learning for its own sake, and the most you can do in four years time is to encourage and foster those young men and women, and point them down fascinating paths that you know will lead them in years to come into places you yourself have perhaps never even seen, but which will be more than "worth the trip." No one can genuinely learn anything *for* anyone else — all real learning is ultimately self-taught, and as Socrates understood over two thousand years ago, the real teacher is never more than a midwife, a gadfly, an asker of *real* questions, and a perpetual student himself.

Down deep, of course, Ken M. understood this. It was what made him such a good teacher in A.A. And he also understood very well indeed the other part of being a good teacher: like Chaucer or Homer, tell a good tale! In real learning, at the spiritual and psychological level, stories give us metaphors, and these metaphors in turn are the doors that open outwards and upwards to that saving knowledge which can never be put comprehensively in human words at any literal level.

Ken M. finished his story with a note of sadness, a sense of a debt unpaid:

I have no regrets, however, except one: I never had the grace to thank the man who changed the entire course of my life, the man whose warmth revived and healed my broken spirit, and who in two short hours gave me full rations of purpose and faith for my long and fascinating journey to a better land.

I assume that William W. Bell has long since passed away. Surely God has led a man of such kindness into very green pastures indeed.

This is part of the mystery of grace. Even when we think we are alone and abandoned, God reaches out with his grace to touch us. It is often long after the fact before we realize that God was there all along, doing his best to steer us in the direction we needed to go. We never “deserve” real grace, we are never “worthy” of it — that is why it is called grace. But when we do not even perceive that God is in the midst of doing-for-us that which we cannot do for ourselves, we lack gratitude. The fullness of salvation is realizing that every day of life is full of countless gifts from above, and looking for them and discovering new ones continually at every hand, and being perpetually overwhelmed with pure gratitude and delight. What is the best and highest form of the Prayer Without Ceasing? Perhaps it is simply “thank you,” over and over again.

An undergraduate student of mine went on to become a pastor, and I commented to one of her seminary professors — an elderly and very wise man — that she would be the source of grace to many people indeed. And then I said, “the strange thing is, that usually she will not even realize it.” The wise old man simply nodded, and said quietly, “that’s the best kind of grace.” I am not sure we can ever thank adequately the fellow human beings who acted in our lives as agents of God’s grace, and often, as in the case of Ken and his old high school teacher, we discover the truth, in God, far too late to thank them at all.

But all this too is part of the mystery of grace. I can “repay” the debt only by being gracious and generous and compassionate in turn to others, and never asking for any overt statements of thanks or gratitude from them. True grace is giving without constraint to those

who never even acknowledge the gift, who may indeed respond with arrogance and scorn. Freely I was given, freely I must give. In the latter part of his life, Ken gave freely. In fact he paid the debt in so far as we can ever (in our halting and finite and fallible human way) repay what must always be an infinite debt to the divine love and generosity which always surpasses any ability to truly repay.

So all of us who are honest and truthful must pray to God to reward, at the resurrection of the just, those good men and women who so lovingly acted as the agents of his grace towards us. And this is also part of the mystery of grace: we must not only ask God to forgive us all we owe him which cannot be repaid, we must also beg him to pay for us what we owe to so many of our fellow human beings, which we would also never adequately repay. There is no room for pride and arrogance in the true world of the Spirit — only humility and continual delight and gratitude and joy.

Chapter 4

The Traveling Salesman Who Played the Organ

Another turning point came in Ken M.'s life in 1911, when he was twenty years old. He obtained a clerk's job at the M. B. Skinner Co. in Chicago, the company with which he would be associated all the rest of his life. Their factory made industrial pipe fittings for oil drilling rigs, municipal water works, and similar large scale operations that pumped fluids. After three years clerking, in 1914 they put the obviously bright and talented young man on their sales force, where in two short years he rose quickly to sales manager, and then (in 1916) to vice-president of sales. This did not mean that he was freed from traveling the road. In a story published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in April, 1927 (when he was 35), "The Hobby of a Traveling Man," Ken described how he combatted the loneliness at first by re-reading all the great nineteenth-century novels by Charles Dickens and William Makepeace Thackeray which he had always so dearly loved:⁷

From 1914 to 1924 I traveled continuously throughout the United States, selling engineering materials.

Dickens and Thackeray took me through my first year. Something had to. For I soon found that I had within me a

capacity for acute loneliness which I had never dreamed of — a loneliness which swept over me in angry waves and threatened to drown me utterly. Superficial diversions left this melancholy strain untouched. Perhaps I took to reading because the characters in Dickens's and Thackeray's books had become so familiar that I looked upon them as friends, and, as friends, turned to them in my trouble. But read I did, endlessly.

A deep inner loneliness and sense of isolation and abandonment is set deep within the core of most practicing alcoholics. At A.A. meetings one hears newcomers repeat, almost like a refrain, phrases like "I felt alone even in the midst of a crowd," "I couldn't stand to be by myself, but I felt just as lonely and cut off even when I was with other people." The inner reason for their sense of isolation is the presence of a kind of toxic, poisonous, punishing, self-condemnatory shame, the sense (coming from their childhood upbringing) of having something irremediably wrong with them, as persons *per se*. You could perhaps change the way you behaved; you cannot change what you intrinsically *are*, and alcoholics feel inherently flawed as persons and unlovable. Alcoholics cannot open up and truly accept love from someone else who appears to be "O.K.," because they believe that if the other person "knew who I truly am," they would turn away from them in disgust.

So the inner isolation is basically self-imposed — the psychic walls are erected instantly when love and true friendship are proffered. Different alcoholics erect different kinds of walls: A swaggering, defiant attitude that says "I'm dangerous, and if you push me, I'll smash you down on the spot." Intellectualizing everything, and turning everything into theories and ideas and "rational explanations" and scholarly debates that bar any entry of real feeling. Adopting the attitude of the icy cool professional, or the

perfectionistic organizer. Trying to turn everything into a joke, and using cynicism and derisive laughter to push other people away. Turning all my relationships into a game of manipulating, conning, and trying to control other people's behavior — whether for my own obviously selfish purposes, or because I justify my domineering behavior on the grounds that “I genuinely care about the other person, and want to steer them away from their improper behavior.” Playing the sexy, seductive, femme fatale who can wrap men around her little finger, or the womanizing, charming man of the world who can talk any woman (and her mother and her sister if they let him!) into his bed, and then brag about his exploits. The ones who retire into total shyness and timidity, who — if required to speak — whisper in frightened little voices as they physically try to shrink back into themselves.

Ken M.'s protective surface façade, which he was already beginning to develop when he was in his twenties, was that of the urbane, sophisticated Anglophile, wearing English tweeds and donning a velvet smoking jacket for dinner, knowledgeable of fine literature, classical music, and gourmet dining. He became the consummate story-teller, entertaining his listeners by embellishing his tales with hyperbole and exaggeration. He became the compelling supersalesman, who outdid all of his peers in his ability to sell a product. But as he reveals in passing in this little story in the *Atlantic Monthly*, inside himself, at thirty-five years of age when he wrote this story, just as he had been in his twenties (when the events in the story took place), he was still the lonely little boy he had always been since earliest childhood, living in the isolated house above the railroad switchyard and the knocked-together hovels of tramp town along the tracks.

Many alcoholics spend significant portions of their lives feeling much like Odysseus after his ship went down — clinging to a

wooden spar, bobbing helplessly up and down in the waves, with dry land and help nowhere to be seen. The alcoholics who eventually make it to A.A. are those with the survivor mentality, who cling to the floating spar or whatever is available, and do what they have to do — fight, struggle, and endure — no matter how great their despair.

There are certain kinds of existential *Angst* which lie like a dark, bottomless abyss below the thin surface layer in every human being: the existential anxiety of helplessness, powerlessness, and death; the existential anxiety of failure, guilt, and condemnation; the existential anxiety of abandonment and isolation. When a crack appears in the surface façade, and the terrifying depths of nonbeing momentarily appear below, the normal human reaction is apt to be a sheer terror greater than anything else a human being could imagine.

As the existentialist philosopher Heidegger put it, the cognitive structures of most human beings, and the rules and conventionalities of most human societies, are designed as a continual “fleeing” from any confrontation with this abyss. It is a peculiar kind of doublethink: we of necessity have to know that the chasm below exists in order to avoid it so skillfully, and yet the whole intent of our fleeing mechanisms is to deny that the void exists at all. We fall into what Jean-Paul Sartre called *mauvaise foi*, endless self-deception. As Sartre points out, however, I can only truly lie when I in fact *know* the truth I am trying to obscure. So inauthentic existence always of necessity involves an inner psychological split, the creation of subpersonalities and personality fragments, where part of me knows the truth, but the rest of me spends all its time suppressing and denying, not only the real truth about my external reality, but part of my own self.

The Devil is the Father of Lies, and when we lie to ourselves, we become what the psychotherapists call neurotic, and we end up doing

the Devil's destructive work, not only to those around us, but ultimately to ourselves as well.

It was the existential anxiety of abandonment and isolation which Ken M. was trying to flee and avoid; it was that terrifying *Angst* which he was trying to cover over. The floating spar which he found to cling to in this instance was books and literature, where he could drift off into the illusions of the fantasy world on the written page, and, for a while, be Not-Me. And yet this was not an intrinsically bad or evil way of trying to survive: in fact, what he was learning was how to use words masterfully, which he would eventually use to help heal other recovering alcoholics and people crippled by neurosis, obsession, and hysteria. Reading was fun, and it was a basically good and useful thing as well.

Now reading involves a distinct technique when one is thousands of miles from one's own hearthside. One cannot enjoy a book in a hotel bedroom. The four unfamiliar walls press in upon one's consciousness and destroy all illusion. To get the full flavor of an author, to come wholly within the comforting influence of his characters, one should be among people. I liked the mezzanine floor of my hotel or a parlor car, where, figuratively speaking, I could rub elbows with others. I found that those about me gave vitality to my book people.

Whenever it was possible to arrange my schedule so that an evening could be spent in a parlor car, I did so. I made rather a ritual of it, and took great care to adjust my window curtain so that I might look out upon the darkening countryside. One's imagination so easily becomes occupied with the cozy farmhouse lamps gleaming through the night! It is an excellent prelude to reading. "There," I would say, "is that beautiful symbol of family life, a well-shaded lamp. It is only a hundred yards away as I pass it.

Grouped about it are happy and congenial people doing just what I am doing — settling down to read after a hard day. All about them is the quieting comfort of familiar things. There is a dozing cat by the fireside, stretching with the exquisite languor of some Persian beauty. Peace has descended upon that household, peace and the plethoric ticking of some portly clock, warm in its place upon the mantelpiece. Can I be lonely with that fireside — even for a fleeting second — near me?”

Ken had a system worked out that was a better adaptation to active alcoholism than most people achieve. When he saw non-alcoholics who had happy homes and good lives, instead of falling into envy and rage, he would pretend to himself that he was also a member of their pleasant little group, a fully accepted member who was not involved in conversations with them at the time only because he had decided to sit down and read for a while. But as anyone can see, these were all imaginary companions. The real people there did not even notice Ken’s existence, and he was a total stranger to them. What he was doing was just pretending, not reality. So we can look at that paragraph above, and see the abyss of ultimate loneliness yawning beneath the thin veil of illusion he was using to try to hide its existence. The problem was, that down deep in the lower recesses of his mind, Ken still knew that he hung over that bottomless pit of total loneliness, and that he had nothing substantial preventing him from breaking through the surface and plunging headlong into this dark abyss, where he would continue to fall forever.

As one recovering alcoholic put it, “I felt like all the rest of the world was a kind of secret club, and I was the only one who didn’t know the password.” All around them, practicing alcoholics see what appear to be warm, loving family groups, just sitting down

together and being peaceful and happy. They yearn for that inner peace, for that blessed quiet way of life, and yet it always eludes their grasp. When they marry, their own marriages end up full of chaos and tension. If their spouses and children do not create it for them, the alcoholics, strangely enough, will create the chaos and tension themselves. But then when they are left to themselves — no matter how cheery the fireplace or how plump and contented the dozing cat which they glimpse for a fraction of a second through the passing window — the terror of their loneliness continues to lurk in wait below. And so a practicing alcoholic, like Ken M. was at that time, sits alone and by himself on a railway train, and gazes out the window at lighted houses in the countryside, and dreams, to avoid thinking about who he truly is and where he truly finds himself.

Alcoholics try to stay busy, to prevent the painful feelings from welling up, and to stop the obsessive cycle of worries and apprehensions and resentments from whirling in endless circles through their minds. In the alcoholic's mind there is something like the wire wheels that are put in hamster and gerbil and squirrel cages. The little furry rodent runs obsessively inside the vertically mounted wheel, but it never goes any place. The faster the tiny animal runs, the faster the wheel turns, but no forward motion is ever accomplished. And so, to avoid the obsessive circles of painful thoughts and feelings, the alcoholic (and also the workaholic and codependent) turn themselves with equal obsessiveness to some other pursuit. It need not be an evil one — alcoholics, workaholics, and codependents frequently achieve major accomplishments — the problem comes when the exhausting obsession with the external pursuit finally leaves the person totally drained. And then, when the fatigue finally overcomes them, they find themselves swallowed up once more in the dark waters of the thoughts and feelings they were trying so hard to avoid.

The book-reading was, as Ken M. reveals, a kind of ritual or ceremony. He had other ritualistic behaviors — bouncing a ball three times, turning a light switch on and off three times — all of which would come to the fore when the inner panic and fear and sense of badness were threatening to overwhelm him. But reading good books was not a bad game or an evil ritual. Some practicing alcoholics are notorious underachievers, bouncing from job to job and from sexual relationship to sexual relationship, and continuously in and out of jails. But for the same underlying reasons paradoxically, many other practicing alcoholics are super-achievers. One should never be surprised at finding terminal alcoholism among presidents of corporations or universities, among high ranking military and naval officers, among skillful lawyers and creative scientists and scholars, among highly successful musicians and artists and writers and entertainers. The ranks of A.A. are full of these people too.

With considerable ceremony I would pick up my book. Now I do not use bookmarks; they are for precise people who read a book as they would build a brick wall, layer on layer. It delights me to find my place leisurely. Salient phrases catch my eye as, like a child in a guessing game, I find myself growing “warmer and warmer.” I do not hesitate to reread the last few pages and get fully into the spirit of the story before going on. One cannot waste time on a train. If a passage pleases, it is read again, with no counting of minutes. Time stands still while the earth rushes by. Comfortably seated in a parlor car, I once finished *Vanity Fair* and, deliberately turning back to the first page, started to read it again.

Ken M.’s reading was not a bad or wicked pursuit — quite the contrary. So what was lacking? The ancient Greek philosopher

Plato said that a person begins to love by learning to love particular physical things. One man becomes an expert on fine horses, or powerful cars, and genuinely loves and appreciates them. A woman schools herself and strives successfully to put together a genuinely beautiful house, with the furniture, the colors, the paintings on the wall, the flower arrangements in the vases, all delightful to the eye. When these physical things are genuinely good and beautiful, there is nothing bad *per se* about enjoying them. The next stage in a human being's spiritual development, however, becomes a love of learning for its own sake. No one becomes a superb concert violinist, or a major league basketball or football player, or a skilled plumber or electrician or machinist or carpenter, who does not genuinely love his or her pursuit, and who does not delight in continually learning more. The next stage in spiritual development comes when the person discovers the joys of ideas. It is always a pleasure to teach university courses when a student suddenly comes alive, and realizes this kind of delight, and begins to learn about the world of ideas with real love and passion. But the ultimate spiritual stage is to come to love what Plato, an ancient pagan Greek, called the Good and the Beautiful Itself — that whose goodness and beauty is reflected in all created things that are good and beautiful. When Jewish, Christian, and finally Muslim theologians turned to the works of Plato in later centuries, they all insisted that what he called the Good and the Beautiful Itself was simply what they called God, the Higher Power who is the ultimate ground of this universe — the blessed divine power whom Moses, Jesus, and Mohammed taught us to love before all else.

Put in traditional Platonic language, the good teacher, William Bell, moved the 17-year-old Ken to the higher stage of spiritual development where he discovered the pure love of learning and ideas. But the ultimate stage — learning to love the divine ground of

all goodness and beauty — was to elude Ken's sure grasp until he came into A.A. over thirty years later. Were the thirty plus years when he remained locked in that intermediate stage therefore a waste? Another of the wise men of old was St. Thomas Aquinas, and that great medieval Christian thinker put together his theological system on a simple but all-significant principle: *grace does not destroy nature but perfects it*. The three decades of intellectual learning and growing formed the incredibly valuable groundwork which the grace of entering the A.A. program at the age of fifty-one allowed Ken to perfect into a tool for saving others. It required someone like a Ken M. to get the A.A. program started and spreading in a city like South Bend, Indiana — someone who could talk, explain, teach skillfully and clearly, and tell delightful and compelling stories — someone with a command of words and a salesman's knack. The good God wastes nothing good in our lives when we come willingly to him at last. He spreads the magic of his grace over all our pasts, and turns it into precious gold by which we can redeem others from slavery.

When he was twenty-five years old, the young traveling salesman made a new discovery, and that almost inadvertently — the power of the world of music. And through that, the young Ken was able to reencounter in some fashion the realm of the sacred:

I had spent some two years on the road, when I realized that something must be done about Saturdays and Sundays. You who have never spent forty-four of the fifty-two Sundays in a year away from home cannot imagine their bleak and awful isolation. I could not bring rational analysis to the problem; the situation held a poignancy

which clouded clear reasoning. If this seems overdrawn, I shall ask a question. What thoughts come to one on a rainy Sunday spent looking at the four walls of a dingy hotel bedroom, with the warmth and beauty of home a thousand miles away? Let me answer it: horrid, creeping little thoughts! . . . Traveling men may not as a group radiate profound orthodox religious convictions, but they all believe in Hell, for they live in it over each weekend.

I found my salvation quite accidentally. One Saturday afternoon as I searched the mezzanine floor of my hotel for a suitable reading chair, I became conscious of the fact that I did not care whether I found one or not. I did not “feel fer readin’ ” as the Pennsylvania Dutch say. But what else was there for me to do? A morning of walking in the rain effectually dampened any idea of going out. Abruptly something caught my attention. It was the inviting keyboard of a handsome grand piano, and with a wave of relief I realized that there was something in the world, after all, that I wanted to do. I wanted to play. As a child I had spent many hours at the piano, and, clutching at this slight musical background, I sat down and awkwardly traced out an old melody on the keys.

To my surprise, a man who had been sitting near by, hooded in black despair, came over to the instrument and asked me to play something else. I realized, of course, that his action was a desperate fling at an overpowering boredom, but nevertheless I was just a little pleased that I had been able to bring even a spark of interest to his eye. So I played through a forlorn little repertoire of hazily recollected tunes, and it was as though a soothing hand had been laid upon my restless spirit.

We talked, this lone gentlemen and I, for an hour and a half, and during this conversation he mentioned the fact that a certain local Episcopal church had rather a fine choir. Did I not wish to hear it? I acquiesced eagerly, for I must

confess a very soft spot in my heart for choirs. I sang in a boys' choir for many years as a child, and there is a glamour, a mellow glow, over those years which has persisted even since. Anyone who has ever sung in a boys' choir will carry the memories with him all his life: the dressing before the service, the quieting hand of the rector as he intones the opening sentence, the soft little sung "Amen," the queer noises which leak out of the back of an organ, the breathless hush just before the first words of the opening hymn, the triumphal music of the processional. As we talked, it all came back to me, and I grieved in my heart for the music I had lost during the intervening years.

The next morning I was in church. Memories I had thought dead fifteen years awoke, and my soul was lifted into verdant places. The beauty of it all!

It was not just music, it was the melody of the spiritual realm which young Ken had suddenly reentered. Churches are places where one confronts the immediate feeling of the Sacred. Rudolf Otto called this the feeling or *Gefühl* of "the numinous," the Wholly Other who stands outside the box of space and time in which our normal, everyday lives are enclosed. That mysterious dimension which we call the Sacred or the Holy is not something we can contact by intellectualization or logical arguments, it must somehow be felt or intuitively sensed.

The struggle at the *feeling level* with the encounter with the Holy ran like a thread, we remember, through Bill W.'s story at the beginning of the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous. Bill had experienced it for just a moment, he said,⁸ when he visited Winchester Cathedral in England when he was an apprehensive young artillery lieutenant; years later, when his old friend Ebby T. visited him at the depths of his drinking career, he recalled also his childhood memories of the emotive pull of the Protestant churches

of small town New England.⁹ The spiritual experience which finally pulled Bill out of his alcoholism was a willingness to finally let go and let himself experience the transforming power of that transcendent might. What Ebby had prompted Bill to do was to stop trying to rationalize it away, and to accept that the intellectual theories we hold were not that important — all that was necessary was for Bill to accept its reality and then to allow it to work on him without fighting it all the time.

Johann Sebastian Bach believed that music was the best interpreter of this experience of the Sacred, because it worked on us more directly at the immediate feeling level than any kind of sermon or scholarly biblical interpretation — this was the theory behind Bach's composition of his *St. Matthew Passion* and his many other pieces of scripturally-oriented church music.

But the feeling of the music itself was not the same as the full feeling of the Sacred that lay behind it. Instead of allowing himself to enter into the beckoning realm of peace and serenity which he had felt in that church, and simply *feeling* it, and allowing its power to heal his soul and redirect his life, Ken M. turned it into something to *do*, a human activity, an “artistic endeavor,” a displacement of his feeling over onto something he himself could control and manipulate.

After the service, carried by an enthusiastic impulse, I went forward and spoke to the organist, if for nothing else that to let him know how his music had exalted and quickened an otherwise unendurable morning. With quiet pride in the vast organ, he showed me its key desk, and as I looked at it — the church had cleared by now — he said, “Why don't you play something?” Fingers trembling with excitement, I sat down and found in the rolling profundity of the organ as it responded to my faltering touch a sense of

power that was almost incredible. To press that little key, with its featherlike resistance, and hear the beat of oceans, the voices of wind-swept forests, come forth and sweep through the chancel and nave of the church — it was like being temporarily in charge of the universe.

Alas, the power of the human mind to take God's attempts to give of himself to us, and turn them into exercises in self-aggrandizement — Ken began to play the church organ, not because it gave him a channel through which he might contact the saving and healing power of the transcendent, but because it made *him* feel like God! From the time Adam and Eve ate the apple, the prideful, futile desire to be God ourselves has lain at the root of our human self-destructiveness.

Sigmund Freud — that tortured genius who battled against God all his life — noted in his pessimistic analysis of the human condition in *Civilization and Its Discontents* that turning to the beauties of music could (like using alcohol or mood-altering drugs) keep away the bad feelings for a while, but not forever. But for some years to follow, Ken M. found that music was one of the things that would temporarily work. For part of a lonely weekend, he could use it to keep the unbearably painful thoughts and feelings at bay. And in typical alcoholic fashion he set about it in a totally obsessive and perfectionistic way.

I took the church program with me when I left, and the next day I purchased one or two of the anthems listed thereon. As I clumsily picked them out on the piano I felt a great curiosity creeping over me as to the extent of church music. How much was there of it? Who wrote it? Whence came its nobility, its alternate tranquillity and fire? Here were things that were worth finding out . . . Traveling as I did, it would be impossible for me to follow any

conventional study of ancient, mediaeval, and modern church music, yet I felt that at least I might attempt some rude classification of the music I heard from Sunday to Sunday. So I started a scrapbook, and into it I pasted the programs or orders of service from the various churches I attended, together with my written impression of each composition used. As new composers appeared in my book I would boldly and freely walk up to the organist of the church I happened to be in and ask him about them. To a man, the organists I spoke to were gracious, patient, and kindly.

As my work took me over the country twice a year, I was soon talking to them a second time, then a third, a fourth, a tenth time. Some of them, as the years passed, became firm friends. Cities where Sunday had been a nightmare became cities where Sunday was a day to be looked forward to during the week. Scarcely a week went by that I was not given an opportunity to play a church organ after service. All during this time, as I encountered interesting new anthems, I would buy them, seek out a secluded piano, and study them. I read music very slowly and, curiously enough, never improved in this respect; but, once read and learned, I never had need of the music again. When I say that it took me two hours — and still does! — to read the average eight-page anthem, one may see how admirably suited the practice was to filling in dull evenings and rainy Saturday afternoons. My reward was to play it on an organ the following Sunday.

In later years, as Ken M. found the opportunity to travel to Europe both for business and pleasure, he was able to explore the beauties of the great church organs in England and the Netherlands and France as well. One of his favorites was the organ in the old Groote Kerk in Rotterdam. He listened enthralled to the organs at

Canterbury and Southwark in England; a letter of introduction allowed him to visit the keyboard and maze of controlling wires in the organ loft of Westminster Abbey. In Paris he listened to the strident tones of the organs at Notre Dame, St.-Sulpice, and Sacré-Coeur.

I cannot refrain from telling a humorous little episode that occurred in Paris. One bright May morning I set out from my hotel, resolved to hear as many fine organs as possible. I prefer to study them leisurely, of course, when I can, but this time my stay in Paris included only one Sunday and I wanted to make the most of it. Hailing a taxi, I was soon set down at the Madeleine. An incredible mass of people filled the building, and what with the incense, the heat, the many and various worshipers, I found the atmosphere rather overpowering, and left after the first chant.

At the curb, I found the same cab I had used in coming to the church and, stepping into it, I directed the driver to take me to St.-Sulpice. I remained in this church about fifteen minutes, and as I came out I noticed my original taxicab, again unoccupied. With a grin I asked to be taken to Notre Dame. It seemed to me that the chauffeur looked at me strangely; certainly the shrug of his shoulders conveyed more than just an acknowledgment of my request.

At Notre Dame I found a gorgeous service in progress. Some sort of military festival it was, with a battle flag at the head of each pew, at least three hundred white-robed singers in the choir, and perhaps a hundred and fifty prelates and church dignitaries in the chancel. The music was glorious, and, fascinated by the warmth and color of it all, I stayed until the very end. Firmly astride of my hobby by this time, I decided to take in one more church before

dinner. (Typically American, I know, but you must remember I get to Paris only once a year.)

Naturally I had forgotten all about my cab driver, but lo! he was waiting, unengaged, as I reached the sidewalk. “Sacré-Coeur,” I said bravely. He paused a moment before opening the cab door, and a smile of deep commiseration, a look of understanding sympathy, flashed over his face like the flicker of a curtain. “Ah, monsieur,” he said softly, “quelle pénitence!”

Perhaps this hobby — organ music — *has* been a penance, in the sense that penances are supposed to induce peace can any experience in life equal the tranquil ecstasy of hearing Noble’s “Souls of the Righteous” sung at dusk in the Cathedral of St. John the Divine? The utter beauty of it caresses and makes whole again the heart torn and racked by separation from all one holds dear in life. “They are at peace,” sings the choir. “Oh, fairest liberty!”

And all things that harass and hurt seem small and meaningless. Is not loneliness a form of bondage? Can this be bondage — this opportunity of hearing the man-interpreted voice of God? No! It is liberty in its highest sense. “They are at peace.” Where there is peace, there can be no loneliness. Oh, fairest liberty!

In such a strange way, Ken M. the practicing alcoholic saw it all, could even put it into moving words, and yet did not realize what he saw. It is almost like a checklist of all the yearnings of the poor, miserable alcoholic: There is the need for a *penance*, a *metanoia* or fundamental shift in our perceptions, a discipline of atonement (an “at-one-ment,” a return to God that makes us become once more spiritually “one” with him) — that will still the inner voice of guilt and toxic shame and bring *peace* and *tranquillity* and true serenity at last. There is the desire for ecstasy — *ek-stasis*, “standing out” of oneself — in the experience of the transcendent that lies beyond

earthly space and time. Tortured by the existential anxiety of *loneliness*, *separation*, total alienation and abandonment, he longs for the *caresses* of the divine love that will make it all right again. “Is not loneliness a form of bondage?” Ken asks. Indeed, for the practicing alcoholic it is one of the most dreadful parts of his servitude. Ken yearns for that which “makes whole again the heart torn and racked by separation.” One cannot help here but think of the famous prayer to God in St. Augustine’s *Confessions*: “O Lord, you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are rest-less until they find their rest in you.” The soul tosses and turns in anguish, without rest or peace, until it returns to God.

In the vision of God, as we find ourselves overwhelmed by gratitude and awe, suddenly “all things that harass and hurt seem small and meaningless.” It is the direct awareness of the divine presence, the experience of an immediate God-consciousness, where we become so lost in the perception of God’s love and goodness and beauty, that nothing else is important anymore. And so we find true serenity, and even in total solitude, need never feel alone again. And with that, our bondage to alcohol, to trying to please or control other people, to materialism, to seeking prestige and the glory of the world, or to earthly worry and anxiety, ceases to hold us in its chains. “Where there is peace” — this kind of true serenity — “there can be no loneliness. Oh, fairest liberty!”

Even that which is only the symbol or ideogram of the divine can sometimes share by participation in a tiny bit of the healing power of the divine. And so Ken M. lost himself in the music, and found a tiny portion of the peace he was searching for. But he was still too afraid to look behind and beyond the music to that transcendent reality which the aesthetic emotionality of the manmade melodies and harmonies could only feebly express. He became absorbed in

the analysis of the signposts, and would not look at what they actually pointed to.

So Ken M. found peace and liberation of a sort, and enjoyed himself at something good and positive, and on many later occasions was able to use his musical talents to bring enjoyment and pleasure to other human beings. At one level, it was not a bad thing at all that Ken had immersed himself in. At that level, he was never a bad man, but always a very good man. Nevertheless, the day of reckoning, when he finally had to come face to face with God, without fleeing into *analyzing* things, and *organizing* things, and *learning* intellectual things and *developing* mechanical skills, and *doing* things, had only been put off — but God has all the time in the world, and Ken had bought himself what was only a temporary delay, not a permanent reprieve.

Chapter 5

World War I: Interlude at Sea

After World War I began, on December 1, 1917, Ken M., the young vice-president of sales at the M. B. Skinner Company in Chicago, now twenty-six years old, enlisted in the U. S. Navy. He started out in the enlisted ranks, serving as a seaman second class for a month and a half on board the *Ashley*, an ore boat on the Great Lakes. But he was quickly sent off to officer training school at Pelham Bay Park, in the Bronx, in New York, on Long Island Sound, and commissioned an ensign on September 9, 1918. Two months later, he sailed for England on board the *S.S. Canopus*, part of a ten-ship convoy accompanied by two destroyers and a cruiser. But in mid-voyage they received word that the armistice had been signed, and the war was officially over.

Nevertheless, military and naval responsibilities do not instantly come to an end when an armistice is signed, and on December 12, 1918, Ken reported for duty as the acting second mate of the *U.S.S. Kerowlee*, a cargo ship that seems also to have been used as a mine sweeper, still a necessary and acutely dangerous task in entering harbors and shipping lanes which the enemy had left mined. The ship, which was docked at Cardiff in Wales, had ten officers and a crew of 160 sailors. During his six months aboard, the ship sailed to a number of ports: Bordeaux, back to Cardiff, then Dunkirk, Liverpool, Southampton, Rotterdam, and Saint-Nazaire. He

returned to the U.S. on May 5, 1919, and was mustered out at the end of the month, when he returned to Chicago and once more took up his job as vice-president of sales at the M. B. Skinner Company.

Nine years later he wrote a story about the sea, “Chips from a Third Mate’s Log,” in *The Outlook* (July 18, 1928).¹⁰ A good deal of the story is clearly fictional. The captain of the *Kerowlee*, the actual ship he served on, was a man named Walter Strong, a very close friend for many years afterwards; even though Strong settled in California, the two men still visited one another on occasion. The captain, officers, and crew of his fictional ship, the *Caroline*, do not seem to represent Strong or any of the others on board the *Kerowlee* in 1918–19. Nevertheless, one can feel fairly sure that the fictional characters are at least composites and modifications of real people whom he met on shipboard, in port, or heard about, during that six months period.

At one level, the short story seems to portray quite accurately the feelings of the young midwesterner — his real experience as a sailor consisting of only a month and a half as a seaman second class on an ore boat on the Great Lakes — suddenly finding himself in a command position on a rather large freighter. It was hardly the same as being on a fighting ship in the middle of an ongoing battle, with its overpowering feelings of frustration and despair, mind-numbing apprehension, horror at the sight of massive human pain and mutilation, and the unnamable helpless fear that floods the mind in the face of one’s own mortal danger. But even on a freighter cum mine sweeper, wind, waves, tide, current, heavy machinery, boxes weighing tons, and human error can crush heavy steel like a boy crumpling a candy wrapper, and kill, crush, maim, and drown human bodies which are in the way. The simplest mistake — even while maneuvering into a dock — can smash through piers and cranes, stave in hulls, and crush the helpless men standing in the way.

December 6, 1918. Barry, Wales. In looking forward to my first day as an officer on a cargo vessel, I have always taken it for granted that I would come aboard in an orderly fashion; I would meet the captain, the various other officers, and then be given a day or so to “find myself” — to unpack, to acquaint myself with the ship — before my actual duties began.

Instead, when I reported aboard the *Caroline* this morning, I was met at the gangway by the second mate, who informed me that the captain was ashore and that I was to go on watch in ten minutes. Throwing my bags in a tiny stateroom, I hastily stumbled out on deck again and found the second mate up for’ard. Without looking up, he muttered: “Loading ’ospital supplies. Bum stevedores. Got to watch dem everyt’ing makes tight.” With which enlightening message he turned on his heel and, relieved of the watch, stalked ashore.

Intent on getting a better idea of the nature and stowage of the cargo, I scrambled down into No. 1 hold and turned what I hoped would be taken as a fiercely discerning eye on the stevedores. I had not been down there three minutes before I heard a deep, raw voice booming down at me from the hatch combing: “Mr. Mate! Mr. Mate!” Looking up, I saw a very red face, and, as the face was surmounted by rather an official-looking cap, I lost no time in climbing up to it. The gentleman to whom the face belonged proved to be the Harbor Master, and the ship, he declared, must be moved immediately to dock No. 17 if we were to coal. I thanked him, and hastened away to give his message to the mate. To be sure I had not yet seen the mate, nor did I know where his quarters were, but I soon found a mess-boy who could help me out. With a leer which I understood a minute later, he pointed to a door. I knocked.

“C’min,” bawled a thick, uncertain voice. On entering, I made out the form of a heavy man sprawled on the bunk. One look was enough — he was dead drunk.

“The Harbor Master tells me we must move to dock No. 17 at once, sir,” I said. The mate waved his hand — an indescribably care-free gesture it was — and grunted cheerfully: “Aw right. Move ’er.”

Now we see here a fascinating thing about alcoholics. Again and again, their childhood and youthful memories of drunks — like Mr. Gadge, the mate — is one of total horror and disgust. Often they promise themselves, explicitly or at least tacitly, that “whatever becomes of me in later life, I will never *ever* become like that.” This is part of the deep shame and despair with which many alcoholics stumble into A.A. at the end. They have in fact become that which they most dreaded and despised, and the admission of that in the simple words “My name is _____, I’m an alcoholic,” is one of the most traumatic things they have ever had to face in their lives. This is one reason why it is so hard to break through the denial mechanisms, even in people whom *everyone else* can see have fallen totally under the power of alcohol.

I had been on board this ship just twenty minutes, I had not even been on the bridge, I scarcely knew her bow from her stern as yet, and here I was being told to move her a matter of three-quarters of a mile and tie her up at a coal dock! Oh, well, I knew how. I simply had never *given* the order before. I jumped on the bridge, whistled down to the engine-room, grabbed a megaphone and shouted down to the stevedore boss that we were moving, had a boy find the bo’sun and tell him to get a couple of men up on the fo’c’sle head, Chips and two more men on the poop. I think I realized the meaning of the word “responsibility” for

the first time in my life. Seventy-five hundred tons of steel, forty souls; a fairish twist to the tide; and a ship as yet a complete stranger to me. I was in a fine perspiration by the time we got to Dock 17 — but get there we did.

About three o'clock this afternoon, a short, powerful man, his face purple with rage, came over the gangway, faced me, and bellowed, "Who in the hell moved this ship?" It was my introduction to the captain.

"The Harbor Master came aboard at 8:10 this morning and said we had to move to this dock, sir," I replied.

"Who in the hell moved this ship?" he repeated.

"The mate was aboard, sir," I hazarded desperately.

"Humph!" growled the captain, and left me. Evidently I had said the right thing.

At dinner tonight the mate appeared, sober, steady, and looking like a particularly bland prelate. Not a word was said about moving the ship, but once when the captain was talking with the second mate he favored me with an elaborate wink. It was alike a comment and an acknowledgment.

Other people have to cover for drunks. Drunks cannot take care of even basic responsibilities. When drunks walk into A.A. for the first time, they are often full of belligerent declarations of power, control, and self-importance. This is the insanity of alcoholic denial. They cannot stand to face the truth — that they have been rendered almost totally helpless by their disease, and are so incapable of managing even simple things, that everyone around them has been forced to carry them continuously. At best, they have become jokes, laughed at behind their backs, and spoken of only with derision.

December 7, 1918 The Caroline appears to be a staunch, commodious ship, bluff bowed and deep bellied; built for a leisurely pace, great carrying capacity, and

economical operation. She is not new — we have oil lamps in the mess-room and the mates' rooms, although the captain has had his roomy quarters and chart-room wired and electric lights installed. The chart-room is directly above the little cubby hole I withdraw to, and I can hear the captain walking to and fro as I write. He seems to have the relentless energy which characterizes so many sea captains, and when the ship is placidly tied up in port — where the strain of long hours and responsibility does not beset him — he is very restless

December 10, 1918 We left Barry and dropped down the Bristol Channel early this morning. It was my watch below this afternoon, and I was dimly conscious of disquiet as I slept, but it was not until I stuck my head outside the mess that I realized the vastness of the seas which were sweeping over us under the malicious urge of a southwest gale. Straight from the Horn came that wind, with five thousand unbroken miles to spur its rush of conquest, and the sea, lashed and pricked into startled fury, rose as though in retaliation, flexed its mighty muscles, and spat.

At six bells on my evening watch the captain appeared on the bridge and for some time paced up and down in silence. Then he sent a seaman below for the mate, who soon joined him. I heard them discussing the advisability of laying to. Heavy seas were pounding our deck-load of five-ton trucks, and the weight of these trucks, perched so high above our plimsoll mark, was making the ship a bit clumsy — “top heavy,” as a landsman might say. To put about would involve real danger

The captain decided to put about, and the order was given just as I went off watch. Emerging a few minutes later from a welter of rushing water — up for'd where the gale bounded upon one's chest with a shriek and stifled him

— I made my way back to the deckhouse to see whether, God grant! we pulled out of the trough as we swung around.

Thirsting for a sense of history, tradition, and culture — and brought up as a child on the romance of the great literary works of England and France — the young Ken eagerly seized the opportunity to see these two countries at first hand. After reading for years about castles and medieval churches and cobblestone streets and restaurants with little tables outside and strange, sophisticated items on the menus like snails and mussels, actually being there for the first time was like being transported into fairyland — suddenly all one's childhood fantasies and images of enchantment were there in reality, before one's very eyes. The sheer thrill of seeing suddenly that it was all real (in your heart of hearts, did you not in fact suspect that it was like Jack and the Beanstalk and Cinderella, only a fairy tale for little children, about a world that never had nor never would exist?) and that you yourself were in the midst of it, was quite literally like being in the midst of real magic.

But there were other reasons why Ken began exploring Europe so desperately. Alcoholics lack a sense of inner stability, or any firm sense of inner self-identity. In Ken's case, turning to the historical and traditional was a way to try to give himself some stable inner footing. Furthermore, to be "the suave businessman and world traveler, who knows all the mysteries of English snobbery and French arrogance," was a pose that Ken would work on over the years to come, as a safe "mask" to put between himself and the world, and as a way to say to himself, "I do *too* have status, I really *am* all right." Ken prided himself on his knowledge of English cathedrals and French wines and cuisine.

But it was also true that, to a young midwesterner in 1918, there was a genuine magic and delight to seeing the wonders of England

and France, and an opportunity to expand his horizons and deepen his understanding of the base of western culture. And English cathedrals really are beautiful and solemn, and French wines and cuisine truly are outstanding, and quite a change from the simple meat and potatoes and nearly flavorless beer of the American midwest.

December 17, 1918. Bordeaux. We had scarcely become attuned to the roar of winches and the rattle of straining “falls” when Mr. Gadge appeared at the gangway accompanied by Mr. Hogan, the chief engineer — a sly Hibernian of Gargantuan girth — and announced that “me’n the chief is goin’ ashore t’ look at some of the public buildin’s of int’rest.” As Mr. Pulke had the watch, I soon followed their example and went ashore myself.

In a little side-street branching off from a most imposing boulevard I found a tiny restaurant with room for but three tables; yet it had a little fountain which tinkled pleasantly and a rather decent bit of statuary standing by the casement window. Here I was served onion soup, a great steaming cauldron of mussels in an indescribably piquant sauce, a thin slice of “beef” (about which one would not inquire too closely), a salad, a pastry, and a bottle of Bordeaux Blanche — all for five francs — and I arose from the table a friend of France.

The Cathedral is not large, but it is very beautiful, and I entered just in time for a burst of music from the organ. A service was in progress, and, fascinated by the ritual — which was strange to me — and the musical intoning of the priests, I stayed until the end. Then out into the bright sunlight, and, driven by the incredible actuality of being in France for the first time, I walked for hours. Bursting with kaleidoscopic impressions, I returned to the ship to absorb and digest them.

Enter once again the alcoholic Mr. Gadge, the mate. Ken, little realizing that he himself is already beginning to walk the same path — “normal social drinkers” do not put down a whole bottle of wine at one sitting, which he had just done — is both horrified and fascinated by seeing what alcohol had done to this man’s mind.

As I clambered over the side and set foot on the deck, I saw a flushed and unsteady Mr. Gadge leaning on the rail and staring off into the twilight. All too obvious was the nature of the “public buildin’s of int’rest” he had been visiting. Looking up, he spoke — rather forlornly, I think:

“Mist’ Merrill,” he said, “the chief engineer is Irish, and the Irish is dirty. Fust thing we got ’shore, him and me hed a pint of that French cunnyac apiece. I bin drunk ever since an’ he ain’t even *started* yet. Mist’ Merrill, that ain’t decent in a man — ”

Sure enough, as I passed the chief engineer’s room a few moments later, there he was at his desk, calmly casting up his coal accounts.

December 19, 1918. Bordeaux. Mr. Gadge has at once the sordid sophistication and the superb innocence of the coastwise sailor. As we ate our dinner today he fixed me with his guileless eye and talked. “Me an’ the chief has bin ashore, Mist’ Merrill, lookin’ over the public buildin’s of int’rest, an’ — well lemme tell you, these French people is got a funny way of talkin’! By Godfrey ’mighty! Me’n the chief, we listened and listened, and we couldn’t understand what in the hell they was a-saying’; why these Frenchies they jist says the same word over and over ’gain — ‘Ong-a-wong a-wong-a-wong,’ they says, an’ ever’ word they says is jist the same as ever’ other word they says. Now, Mist’ Merrill, when people sit ’round caffees and rest’rints jist sayin’ the same word over an’ over, it don’t mean nothin’

and don't make no sense to nobody!" He lit his pipe, a bit proud of his epic on the French tongue.

Just then a little French port official stuck his nose into the mess-room. In dress he was fussy to the point of daintiness, and his little lacquered moustache and high color gave him an almost theatrical appearance. With one bound Mr. Gadge cast his great bulk across the room and caught the man roughly by the throat. "Git the hell out of here, you little ——!" he roared.

"But, Mr. Gadge," I broke in hastily, "this man is a port official — he was around here this morning."

Horried, Mr. Gadge let go his hold on the man. "My gosh!" he groaned. "I thought he was another one of the fellers a-sellin' postal cards!"

The popular myth is that Christmas is a time of warmth and cheer and family togetherness. In fact it is for many people a very trying time, or an intensely lonely time. For alcoholics this is apt to be especially so, both because their extended families tend to be so dysfunctional that no one can relax and enjoy any kind of family get-together, and because they conjure up particularly unrealistic fantasies of Christmas cheer (as what *ought* to be) to counter their own deep inner sense of total isolation and aloneness. The idea was so deeply ingrained in Ken M.'s mind of "what Christmas *should* be," that it was to play a major role many years later in his memories of one of his last major drunks, as replayed several times for wide radio audiences. It made him especially miserable on this, his first Christmas away from family and home. Almost surely, the images he conjured up of his mother and sister were falsified by wishful thinking. Such a family could not have been that open and happy in truth, nor would his being there have shut off the inner painful thoughts and feelings in his own mind. And significantly, the figure

of his father was carefully excluded from the unreal fantasies with which he tortured himself.

December 25, 1918. Last night we dropped down the Gironde River, and here we are fog-bound, half-way to the mouth. Christmas day! Instead of looking out the window upon a bright snow-tufted evergreen landscape, I look out a port-hole into an impenetrable gray veil of fog.

Instead of wakening to the clear, lovely voice of my mother and the excited cries of my little sister, I was aroused this morning by the beating of heavy feet on the deck plates, as some of the seamen fight off nostalgia with horseplay. The only relief I have found is in writing a long letter home — to be mailed four or five days hence!

I have not seen the captain all day. Mr. Gadge and Mr. Pulke move around mechanically, with the glazed eyes of far-away thought. I caught the little Italian mess-cook crying in his galley this morning — crying as he strove with all his warm little heart to evolve a suitable Christmas cake from coarse ship's stores ingredients. This evening he begged a tallow candle from one of the oilers, to burn in front of a sacred picture that hangs over his bunk. He was happier after that.

Every sailor is a child on Christmas — a child whom Santa forgot.

Even though the armistice had been signed, there were still dangers left over from the war, coupled with the normal dangers of the sea:

December 27, 1918. At sea, off Ushant light. Sailors are just as superstitious as they were in the days of clipper ships. Today we sighted a vagrant floating mine, cast adrift, mayhap, by heavy seas. There are a lot of them

around this part of the coast. They're frightfully dangerous things — a menace to shipping — and we see a good many French patrol boats out looking for them. The captain has a unique way of disposing of them without help from the patrol. He keeps an elephant gun in the chart-room, and when a mine is sighted, he hops out on deck and blazes away at it with his rifle. The first shot that hits the mine pierces its sheet-steel sides, and the mine, filling with salt water, sinks harmlessly enough.

Today, however, his second or third shot, by purest accident, caught a pretty sea-gull on the wing, and the poor thing dropped into the water, dead. I heard a suppressed curse, and, looking around, saw McGraw, the bo'sun, gripping the rail with his fingers — his face as white as the gull's breast. He turned to me, and growled hoarsely: "Bad luck, Mr. Merrill, bad luck! Mark my words, we'll have bad luck before we tie up in Liverpool — damned bad luck! It's awful — awful, t' kill a sea-gull." It's pathetic to see a great hulking fellow like McGraw so upset by superstition.

December 31, 1918. Liverpool. As we were warping into our dock here this noon a twist of the tide swung our nose into the quay, and stove in three plates — so badly that we will be laid up ten days for repairs. Did I say superstition?

Ken's attitude towards his own drinking was typical of alcoholics at this stage. He believed that he was a carefully controlled drinker, someone who could clearly "hold his liquor" and "drink like a gentleman." Like many educated, professional class men, he was good at staying out of serious trouble even when he had imbibed large amounts — or at least at this stage of his alcoholism, because it is a degenerative disease that leads all people to the same end ultimately.

When he had a bad experience — like the toxic reaction he experienced when, in a state of severe depression, he downed two glasses of port wine in a few gulps in Liverpool — he had the typical alcoholic's reaction. "I can control this and keep it from happening again by switching types of liquor, or the circumstances, or making carefully calculated adjustments to the time of day and weather." For a while, these attempts at greater control and calculation over one's drinking can seem to work — and for Ken, for some years to come, they would work, at least at the level of his own self-awareness — but alcoholics, as they progress, have notoriously bad self-awareness about how drunk they really are, and sooner or later, the belief that they are still maintaining control over their drinking becomes total delusion.

Like many educated professionals who are alcoholics, Ken also was a skillful "switch-hitter" for many years: alternating between a totally preoccupied work-aholism, and then binges of drinking on his off time. If you can throw yourself with total fanaticism and driven perfectionism into a job (or an equally monomaniacal "hobby," as Ken's so-called pastimes often were), you can keep the painful inner voices away, and ignore the tormenting feelings.

To a great degree, alcoholics deny that these painful feelings that they are working so hard to flee even exist. So the severe depression that preceded this toxic reaction was also downplayed and minimized, and the fact that the alcohol did not in fact relieve the depression was casually written off to "choosing the wrong kind of liquor."

For many alcoholics, drinking is a carefully plotted out game of self-medication, based on the belief that somewhere, somehow, if one is clever enough, there is always a beverage, a particular way of drinking it, a correct amount, which will magically erase all the painful feelings and thoughts that crowd into the mind, without

harmful consequences afterwards. Stranded in port for repairs, with no work to occupy his mind and shut out the unbearable feelings, Ken was left severely depressed and plunged deeply into the existential *Angst* of isolation and abandonment that continually hovered just at the edge of his consciousness. Even at the age of twenty-seven, his physical reaction to alcohol was no longer that of a “normal” person, and that he could not admit either. But let us look at the way he himself told the tale at that time:

January 4, 1919. Liverpool. I learned not to drink port when I’m “low” this evening. What with our loading waiting upon the repair of our bow plates, we haven’t much to keep us occupied, and I was so dejected this afternoon that I sought to cheer myself with a change of scene.

Accordingly, I went over to the Adelphi Hotel, and whom should I meet there but that charming old Mme. Roullier, whom I met on the White Star Canopic coming over a few months ago. We had dinner together and, under the spell of her Victorian appearance and motherly sympathy, I spoke of my recent depression.

She laughed. “Ah, my boy,” she cried, “what you need is a glass of port!” So I ordered port. With reverent care the chubby little waiter poured me out a glass. I drank it, and, finding no immediate warmth in it — the dining room of the hotel seemed beastly cold to me — I essayed another glass. As I finished it the gray groping cold of Liverpool, as though challenged by my combative gesture, crept into the very marrow of my bones, and chilled them until my teeth chattered.

At 60° below zero, walking across the plains of Minnesota on my way to school, I was never one-half as cold. It was not until I had consumed a whole pot of coffee that, slowly, like a man resuscitated from drowning, I felt the return of warmth and life.

Br-r-r-r! England in January!

So in Ken's self-diagnosis, "port was the wrong alcoholic beverage to magically relieve depression," and the sudden attack of unbearable shivering and shaking was the result of "a chilly English hotel dining room." He almost totally discounted, naturally enough, the fact that the toxic reaction did not start until after he had drunk his first very small glass of alcohol (the dining room had been exactly the same temperature before, and a tiny port-glass full of even an ice cold liquid would not have been sufficient to trigger that kind of reaction). He also almost totally ignored the fact that a second glass only made the toxic reaction worse. And the even more dangerous assumption behind his self-diagnosis was his insistence that having picked some other alcoholic beverage instead of port would in fact have magically swept away his severe depression with no subsequent unpleasant consequences.

In his *Confessions*, St. Augustine made an interesting comment about our human knowledge and awareness of God. (His mother, St. Monica, had been a childhood alcoholic, and he himself was a sexual addict for many years — engaging in compulsive womanizing — so his acute psychological observations here have special significance in the context of alcoholism and other similar addictions.) Augustine noted that, before his conversion, he spent many years in what he regarded as a fruitless and futile search for God. No matter where he looked, and what he studied, he could not "figure it out." The idea of God seemed to be nonsensical — silliness for ignorant, superstitious peasants and the like. Certainly, it seemed to him, he had never experienced the presence of God in any way in his own life.

But when he was writing his *Confessions*, a few years after his spiritual conversion, Augustine realized that God had been there all along, and that he had sometimes even *known* that God was there, but it was an unknowing knowing. Augustine made the interesting statement that nothing I learn about God when I begin walking the true spiritual path turns out to be genuinely new. God-at-work was already there — in my own *memory*, of all places! — and learning to recognize God was more like *remembering* once again something that I had once known but had let drop out of mind.¹¹

When the young Ken, out on the road as a salesman, wandered into a church on a lonely Sunday, he did in fact *feel* the living presence of God: “Memories I had thought dead fifteen years awoke, and my soul was lifted into verdant places. The beauty of it all!” But then he explained it all away to himself — it was the music, and he could learn how to play the music himself, and organize and catalogue all the pieces, and memorize them and practice them, and “feel like God Himself” as he coaxed a mighty church organ into pulsating waves of sound.

What is the *feeling* of the divine presence? It is partly the awe-filled fascination of the infinite and unfathomable beyond. The boundless stretches of the mighty ocean and the infinite depths of the starry heavens are frequent symbols for that divine infinity that transcends even them, and contemplating either can easily push the human mind over into the awareness of the yet greater depths that lie behind. The philosopher Kant called this the feeling of the sublime, and had clearly experienced it himself, but then tried to explain it away in his aesthetic theory.

It is in fact child’s play to “explain it away” and rationalize it as a merely human feeling of relative smallness and powerlessness before something much bigger but still totally “natural.” But the intellectualization is fraudulent, and the fascinated awe we feel is

much greater and totally different in kind from merely seeing something totally natural which is simply “extremely big,” or “terribly far away.” And somewhere down deep, locked in our memories, is the knowledge that our attempts to rationalize away what we were feeling was a denial of reality.

While he was at sea, in the middle of the English Channel, Ken once again confronted the reality of the higher power which lies behind this visible, tangible universe, and he even realized that genuine serenity and tranquillity of soul could only come from maintaining contact with that transcendent source of divine peace. But he then promptly twisted it into a romanticized piece of sentimentality about “the life of the sailor,” and once more evaded the Holy One’s attempt to reach him and lead him to that divine peace which the young Ken so deeply yearned for.

January 10, 1919. “Butting through the Channel in the mad March days” — only it’s January While I was on watch this evening the sky cleared for an hour, and I watched the swaying foremast pick out the stars. I have the feeling that no one but a sailor can really know the stars. Think of the hours he spends in their silent company! Not all the seafaring man’s tranquillity comes from his regular life; surely the heaven’s infinite wonders, as he paces the lonely bridge, come closer to him than they ever do to his land-held brothers. Perhaps that is why sailors cling so passionately to the sea.

May of 1919 found Ken back in the United States, ready to return to his position as vice-president of sales at the M. B. Skinner Company in Chicago. For thirty-four more years his drinking would progressively escalate. The last eight or ten years would be exceptionally grim. God had tried to reach out to him, there during

his brief naval career, both with a warning of what he was doing to himself, and with a promise of an ever-present divine gift which he could possess the minute he was ready to accept it. But Ken was not ready yet.

No one — least of all Ken — realized at that time that he had been given a chance and had rejected it. As the world sees it, Ken was a young man on his way professionally, and for many years to come it would seem as though he had been almost magically gifted with the kinds of worldly success most men and women only dream about. Who could imagine that the real gift had been within his very grasp, and that he had casually thrown it aside.

Chapter 6

Marriage to Helen and Move to South Bend

When he was in his early thirties, Ken finally found love and marriage, and set up a home of his own: on Valentine's Day, February 14, 1925, he married Helen Shapley Coleman, the daughter of Charles Elliot Coleman, a well-to-do Chicago businessman, and they set up housekeeping in wealthy suburban Evanston.

He still had to travel on the road selling. Two years into the marriage, he talked about the pain of being away from home so much:

You who have never spent forty-four of the fifty-two Sundays in a year away from home cannot imagine their bleak and awful isolation What thoughts come to one on a rainy Sunday spent looking at the four walls of a dingy hotel bedroom, with the warmth and beauty of home a thousand miles away? . . . What beauty, what warmth, might you have stored in your mind this day if you had been with your friends?

At this very moment they are dropping into your home for a cup of tea, their fine familiar faces reflecting the light of candles on the gleaming sideboard. They are talking — brilliant little scraps of conversation, brave mots that one

remembers and chuckles over, suddenly, years later. And you're missing it, missing it all . . . Traveling men may not as a group radiate profound orthodox religious convictions, but they all believe in Hell, for they live in it over each week-end.¹²

There were a number of agendas being worked out here. Ken was always conscious that his father had been a Yale graduate, ostensibly a ticket to enormous worldly success; he had gone on trips with his dad to visit some of the old Yale classmates who had gone on to wealth and fortune.¹³ Yet in almost every sense his father's life had been a failure — and particularly in Ken's assessment. Ken had had to climb up the hard way, coming out of poverty, without even a high school diploma. During his childhood, and even for years afterwards, he played the role of Mother's Protector,¹⁴ the one who was continually praised and reinforced by Mom for being the opposite of Dad.

Driven to accomplishment and success, resolved that "he would not be a failure like his father," the marriage into the wealthy Coleman family was clearly in part a declaration that he *could* make it, that he could by determined effort evade the curse and avoid his father's doom. This was a life script filled with an incredible strain and tension, with a constant underlayer of incredible fear and anxiety.

There was a certain posed quality to the image that Ken was working so hard to present: tea by candlelight, surrounded by brilliant conversationalists, dropping bon mots as they moved from one intellectual topic to another — a world of cultured, well-read, much-traveled, sophisticated folk who appreciated fine silver, polished mahogany sideboards, good French wines and European cuisine. Ken took pains to wear English tweeds, and talk about

restaurants he had eaten at in France — and all with a wife from a suitably wealthy background at his side.

There was a rigidity, an inability to relax, with both of them. Ken and Helen were always equally obsessive in their orderliness. Helen in particular exuded the air of a totally no-nonsense person. There was no imagination or intuition. Truthful to a fault, she would get on Ken for his frequent exaggerations when telling a good tale.¹⁵

There was not anything necessarily inappropriate about all this: If you yourself are cultured and well-read, it can be genuine fun being with other people who know about the same things you do. What is wrong, *per se*, with having beautiful things around you, and having an educated taste? Knowing more about the world, and being able to appreciate a wide range of fine things, can make life richer and even more enjoyable. In this sense, Ken and Helen were fitting mates for one another, and it is doubtful that either could have been happy with someone who did not know about and savor such things.

The intellectual side of this had in fact been part of Ken's childhood — someone who had been read to as a child from *Oliver Twist* and *Vanity Fair* and *Moby Dick* needed a wife with whom he could genuinely converse. But the material side of this was a bit different: Ken was an ambitious social climber, not born to that lifestyle, who was to some degree doing all this, not because he totally enjoyed it, but because, by external accomplishments, he was trying desperately hard to prove something to himself that he was never truly going to believe anyway — at least not when he was trying to do it this way.

There tend to be two basic styles of alcoholic, the Rebels Without a Cause who degenerate into flaunting of the law, brawling, and flagrantly antisocial behavior, and the Super Achievers who drive themselves unmercifully to perform, with — usually — considerable success until they finally simply wear out, both

physically and emotionally, and collapse in total despair. In high school, the young Ken had started out on the first path — fighting, brawling, petty theft, getting kicked out of school — but then had been diverted into the second by the intervention of one of his teachers. And so at this point he drove himself unmercifully into success after success, and the ultimate collapse and breakdown that awaited him was still far off in the future. But it was inevitably going to come. It was like a Greek tragedy, where the hero (who must be fundamentally a likable person, Aristotle said) appears to be totally in control, successfully evading the oracle's prophecy, but is in fact fatalistically treading the path, step by slow step, that will finally lead him to his doom.

At best, one could say that the sophisticated lifestyle that Ken had now adopted fit only one part of who he was. He was also the boy born by the shantytown along the railroad tracks, who fought in the streets of Chicago's rougher neighborhoods, and had been thrown out of school and worked at menial labor in a label factory. There was a layer in Ken's soul, down underneath, where he was simply a man of the common folk, the average, everyday people — some of whom were in fact wonderful, wise, sensitive, totally decent men and women. When he finally came to A.A. he was able for the first time in years to get back in contact with that part of himself, and associate with perfectly ordinary people, and talk, not about French cuisine and English cathedrals and great literature, but about perfectly everyday things in plain, simple language. It was a coming home to part of himself, a re-integration of a split within his soul.

In A.A., he was able to be close friends with people like John Dillon, a former soccer player and referee who calculated interstate trucking rates, and with Johnny Morgan, a barber on the east side of South Bend, with whom he was particularly close. Johnny's caring

and loyalty especially came out in 1951, when Ken suffered a crippling relapse into his old compulsions and phobias.

In A.A., Ken could associate with people who were very different from the polished men and sophisticated women with whom he had once mingled in elegant salons and drawing rooms — people for example like Eddie Slake, the professional wrestler. One of Ken's sons tells the tale:

Even in junior high school I had heard stories from my west side friends about the fearsome Eddie Slake.¹⁶ What a surprise, then, when he showed up at the house for A.A. meetings! He was quite a physical specimen, though his face showed the effects of too many fights. My father became very fond of him and found a basic decency and quietness in him that was not reflected in his public image.

On just one occasion, Slake prevailed on Dad to see him wrestle. It was at the old South Bend Armory, and his opponent was Primo Carnera, the giant ex-heavyweight boxing champion. I went with Dad to the match, and Slake was pretty well taken to the cleaners by Carnera. We happened to be seated by the aisle, and Slake walked past us on his way back to the dressing room. Dad must have looked concerned, because, as Slake walked by, he said, "Don't worry, Ken, I'm fine."¹⁷

After he came into A.A., Ken took pains to try to raise his children so that they would not become the kind of snobbish people he had wanted so much to imitate right after he first started making real money. Although the children were in fact brought up in a certain amount of wealth and privilege, in a fancy house, with servants around at least part of the time, and were sent off to do degrees at exclusive colleges, I found that any attempt to talk with them about it would always produce embarrassment and attempts to

downplay all that. After he came into A.A., Ken taught them well about democracy and human equality, and the need to respect honesty, decency, and real wisdom in everyone, regardless of how much money they made or how much formal education they had (or did not have). It was always refreshing to talk to Ken's children — their father (and their mother too) had taught them well about the truly important things in life.

The *young* Ken, however, had been a man of a quite different sort, an ambitious social riser of a style which must have produced enormous inner tension. There was a tremendous tension and repression in Helen too, beneath the omnipresent surface impression of rigid control. Her father and mother had originally come from upper New York state, where her father, Charles Coleman, had started out as simply a tinsmith. But Coleman got a job with a company that made mica insulation for stoves, went into sales, and ended up as the sales manager for the entire midwest. He bought a big house in the Beverly Hills sections of Chicago, with servants to wait on the family, and sent Helen and her sister and brother off to Northwestern University for degrees.

The old popular song goes "I want a gal just like a gal that married dear old dad," and women can sing a similar song. Young Ken was (to her) a hard-driven self-made man just like her father, who had come up from almost nothing to wealth and respectability.

But there was also a big difference between Ken and her father: the latter was very religious, at least in the rule-laden, repressive sense. Charles Coleman was treasurer of the Anti-Saloon League and vehemently opposed to alcoholic beverages. He not only forbade his children to drink, but also to dance and play cards. Whatever Helen might say to others, the hard-drinking young Ken, with his exaggerated tall tales and explosions of wildly outrageous

activity, allowed her to play out vicariously her own secret lust to rebel against her rigid, authoritarian father.

On one of the trips Ken and Helen made to Europe, for example, Ken stayed up to 7 a.m. playing jazz on the piano with the ocean liner's orchestra, buying round after round of drinks to keep the musicians going.¹⁸ There was nothing strange about this marriage to anyone who knows alcoholics. Helen was (at least to a point) the typical control-crazy, moralistic, super-responsible Al-Anon type who inwardly delighted in the alcoholic's wild, exciting, rebellious escapades, even while she was putting up a public pretense of disapproving of all his flamboyant behavior. Helen was also a marvelous and kind-hearted woman of the delightful sort which one finds at so many Al-Anon gatherings. And alcoholics at their best do have a delightful, larger-than-life craziness to their adventures that makes ordinary people seem terribly boring by comparison. The alcoholic's motto seems always to involve an either-or, all-or-nothing polarization: Nothing is worth doing at all unless it is worth doing to excess! It is true that some of the reasons why Helen found Ken's way of living life so fascinating (as well as frightening) were not completely healthy. The important thing to observe however is that, no matter what she said — at least until things got out of hand — Helen in her heart in fact loved every minute of Ken's escapades.

In 1928, the decision was made to move the M. B. Skinner Company from Chicago to South Bend, Indiana, ninety miles to the east. It was decided that too much time and energy was being wasted moving parts and equipment from floor to floor in the Chicago factory building, that a brand new manufacturing facility needed to be built, and that Chicago land prices were too high to afford to erect the large, sprawling one-story structure that would be most efficient. South Bend was a good factory town, still small

enough to have lots of cheap land around its outskirts, so the new plant was built on the west side of that city (for easy access to the highways and rail lines leading to Chicago) at 3502 West Sample Street, where the low, tan brick building is still being used for manufacturing today. As Ken told the story:¹⁹

We manufacture repair clamps and saddles (heavy special fittings) for steel and cast-iron pipe, selling principally to the gas, water and petroleum industries. The firm was founded in 1898 in Chicago as James McCrea & Company. M. B. Skinner bought it in 1908 and changed the name to its present form in 1911. Like many sound businesses, it got off to a slow start, building slowly and well. Today our line is known all over the world.

Mr. Skinner, having known hardship himself, was always warmhearted and liberal toward his employees. In fact, we believe the M. B. Skinner Company was the first concern in the country to adopt the eight-hour day. It was put into effect 33 years ago [in 1920], amid dire prophecies by neighboring manufacturers that such pampering and coddling of the workers could lead only to disaster.

In 1928, Mr. Skinner tired of operating on three floors (we used to say jokingly that goods in manufacture spent half the time on elevators) and built a new single-story plant in South Bend, 90 miles east of Chicago. We moved into the new building that fall, and it is rather significant that more than half our men broke lifelong ties in Chicago to come to South Bend with us.

The disastrous stock market crash of 1929 — hitting them a body blow the very next year — then started the Great Depression. By March of 1933, all the banks in the United States were closed. That same year, Mr. Skinner decided that it was time for him to quit. The new factory had only been in operation in South Bend for five years.

Ken, his brother, and two other members of the management decided to buy the business themselves. They had come to like South Bend.²⁰

All of us, industrially and personally, gradually took root in the soil of this pleasant community. Growing up with the firm under the benevolent ownership of Mr. Skinner, my brother Patterson Merrill, now our vice-president for production; Frederick R. McMurray, now vice-president for sales; Harvey E. Southard, now treasurer; and the writer, now president, developed a strong sense of the dignity and importance of labor — all the more so because three of us started in the business as factory hands more than 35 years ago.

In 1933 we four younger men bought out Mr. Skinner's interest and took over direction of the business. We fell at once into a management pattern that has not altered since. We run the company on a consultation basis. There are no dictators, no layer-downers of the law. The four of us just get together frequently and talk. From these conversations emerge decisions and policies.

Ken's brother was the organizer who kept things going smoothly in the factory itself, while Ken used his genius in sales and advertising to push their products successfully even though the country had been half crippled by the overall national economic collapse. In particular, the ads which Ken designed to run in various publications were far ahead of their time when we compare them with other commercial advertising of that period. They were brilliantly conceived, creative in their approach, and enormously successful. So in spite of the lingering long term effects of the great depression, the four young men, with Ken at the helm, were able to make their company flourish and grow.

Chapter 7

The Successful Young Factory Owner

In addition to the advertising innovations Ken introduced, a novel scheme got the factory workers solidly on the side of the new management. In the spring of 1934, at one of their informal meetings, the four directors made a decision that was to turn it into a workplace with a totally different spirit from the normal American factory.²¹

We decided to put into effect an idea which has had far-reaching and undreamed-of effects. The idea was a bonus plan.

Actually the idea first had been suggested three years earlier by Mr. Skinner. He had come into the office one morning in 1931 brandishing a newspaper. He slammed it down on his desk and pointed to a headline: Corporation Pays Sixth Dividend. Turning to us younger men, he said:

“Capital is entitled to a reasonable return. But when it exceeds that, the funds are coming out of the hides of the men who do the work. I want you boys to remember after I’m gone that when you make any extra money, it should go back to the men on the job.”

Well, on this particular day in 1934 we were discussing the fact that profits, so far for the year, had been quite

satisfactory. What, asked our treasurer, should we do with them? In those relatively tax-free days, money could always be added to our reserve fund or paid out in extra dividends. There was a moment of silence. Then our vice-president for production spoke up.

“Do you remember,” he asked, “the day Mr. Skinner said he didn’t think invested capital rated more than a reasonable return? We have a fair reserve right now. Why not give the profits back to the men as he suggested — to the fellows who did the work?”

“On what basis?” he was asked.

“Well,” he replied, “when you come right down to it, all differences in seniority and ability are taken care of in the wage rate. Why not pay a straight 5 per cent bonus on last year’s wages? After all, we started as factory hands; we know what it will mean to the boys.”

Like other businessmen, we had read many articles on the theory of profit-sharing. Some old concerns were making progress in that direction, but invariably the profit sharing was set up under an extremely complex formula, tied in with some philanthropic idea or with insurance, pensions, or stock purchasing.

Our idea was different. It was startlingly simple. All we had to do was to get a memo from the timekeeper as to the money each man in the organization had drawn in the previous calendar year, figure 5 percent of that — and we had the amount of the bonus to be paid each man. Instead of a whole department working for weeks to calculate the sums involved, our accounting department could make out the checks in a couple of hours with little interruption of routine.

We talked over the plan for a while, then looked at one another and said: “Let’s do it.” And we did. Just before the luncheon period that same day, the giant buzzer in the plant summoned our employees to the shipping room.

There they heard a short talk which went something like this:

“You men have worked so efficiently this year that we have made more money than our year-end forecast predicted. You’re going to be interested — perhaps a little surprised, as no one to our knowledge has ever done it before — when you learn what we’re going to do with this extra money. We’re going to give it back to you men who did the work It is with great pleasure that the management announces the distribution of a general bonus of 5 per cent on your whole last year’s wage, from sweeper to president, payable right now! Come and get it!”

Wages were a lot lower twenty years ago than they are now, but even then 5 per cent of a year’s wage made a respectable check. We in management still remember the joyous looks on the men’s faces when they saw the totals and really grasped what had happened.

There were smiles on the workers’ faces for weeks afterward, too. Many of them stopped one or another of us to confide what they had done with their checks. Some had realized minor ambitions like buying a new radio, others had paid off debts resulting from sickness in the family, this one had his car painted, that one had finally bought a long-wanted sofa.

A few months later, year-end rolled around and our annual statement was delivered by the auditors — to be considered as usual at one of our informal meetings. As we studied the report, one figure stood out like a neon sign — the year’s profit. In spite of giving our men their first bonus, our profit on the year’s business had risen!

Could the auditor have made a mistake perhaps? We checked and double-checked. The figure was correct. Suddenly the answer flashed into the mind of each man almost simultaneously: “Why, it’s on account of that bonus we paid!”

The average workman, if he has no personal incentive, no knowledge that increased production on his part will result in increased earnings for himself, may be halfhearted in his work. Nearly any man who doesn't feel he is, in a sense, in business for himself, who knows there is an impenetrable ceiling on his earning power, is likely to indulge in a surprising amount of aimless doodling and purposeless stalling.

Obviously the bonus we paid had given our boys a breath-taking vista. They began thinking: If I quit the monkey business entirely and really make knots, maybe there'll be another bonus — maybe a bigger one! So they buckled down to work — and there was another and bigger bonus. In March of 1935, we gave everyone 10 per cent of his previous year's wages.

As 1935 wore on, we began to look forward with more than a little excitement to the company's year-end statement. When it did arrive, we could hardly believe our eyes. Despite the 10 per cent bonus, our net profit again had increased.

By this time, word of our bonus plan had got around town, and various manufacturer friends of ours warned us that we were in for terrible trouble if we continued our mad course. "Just wait until you have a bad year," they said. "You've completely spoiled your employees. When the time comes that you can't pay a bonus, they'll turn on you like a pack of wolves and you'll really be in for it."

But we kept on paying bonuses. In 1936. In 1937. Then in 1938 the test came. Few businessmen will forget the small-scale panic that hit the country when it became clear Hitler would not limit himself to rabble-rousing oratory much longer.

As the months dragged on and no bonus was forthcoming, did the men turn suspicious, cynical, lose faith in their company? No. Because they knew what was going

on. With candor, bluntly, openly, quoting figures, we explained to them the exact situation. They understood, and grimly set to work to offset the national trend by an even higher production level.

Their efforts taught us a lesson. From that day to this, we have continued to tell our workers at intervals just how our business is going. Why shouldn't a workman know what's cooking? Sales, profits, inventories, new products, new machinery, even current bank commitments. Certainly a mind filled with accurate knowledge has no room for the distortions, the lies and the venomous gossip which ignorance can foster.

Our sales, like almost everyone else's declined in 1938, but we finally managed to distribute a 5 per cent bonus. In 1939, we increased the bonus to 8 per cent of the workers' previous year's earnings. In 1940, war orders began to come in and we upped the bonus to 17½ per cent. Even though we took on more men, we paid 30 per cent in 1941, 20 per cent in 1943 and 20 per cent in 1945 — to mention some of the high spots.

After the armistice, our profit sharing naturally was hobbled by price ceilings and rising labor costs. But we managed to pay out 14 per cent in 1950 and again in 1951. Last year marked the maximum squeeze between rising costs and price ceilings, but we paid 10 per cent to our boys.

Today [in 1953] we see many signs of a return to stability in business operations, and we feel the outlook for the future — both for the company itself and for the swell guys we have working for us — is better than it has been in a decade.

Carrying this same spirit forward into relationships with the labor union seemed to eliminate the problem of confrontations, hostility, and the expensive strikes that halted all production

periodically in so many factories, and took money out of the pockets of both the owners and the workers:

Looking back over the years the bonus plan has been operating, we feel that some of its by-products have been just as salutary as its effect on production figures and worker morale. For example, it doesn't take much imagination to see that the paying of bonuses would make for smoother relations with a union. When a concern has a long history of distributing its profits, above a reasonable dividend, among the men who do the work, it doesn't have to prove that its intentions are honorable.

Every two years for the last 10 years we have negotiated a new contract with Local 278, United Construction Workers, District 50 United Mine Workers of America. Our wage rates conform to union scale for the area. Meeting in an atmosphere as pleasant as that of a civic committee session, our shop stewards, the union representative and management have a series of mutually enlightening conversations about labor matters that have come up since the last contract was negotiated. There is respect, consideration and courtesy on the part of everyone present.

After a week or two of talks, we reach agreement and sign a new contract. In celebration, we always shut down the whole plant an hour or two early and throw a big party.

The fire that almost destroyed the factory on a swelteringly hot day in August of 1935 showed how the new spirit worked. It was *everybody's* company, and everyone there knew that he had something at stake. A neighboring factory had caught on fire, and a sudden wind storm, with driving gusts of up to sixty miles an hour, was driving the flames towards the M. B. Skinner Company.

To make matters worse, the area to windward included some of the mucklands that surrounded South Bend. These former swamps had been drained with underground pipes and long, straight, run-off ditches, and the dark black peat-like material left behind was now being used to plant huge commercial truck gardens. The mucklands, this particular year, had totally dried out in the summer heat; the material in which the table vegetables was planted was not truly soil, but instead finely-divided particles of a dark, semi-carbonized matter which was the residue from the lush vegetation that had grown in the swamps for centuries before they were drained.

On this hot day in August 1935 the high winds which had sprung up were blowing blinding gusts of the black dust from these fields. The finely powdered muck was flammable itself, just like peat or soft coal, which added to the hazard:

With the temperature hovering around 100 degrees, we four executives went out to lunch as usual that day, little realizing that near disaster was about to strike the plant. All we noticed as we got into our cars was that a strong wind from the west was sending great clouds of dust rolling up from the muck farms bordering our industrial area.

At 12:15 p.m., fire broke out in a plant to the windward of ours, and within minutes, sparks and big pieces of flaming roofing and timber began to fall on our roof. Instantly recognizing the acute danger (the wind had risen to nearly 60 miles an hour), the men in our plant spontaneously rigged several hose lines, detailed others to grab every available fire extinguisher and started patrolling the roof. Whenever a sizzling torch fell on the roof, it was instantly extinguished.

For an hour and half the men stuck to their posts. It wasn't fun. The heavy smoke, coupled with the dust storm,

limited visibility at times to a few feet. But the men stuck it out and saved the plant.

When we returned from lunch and saw this brave band of men, black as tar paper, we decided to take emergency measures of our own. We sent across the street for a Gargantuan load of beer and joined the workers in putting it to good use the rest of the afternoon. It was a very pleasant way to cool off.

Early the next summer, on another extremely hot day, one of our men quite innocently remarked, "This is about as hot as it was the day we had the fire."

"Doggone if it isn't," we said. "Let's knock off at two o'clock and have some beer." And we did.

Since then, whenever the thermometer threatens 100 degrees during the summer, we knock off at 2 p.m. and bring in a load of beer for the boys.

Only one event we enjoy more: the big Christmas party every year. It's a dress-up affair, "with wives." And it is given *by the shop*, with the management as guests.

Now it should be noted that these practices not only started, but were continued, after Ken himself was in A.A. and was not drinking a drop himself. There is often an assumption — which Ken was always at great pains to try to counter — that A.A. people were in the same camp as the prohibitionists and others who campaigned against anybody drinking alcoholic beverages. The vast majority of men and women in A.A. see alcoholism as a special disease which afflicts only a small percentage of the population. They are no more hostile towards others drinking alcoholic beverages than someone with diabetes is hostile to non-diabetics eating all the chocolate cake they want to. It would be absurd for an individual who was allergic to strawberries, say, or shrimp, to campaign for laws barring the sale

or consumption of strawberries and shrimp to everyone else in the population.

So Ken cheerfully bought the beer himself, and had great fun watching his men enjoy themselves. And the workers themselves responded to this totally different spirit in the workplace by genuinely committing themselves to the job.

One of the older A.A. members in this area, who was brought up as a child in the factory workers' neighborhood near the Skinner plant, said that the company was legendary among South Bend workers. A position there was one of the three or four most eagerly coveted factory jobs in town. It also meant security, because it was a job for life:

We are often asked what our labor turnover is. To all intents and purposes, we haven't any The regular employees — the Skinner gang, as they call themselves — seldom change. Of course, occasionally a man dies; once in a while an old fellow decides he wants a rest and retires; there have been cases of chronic and disabling illness forcing a man to quit. But in the ordinary meaning of that word, we have no turnover. Quite a number of men have been with us 30 years or more, and many more have passed the quarter-century mark.

When a man does leave us, we violate a widely respected business tradition in choosing his successor. We don't believe in the saying, "Never hire a relation." In fact, we rather favor hiring relations. We have a lot of second-generation employees who as children grew up in a household where the father felt secure, respected and valued in his job at "Skinner's." We don't have to tell a lad from such a family that he's going to get a fair shake here. He has known it for years.

Layoffs? In the commonly accepted meaning of the word, we've never had one. We've always held the deep conviction that the privilege of business ownership carries with it an unequivocal responsibility for the welfare of the men. While we realize that other manufacturers face entirely different problems, we are still inclined to believe that many if not most general layoffs are the result of bad planning. At least, we haven't had a single general layoff in the company's more than half-century history.

During the bank-closing days of 1932, we assigned the men to move piles of castings, sweep under them and shove the iron back, just to keep them on the payroll. Then, in the petty depression of 1938, our financial intake fell below outgo. On both occasions, we dropped temporarily to a 30-hour work week to cut our losses — and took it on the chin. But we had the satisfaction of knowing that not one Skinner man ever had to apply for unemployment relief or, before the days of that agency, throw himself on the mercy of the county authorities.

Another by-product of our profit-sharing plan rather surprised us. As soon as the plan had been established long enough for the men to know it was permanent, they started disciplining themselves. Say there were three men working side by side at a bench, and the one in the middle wasn't carrying his share of the load. It wouldn't be long before one of the other boys would turn and say, "Look, Joe, if you're not feeling well, why don't you go home? If you're okay, start hitting the ball, boy, because around here every time you hit a casting, it means another penny in your pocket!" As time went by, our foremen became more consultants than anything else.

Ken and the other co-owners realized that the factory workers were individual human beings, not statistics and numbers and anonymous groups on a sheet of paper. And so they decided that

there was no earthly reason to force one particular man to retire, even if he was over 65, if he himself was able-bodied and wanted to continue to work. Nor was there any reason to automatically reject physically handicapped job applicants if there was useful work that they could do around the plant:

Another point on which we differ sharply from most companies is compulsory retirement. Of all the legends that have grown up in American industry, we feel none is as nonsensical, as utterly unsupported by fact, as the common belief that a workman has outlived his usefulness at sixty-five and should be laid off.

We have a number of so-called over-age employees and they are wonderful guys. One, a magnificent old fellow of seventy-six, in his younger days was reputed to be the best blacksmith in Saint Joseph County. He still hits the truest blow with a hammer of any man in this shop.

Winter or summer, he's at his bench at the stroke of seven, sleeves rolled up, ready to give us a day's work. He knows that as long as he can turn out the work, his job is secure and no nonsense about it. He puffs his pipe in great peace of soul.

How about handicapped workers? Well, we've got quite a few of them and they're hired on an absolute par with able-bodied men. We feel that if the job is suited to the man, his productivity is just as good as the next worker's. Take a man with one leg. He wouldn't be very good standing in front of a press, but find him a comfortable place at a bench and he's just as efficient (and happy) as any other employee. An ex-polio patient doesn't walk very well, but find him a job where his powerful arms come into play and he won't feel inferior to anyone. Handicapped people in our plant find no reminder of their disability in their pay checks either — they draw full scale.

It is important to note that Ken was not just concerned with mechanical measures of productivity. First you made sure that the wise, highly skilled elderly worker could have “peace of soul,” and that the crippled polio victim could be given a task where he would not “feel inferior to anyone.” You took care of the human equation first, and the things that most businessmen allow themselves to become over-preoccupied with would automatically follow. A man who loved his job, felt good about himself, and understood that he was part of a mutually-committed community of effort, would outwork anyone else around — and have a real feeling of satisfaction about doing it.

The Skinner factory was Ken’s pride and joy. The sprawling, one-story plant was faced on the outside with light-brown brick the sunny color of the Lake Michigan sand dunes, and lovingly surrounded by trees, hedges, and flowers. The air was filled with purple martins swooping gracefully about on their long, tapered wings, catching flying insects. Sadly, not much of the landscaping still survives today. But a visitor can see the building itself, still being cared for and used, the brick entrance gate with its bronze plaque inscribed with the Skinnner name, and in particular the ruins of the rock garden off to one side — and even today if you look at this while reading Ken’s description, you can easily recreate in imagination the impact of that little spot of beauty and humanity, shining out amidst the long, grim stretch of grimy, impersonal factory buildings which extended, pretty much unbroken, from that part of Sample Street all the way into downtown South Bend.

The typical business mentality in the United States today thinks that one makes a success of a commercial venture by being “tough-minded” and implacable, draining people dry, discarding them without a thought if one can make a short-term personal profit out of

it, and looking only at numbers and statistics and “the bottom line” of this month’s financial report. There tends to be gross disregard of beauty, goodness, and morality; a soulless dismissal of the human element, and a serious lack of long term planning. The year-end financial report becomes the tyrant, and no thought is given to advantages or consequences that might accrue further down the line, four or five or six years in the future. And so, from this tunnel vision perspective, catastrophically stupid things are often done.

Ken’s argument over and over in his published writings was that, if the management of a business *also* looked at the human element, and *also* was concerned with such intangibles as beauty, goodness, and moral responsibility, that the *long term* bottom line after a few years would show you outstripping the competition by a wide margin. And he proved that this was so, through depressions, wartime economies, and inflationary periods. One small article he wrote demonstrated how intangibles had their positive effect — often when and where you least would have expected it:²²

Have you every tried to satisfy a big potential customer in a foreign country on the chances of your company being in business many years from now?

I did, and it makes quite a story. First, as background only, let me say that our company has, for half a century, manufactured a line of repair clamps and saddles for steel and cast iron pipe, reseating tools for valves, and other allied products. Twenty-five years ago we found that costs of manufacturing in a three-story plant in a crowded section of Chicago had increased to such a point (we used to say that goods in process spent half their time on elevators) that it was absolutely necessary for us to move to an outlying community where we would have room to spread out to get all our operations on one floor.

So we secured several acres in South Bend, Indiana, and built our present plant. At the time, our founder, Mr. Skinner, laid out exceptionally beautiful gardens and lawns surrounding the factory buildings. There are spacious stretches of greensward on three sides, bordered by colorful flower beds, dotted with majestic elms, and enclosed by a spectacular privet hedge eleven feet high, five feet thick, and clipped as trim as a brick wall.

This east lawn, which the office overlooks, culminates in a lovely rock garden and pool with a backdrop of honeysuckle, all shaded by a gigantic weeping willow which separates this tranquil scene from the more utilitarian parking lot. One last touch. Here and there, soaring above the shrubbery, are Martin houses atop sixteen-foot poles [to attract these beautiful, graceful birds into nesting on the factory grounds]. The whole layout is quite unexpected as a setting for an industrial plant, and causes quite a good deal of comment among visitors.

Well, to get on with my tale. In the early thirties, I decided it was time we established our line in the British Isles Within a week after my arrival in London, I had, by a process of elimination, found exactly the outfit I wanted. Over 125 years old, this magnificent concern was practically the first thought of every factory superintendent or purchasing agent from the Orkney Islands to Land's End. A huge warehouse accommodated one of the largest and most diverse stocks of mill supplies I have ever seen in my life. The company was conservatively financed, their bank spoke of them in the most glowing terms, their sales methods were alert and resourceful. They were ideal.

So I went to work to acquaint them with the Skinner line Finally came the day [of their official decision]. The General Manger asked me to list what I would propose as a primary stock order. When I had finished drawing it up, it was the biggest single jobber

order in the history of our company. But deservedly so, as the deal represented not just another stock, but a monopoly for the entire British Isles. I drew a long breath, and the next morning walked into the Managing Director's office, and laid a sheet on his desk.

Without a word he looked it over. The minutes ticked by and I began to get nervous. Finally, when he spoke it was the last thing I'd expected him to say.

"Mr. Merrill," he said, "we are very much impressed with your line. I think it will meet with general acceptance and a nice sale. But I have a serious question to ask. I had never heard of your company before you entered these doors a month ago. We enter into no temporary relationships. We must have complete assurance of permanence—" he stopped speaking, looked out the window.

Suddenly he turned and faced me. He was serious to the point of sternness. "What proof can you present," he said, "that you will be in business ten years, twenty years, thirty years from now."

Well, friend salesman, what would *you* do if you were asked a question like that? Probably what I did! I was reduced to mumbling incoherence as I groped for some idea which might form the basis of an answer. A little flash came — I had provided myself with a letter of introduction from our company banker. At least, the looking for it in my brief case would give me a little chance to gather my wits.

As I bent over to search for it, my fingers first touched a little folio of color photographs of our factory gardens. Like the old story of tossing a chunk of meat out of the sleigh to delay the pursuing wolves a few moments, I picked up this folder and threw it on his desk. "Our factory gardens," I said jerkily, "you might want to look at them while I am trying to find a letter."

Did I say trying to find it? I couldn't find it! I was wild! A month's work wasted because I couldn't find a letter! As I frantically thumbed through my papers one last time, I heard the cool voice of the managing director, "Oh, put up your trinkets, Mr. Merrill—" I looked up to see him smiling in a quizzical way. He was holding the photograph of our exquisite rock garden in his hand.

"Don't you realize that these photographs answer my question?" he said. "No concern is going to install gardens like this if they don't intend to stay in business. Furthermore, it is an extraordinary character reference, for I am sure that no man who loves gardens, as you people quite obviously do, is capable of an unworthy action."

He scratched his initials across my list, tossed it to his clerk to write up. Suddenly [he] became very animated. "Delphiniums, now!" he said. "In your country do you have to reinforce their soil with bonemeal? Here, we find it quite salutary . . ."

And that's how our garden made the most important sale in our company's history!

This was Ken M. in his early forties. He seemed to have achieved everything a businessman could dream of: president of his own company, devoted employees who made the business prosper in spite of the depression-era economic situation, an elegant and intelligent wife, a beautiful home in a well-to-do neighborhood in a pleasant, friendly, midwestern city, and three lovely children.

Even more than that, he was a truly good man. People around him, from the highest to the lowest, not only admired him but genuinely loved him — much more so than he himself was capable at that time of understanding. He was a person who had created a large number of good, decent jobs for people in the middle of an economic catastrophe which often seemed hopeless. He gave beauty

and delight to the world around him — playing music, publishing short stories, creating an oasis of flowers and trees and birds in the midst of a grim industrial desert.

He could not have understood that all that was required was for the right external trigger to be pulled, and he would be plunged into the nightmare of full blown, uncontrollable alcoholism. Those who are not themselves recovering alcoholics (or addicts or codependents or the like) may find this unbelievable too. They want to believe that alcoholics are bad people, men and women with weak willpower and low moral fiber, who do not have the gumption to pull their own weight and add anything positive to the community, sponges and leeches and slackers.

The story of Ken M.'s early life is a good way to demolish that facile myth. He seemed to be the living example of the American dream: rising from rags to riches, raising himself out of the slums to become the community's benefactor. But part of his driving energy was a fleeing from something dark back in his childhood. He had run desperately hard for many years. But that dark something was now catching up.

Chapter 8

Breakdown and Collapse

Two years after taking over the company, Ken seemed to have everything he could have dreamed for. He was president of his own business, which was doing well in spite of the lingering effects of the Great Depression. He had a wife and three lovely children: seven-year-old Janet, five-year-old Ken C., and three-year-old Dan. They had a large, beautiful house at 2705 S. Marine Street in South Bend — still quite a show place, even among the houses of that expensive neighborhood — with huge trees towering over its white brick and frame construction, with a maid, and even a cook for special occasions. It was a life of style and elegance.

But at that point — it was 1935 — little Janet came down with scarlet fever. It was a year or two before sulfa drugs came to be available as antibiotics, so there was little that could be done. The seven-year-old girl was rigidly quarantined in the hospital, so that Ken and Helen could not even be with her in her agony and terror. And the little girl died.

Both Ken and Helen had been involved in massive denials of many of their deepest feelings: There was Ken's fear of being the helpless victim of mindless violence, his special vulnerability to the existential *Angst* of rejection and abandonment, the constant worry behind all his frantic attempts to prove that he could avoid the curse that had doomed his father to a life of failure, and ever-increasing

torment from the strange phobias that terrorized him. Helen on her side could never admit the secret inner desire to flaunt all her father's rigid rules and throw herself totally into Ken's rebellious, flamboyant, alcoholic escapades, and the paralyzing fear of ever letting that part of herself really loose caused her to close the repressive lid down ever more tightly over her real feelings.

They had never been emotionally close to one another even before that point. How could they have been, when neither could admit his or her real feelings even in their own heads? Nevertheless, everyone in the family seems to have felt that Janet's death further hardened the emotional walls between them to such a degree that for all practical purposes they led separate lives from this point on.

Helen threw herself into being an overprotective, constantly worrying mother to the other children. A little girl, Martha, was born on May 11, 1938, and Helen seems to have turned her anxieties and fears particularly towards this new daughter.

At night, Ken would go out and take walks, or read, or play the piano — anything to stay away from his wife. Little Martha became a major focus here too. She became "Daddy's favorite girl," whom he would take out for car rides in the country in a magnificent, shiny 1937 Packard (his pride and joy, which he kept in loving shape all the way to the end of his life). Ken would stop and park the car whenever he saw something beautiful — a tranquil lake or valley, brightly colored autumn foliage or summer flowers, a magnificent cloud formation in the sky — and would simply sit absolutely transfixed by the sight, and trying to drink in all that beauty, deep into his soul. He would often take his daughter Martha with him on these jaunts. But he always made sure it was not Helen, his wife, who came along.²³

The previous year, in 1934, Ken's father John had died, at the age of 76. Even the death of an abusive parent seems to cut away

part of your soul when it happens. But now, in 1935, Ken's mother Annie, only 71, also died. Ken, when he was a little boy — and in fact all the way to the end of her life — had been Mother's Protector, Mother's Confidant and Surrogate Spouse, but he could not save her, any more than he had been able to save his little daughter Janet.

He tried to self-medicate with alcohol, in order to still the ever-louder voices of panic fear, worry, and anxiety that assaulted him inside his head; he attempted to numb his thoughts and feelings with liquor in an effort to render himself totally insensible to that dark, murky, nameless background feeling of total failure and worthlessness and "badness" that crept into his consciousness whenever he tried to rest his mind and be quiet.²⁴

Alcohol is not a stimulant, as is commonly believed, but an anesthetic. It progressively puts to sleep the various layers of consciousness and one of the first layers to go "bye-bye" is this desperate sense of uneasiness which all alcoholics suffer.

Ken was trying to keep a factory going through the rough part of the great depression. It was not just a matter of precise financial calculations and sophisticated technical know-how — the biggest problems involved dealing with people, people, and more people. The people who bought their products had to be charmed and pleased; the other three managers had to be kept working together cooperatively; the workers at the factory had to be cajoled into enthusiasm, willingness, and love. And he was trying to do all this while simultaneously writing short stories for major national publications, playing the organ at the semiprofessional level, and trying to be a responsible husband, father, and homeowner. And then came the need to cope with people who were dying — his father, his mother, his poor little girl — as well as with the craziness

which death and grieving so often produce in other members of the family.

Surface appearances to the contrary, the typical alcoholic is an extremely shy person. Dealing with other people produces enormous tension and strain. Even things like buying clothes or arranging for a repairman to work on a household appliance involves dealing with other human beings, so the alcoholic feels exhausted afterwards. And the most important part of the existential *Umwelt* — the surrounding environment of the Not-Me within which I define myself and my goals and purposes — is not things but other persons:

The greatest reality of life does not consist of a variety of physical objects. The greatest reality in life is *people*. And here is a young man who has made his adjustment to the greatest reality in his life, people, through alcohol. There are two things wrong with this. First the size of the dose has constantly to be increased as the fellow develops tolerance for alcohol. Secondly having solved his greatest problem, people, through alcohol he now uses the same adjustment on the other realities of life, namely responsibilities.

Having reached early manhood he now has a man's duties to perform. He has to buy a car, rent a house, buy a refrigerator, ask a girl to marry him, have a baby in the family, see a dentist, take a life insurance examination, and as these common things present themselves, his instantaneous inner rejoinder is "just give me a drink or two and I'll be all right!" And he is. He has taken the edge off his unremitting doubt as to his adequacy in an adult's role. He is not drunk. He just anesthetized uneasiness. And he goes through with what he has to do.

We now have a picture of a young man who is using alcohol as a cushion between him and the rough give and take of life. He has found his adjustment to his own

problems and employs that adjustment. He probably will go along eight or ten years using this crutch to hold himself up. His drinking has not as yet increased immoderately. He's usually on the job in the morning. He hasn't got into any too serious trouble — perhaps a caustic remark to some old friend, a squabble with his wife, a little slowness in paying bills, sometimes a scratched fender while driving, but nothing serious.

It is at about this time that sheer horror enters his life. The physical side of alcoholism appears. Some very remarkable clinical work has recently been done in this field. Consistent abnormalities in the adrenal cortex have been found to exist in drunkards. Perhaps it is too early to know whether this phenomenon has been there all the time, or is a psychosomatic result of the man's life tensions. However, whether a congenital or an acquired defect, the effect is the same.

The poor chap, along about this time in his drinking career develops what we loosely call the alcoholic allergy. It is an allergy in the sense that he finds out, rather suddenly, that now when alcohol is introduced into his system, he is no more able to stop drinking than would a hay fever sufferer, by an act of will, be able to stop his sneezing when the ragweed pollen begins flying about in autumn.

Up until this time each high, wide and fancy evening has been an episode, terminated when he finally got to bed that night, and definitely over with until he started drinking again. But now all is changed. It is impossible for him to stop. He takes his first "morning after" drink — to be followed with another gargantuan shot a half hour later, and by 9 a.m. he is drunk again. It becomes a continuous performance. Thus what had formerly been just an occasional wild night, now becomes a two-day, a three-day,

a four-day drunk; a two-week, a three-week, a four-week drunk

In brief periods of half-sobriety, he *recognizes* with mounting fear that he is in grave condition. Lacking any understanding of the problem, he can only apply to himself the cruelest of all human fallacies — applying a moral judgment to a neurotic problem. The natural result of this is a degree of self-loathing a normal person cannot even faintly glimpse. This is followed by a sort of panic — “if other people find out what I know about myself, the game is up.” He begins talking big to try to cover it up. There is nothing phonier in this world than the brassy, arrogant, domineering manner of an alcoholic. The world says, “did you ever see such conceit!” If they only knew! Actually he is suffering from a complete prostration of self-confidence. This is the final phase. The alcoholic has entered the spiral that leads to bedlam a death sentence, or the booby hatch.

In the eight years after the multiple deaths in the family, and the *de facto* near total estrangement from his wife Helen, Ken kept drinking more and more heavily, until it was finally completely out of control. A close friend in A.A. said that the family first attempted to cope with him by getting a man to drive the car for Ken when he went out to his club to drink, to chauffeur him, wait around while he drank, and finally pour him into the car and get him back home again.

Most alcoholics do not have the luxury of being their own boss, or having a family which has both the money and the willingness to provide a discreet private club and a chauffeur-driven car. Later on, in his recovery, Ken was vividly aware of what happens to most alcoholics at that point:

The rather casual little difficulties which he has experienced in the past as a result of his drinking are nothing compared to the serious jams he gets into now. He begins to lose jobs. One by one his friends wash their hands of him with cold finality. His domestic difficulties become impossible. He gets into debt, he starts to have brushes with the law and spends an occasional night in jail. He begins to lie and chisel to obtain more whiskey and ends up slyly stealing it. Each prolonged drinking bout cuts deeper into his physical resources. He begins to know the horrors of delirium tremens. He is definitely upon the final road to deterioration, physical and mental, which is going to lead to death.

Even in his privileged situation, that was nevertheless where Ken also was ultimately going. With most people, the steady, progressive degeneration which untreated alcoholism produces eventually kills them (there was a 40% early mortality rate among the subjects in one long term study made by the editor of this book) or puts them behind bars for the rest of their lives. In the latter case, it will be prison for some, mental hospitals for others, but it will be a locked room where somebody else has the key. According to one of his old A.A. friends, Ken's family had finally fallen into total despair over his drinking, and had already gotten the legal papers signed to commit him involuntarily to an insane asylum, when the salvation of A.A. was brought to him.

There are alcoholics who hit their bottom with everything external lost: the once-successful businessman fired from his job, divorced by his wife, shunned by his children, drinking wine out of a paper bag, sleeping on park benches and going to rescue missions for soup, or thrown in jail for driving under the influence, or sent to prison for crimes which he committed in a drunken rage, or to get

money to buy more booze. These alcoholics, consumed with self-pity, like to pretend that if they got their job or their spouse back, or if certain people hadn't "had it in for them," that they would be able to control their drinking and not get in trouble again.

But Ken had the wife, the family, the job, the prestige, and everyone around him trying vainly to take care of him and cover for him and protect him, and he still drank uncontrollably anyway. The moral here is simple and obvious — when newcomers stagger into an A.A. meeting, and start insisting that "if I could just get a job that paid X amount of money again, I would be able to pull myself together," or "if my wife (or other people) would just give me some real love and sympathy, I wouldn't be driven to drink like this," or "if I could just get enough sex I wouldn't have to drown my sorrows this way" (a truly champion line!) — the old-timers just smile, if they do not outright laugh in the person's face. Alcoholics will drink just as much even if they have all the other things they want.

Ken seemed to have everything, in terms of external things, and yet he was drinking himself to death and destroying everything he held dear, compulsively and uncontrollably. Not enough will-power? This is a myth that non-alcoholics often cling to. Look at the will-power this superachiever had displayed, and look at the work loads he had carried on his shoulders. Lack of moral fiber? He was a pillar of his community, a responsible, caring, compassionate man. The puzzle of alcoholism cannot be solved by any of these naive falsifications.

Failure to receive competent psychotherapy to work through his real inner problems? He had been going to an excellent conventional psychiatrist for years, and anyone who knew Ken M. would have been forced to have admitted that he was the kind of person who would be doing his level best to let the psychotherapy work. We have talked about his dysfunctional family background,

and the traumatic year of 1935 — and they were in fact a part of the net in which he was now ensnared — but there was in addition some mysterious X-factor at work which conventional psychotherapy, psychiatry, and psychology could not deal with. No psychoanalytic insight, no behavior modification, no cognitive restructuring, no hypnotically-induced suggestion or neurolinguistic programming, no Gestalt or existential therapy could, in and of itself, save him from his doom.

In fact, in later years, as a hobby, Ken began practicing psychotherapy himself in his spare time (no licensing or academic degrees were required in that era). He took on non-alcoholic patients with a fascinating variety of neuroses and psychological problems, saw them for counseling sessions on a regular basis, and in fact achieved an extremely high cure rate. There were a number of people in South Bend who regarded Ken as their savior, and justifiably so. In other words, it is clear that his own knowledge of psychiatry and psychology was of a professional level. And yet, even someone who knew as much as he did, could not solve the problem of his own alcoholism by the use of conventional psychiatric and psychological methods.

A.A. people tell newcomers that they must ultimately deal with issues like the ones Ken was saddled with — early childhood traumas, deaths, unhappy marriages, and so on — when they do their fourth and fifth steps, and their eighth and ninth steps. But they do not let the new person play the game of saying over and over that this is “why I drink,” and they get very visibly annoyed with men or women who try to pull that excuse for too long. The reason “why I drink” (to an alcoholic who is willing to act like a responsible, mature, adult) has to be only because “I am an alcoholic, and that is the way alcoholics are always tempted to deal with all life problems.” Rehearsing the minute details of some of the

psychological problems that helped send me down the path to chronic alcoholism can never, in and of itself, enable me to walk the path of recovery. Alcoholism is not healed by insight therapies *per se*. Good psychotherapy can make many alcoholics' lives far happier (after they are already basically in recovery), and can help to mitigate the psychological forces that can drive the person to relapse. But nothing that has been said about Ken's early life, and the crisis of 1935, should be taken to imply that resolving these issues would have stopped him from drinking alcoholically.

Ken drank uncontrollably because he was quite literally totally powerless to stop drinking. It was bizarre, it was irrational, it was incomprehensible to normal people. But no human power on earth could have saved him from ending up six feet underground or locked up behind bars for the rest of his life, and by early 1943, it was going to be a matter of days, weeks, or months at most — not years — before that came to pass.

The first of the twelve steps in the Alcoholics Anonymous program forces the newcomer to grasp the total illogic of his dilemma firmly: he cannot triumph until he surrenders, he cannot win until he admits total defeat. The words in which the first step is phrased are very simple:

We admitted we were powerless over alcohol — that our lives had become unmanageable.

To those who do not understand what this kind of powerlessness and unmanageability mean in the twelve-step program, Ken's life at this point in time illustrates perfectly the dreadful reality that these words point to.

Part Three

Nick K.'s Early Life: From the Orphanage to the Penitentiary

Chapter 9

The Brave Young Man Who Didn't Even Cry

If Ken M. was the alcoholic who seemed to have had all of life's successes, and was able to fend off the final end until he was in his early fifties, Nick Kowalski was the other kind of alcoholic, the sort that begins to get into very serious trouble almost immediately. And the jams he got into kept on getting worse, so that by the time he was in his late twenties, the young Nick found himself a convict locked up in the Indiana State Prison at Michigan City, facing a life sentence for the bungling murder of another man after he fell into a drunken rage while drinking in the sleazy bars of the red light district in South Bend, Indiana. It is doubtful if many of the non-alcoholics who knew Nick at that time regarded him as anything but a born loser.

Yet both Ken and Nick would have insisted that they were brothers under the skin, and that the similarities of their fundamental problems, their feelings, their longings, and their fears, were of enormously much greater importance than any surface differences in their lives. Over and over, newcomers to A.A. are told, "*Don't compare*": when you listen to other alcoholics talk about themselves, don't look for differences in the attempt to "prove" to yourself that, since "I'm not like him or her in this respect or that respect," therefore I must not be an alcoholic like they are. Listen hard for

places where you *know* that you *understand perfectly*, exactly what that other alcoholic was *feeling* in the situation he is describing. If you can genuinely hear just one or two tiny things like that in an hour-long meeting, this is an important part of what is eventually going to heal your soul.

Ken M., like other recovering alcoholics in A.A., knew good and well that the young Nick, and people like him, were not at all irredeemable “born losers.” The real Nick, down at his core, was an extraordinarily good and sensitive person — and those A.A. people who had some real recovery behind them had grown enough spiritually themselves that they could look at Nick with the eyes of the spirit, and see that decent, caring person locked inside. It was the liquor that did the evil and destructive deeds, and the alcoholism that imprisoned the real Nick down in the dungeon-depths of his own soul.

Within a year after Ken M. started the A.A. movement in South Bend, he and others whom he had brought in during that first year (like Harry Stevens in particular) had figured out a way to reach out to the young Nick in his prison cell and turn his life around. Nick changed so much that he ended up being released when he was around 42, and quickly became one of the legendary figures in A.A., not only in South Bend, Indiana, but in that whole area of the upper midwest. When he finally died of Lou Gehrig’s disease on May 6, 1989, at the age of around 77, the same epitaph could have been written for him that could have been placed on Ken M.’s grave:

This good man literally saved the lives of thousands of people with his example, his spirituality, his wisdom, and his compassion.

Nick talked a lot about his life in a lead he gave at Ann Arbor, Michigan on February 26, 1976, that was recorded on tape.²⁵ There were gales of laughter sweeping the audience repeatedly through his tale. This is one of the things that so often surprises the downcast drunk who staggers into his first A.A. meeting — even years later they comment on it — the smiles on everyone’s faces and the easy laughter. Nick talked about that too in his lead:

It’s great to laugh! I was just listening to a tape the other day, about a girl named Edith from up in Detroit some of you know — you know old Edith M. — and she says in there about “the great, wonderful laughter of people in the program of Alcoholics Anonymous.” And I really think it’s kind of the open heart thing. But she says, you know, that we don’t laugh because our life prior to coming into the program was so hilarious. We can laugh about some of the things that happen today — but [our past life] was not hilarious, and I’m a member of this lodge.

Laughter can be healing. There is a famous report of one well-known individual who totally healed himself of a disease which the doctors said would kill him by reading books of humor and watching light comedies on television, and learning to laugh and *enjoy life* again.

But it is especially important for the alcoholic, because the disease in this case produces (at the psychological level) an ego run riot. Nothing punctures an arrogant, pompous ass so quickly as laughing at him. When a self-righteous, know-it-all Pharisee in the audience would heckle Jesus while he was preaching, the great master of the spirit would toss out a quick, humorous response that would instantly have the whole crowd simply laughing at the Pharisee.

Alcoholism is a three-fold disease, a sickness of the body, the psyche, and the spirit. In order to heal the psychological and spiritual components of the disease, alcoholics need above all to learn *to stop taking themselves so seriously*. So in an A.A. meeting there are smiles on people's faces, and there is a quick, easy, charming laughter rippling lightly through the room. Over and over, recovering alcoholics remember this from the first A.A. meeting they went to, and they remember also that the gentle smiles and easygoing laughter represented something totally different than they had ever seen before, and they recall that at some level they recognized even on that first encounter that it was the divine laughter of heaven, relaxed and *without fear*, and that it represented real hope and genuine salvation.

Nick was born at St. Xavier Mission in San Bernardino, California, on November 8, around the year 1911. His father was an itinerant stone-carver, who traveled around working on churches. His mother died of influenza during the great killer flu epidemic that swept over the entire world in 1918-20 (it killed twenty-two million people around the globe) and Nick, who remembered being around six years old or so, was sent off to an orphanage for a number of years, until his father remarried. This is the way Nick recounted the tale, there at Ann Arbor in 1976:

My name is Nick Kowalski, and I'm an alcoholic. Hi, gang! I'm real glad to be here, and it's just great to see such a happy feeling. Isn't it just great to laugh and enjoy an evening! I hate to spoil it for you, but I'm going to give you some time to sit back and kind of get comfortable and relaxed, because I try (I hope with the grace of God) to talk with some enthusiasm about this program.

And I've often been told that I talk at great length. In fact, I just told Don, the last time I talked in Chicago, when I got done there was only one guy left down there. *[Laughter]* I thought that was mighty nice of him, I bent down to thank him. He said, "You dirty dog, I'm the next speaker!" *[Long laughter]* . . .

My name is Nick Kowalski, I repeat again. Tonight I can say with your help, that I'm an ex-thief, ex-murderer, ex-con, ex-alcoholic — *today*. The titles are mine — I'm a thief, and a murderer, and alcoholic — the ex's are provided by a simple twelve-step program that's available to anybody, if they can take that first step, turn their will and their life over to the care of God, follow down through. And I can't tell you how to do that in your case. But if you'll hang around your group, you'll get enough ideas and suggestions that you can work out a program for what you have to do.

So you see, what a kind of remarkable thing — it's always amazed me when I'm asked to talk, because, if you think about it — the lady next door to me says, "You look like the devil. Your eyebrows grow up, and you've got them mean blue eyes, and that chin whiskers." She said, "I took a picture of you one day, and I scare my kids in the house with it." *[Laughter]* I think he was a good companion of mine at one time, not because I wanted him so much, because he for some reason needed me, and he used me.

In order to tell you a little bit about, you know . . . so that we see the power of this program, that you can apply, any one of you . . . I have to tell you a little bit about my past. I hope I don't get hung up there, but the thing about it is that . . .

I was born in San Bernardino. I just retired. I don't know why, I can't support my family now, I put my wife to work! But I just retired, and I had to prove my age, and I

couldn't prove it. There's no record of my birth. I was born in a mission in San Bernardino, California, in St. Xavier Mission, and the old priest and the few nuns that were there, they didn't keep records. And so they had a heck of a time proving that I was even alive. Most of what they used were police records, and the dates on them that run back for some forty or fifty years, and they finally accepted those as [establishing] the fact that I was telling the truth — that at least I'd been born, and I'd been around a long time, and they're going to let me retire somehow.

In the process of being born — my mother died when I was about six, and I don't want to take you through a whole horror story — but I just want to show you some of the impressions that I gained about *me*. And I don't want you to go home and compare them, and say, "Hell, I ain't no orphan, and I didn't think like that cat — I'm not an alcoholic."

An alcoholic is anybody who drinks to the point where it adversely — it *adversely affects* — your love life, your work life, your worship, or your image of yourself. And you try to erase that by stopping drinking, and you find out you can't do it. I don't care whether that's six bottles of beer, or sixty bottles of beer! I don't care what it is, under what conditions, when or whether you drank every day, or If you do it, and you find out that you can "stop" all the time, but you *never quit* drinking, then you belong here. At least you should hear this, and you should try to put a different spirit in the place of that spirit that somehow made life possible for me for a number of years.

So I just want to show you that my [own fourth step] inventory brought out some things I had never stopped to see before, because I lost *initially*, when my mother died, the ability to communicate with people. And I think that happens to a good many of us in different fashions. I could play all the roles, and play the games, and talk anything you

wanted to talk about, but I couldn't *really* talk about what was on my heart or my mind with any honesty, and I couldn't *understand* it.

One thing I remember about my mother's funeral was I stood there by the casket, and I was all dressed up, and I was wondering why she don't get up and fix breakfast! She's only been gone a couple of days. And they told me she was away somewhere on a trip, and somebody patted me on the head kindly, and said, "He's sure a brave young man! He don't even cry." And that kind of hung in my mind — I don't know why I was supposed to cry, but I didn't, and I was "a brave young man."

This was one of Nick K.'s central themes in this particular talk: "He's sure a brave young man! He don't even cry." In the childhoods of most alcoholics you find horrifying situations, where the small child's mind is totally incapable of handling the pain, the fear, the grief, the agonizing feeling of total helplessness. And the child is given no true opportunity to talk about these feelings — there is no one there, or you are instantly put down and shamed for talking about it, or (particularly with incest victims) you are threatened with dire punishments if you dare speak of what was done to you at all. For safety's sake, the little child must pretend to himself or herself that the feelings do not even exist inside.

Alcoholics so often pride themselves, above all, on being brave and self-reliant, on solving their own problems without ever asking for help, on being "survivors." But that is one of the roots of their sickness. They were never really allowed to be helpless children, they were never permitted to really cry. There would be no nurturing, parental figure to hear it and respond with love. We simply assumed that God — if there was such a being — could be no different.

“He’s sure a brave young man! He don’t even cry.” All their lives, alcoholics tried their hardest to be brave — because they were mortally afraid ever to let go totally and truly cry. And the people around them actually praised them for being “brave” and being “self-reliant” and for “solving their own problems.”

And people told them all sorts of other things while they were children: “you’re stupid,” “no one cares what you think,” “you’re fat,” “you have a big nose” or “ears that stick out” or “a receding chin,” “no girl (or boy) would ever want to kiss you,” “you’ll end up just like your father” (or your mother, or your no good Uncle Beauregard), or “you’ll never learn in school.” The people who said these heartless and cruel things were often other children — the ones who were marginal themselves, trying desperately hard to continue to be accepted in the “in” group, and filled with a deep inner fear about “not being good enough” themselves — trying desperately hard to maintain their own fragile sense of acquired status by attacking others.

And alcoholics are so cut off from other people, that one single cruel negative remark like that from one marginal individual on just one occasion will be taken to heart as a true statement of who they are. Even if the statement is not true at all, and even if most of the other people around them do not think of them that way at all, the alcoholic is so afraid of genuinely talking to other people that he will never even check with anyone else to see if that characterization is so.

And so a single unthinking remark, by a couple of people who in this case were not really bad persons at all, set Nick on the tragic, ever more closed-off course of life he was to follow for many years afterwards: “He’s sure a brave young man! He don’t even cry.” He heard it first at his mother’s funeral, and then again a second time when he was abandoned at the orphanage:

About a year later, my dad dropped us off in an orphanage in Tucson, Arizona, and a little nun who became my mother and father, said, “Boy, he’s sure a brave young man! He don’t even cry.” I was watching the old man go down the street in that old Dodge, kind a’ wondering where the hell he’s going. Who’s these weird looking penguins? [*Sympathetic laughter*] But “a brave young man don’t cry.”

Now that locked into my mind, and I think most of us who are alcoholic somehow lock an image [of ourselves like that, one which will end up destroying us]. There’s an old line from school says “sticks and stones will break my bones, but names will never hurt me” — but names *hurt me*. You know why? Because I accepted what you said to me, and it’d lie on my soul, and I never *talked* about it, I just accepted it.

So I had this little tragedy, so “a brave young man don’t cry.” Now if you think about that a minute, it meant I never got — from that moment on — deeply involved with anybody. ‘Cause if you get really deeply involved, you’re gonna have some happiness, you’re gonna have some tears, you’re gonna have joys and all of these extreme emotions. And I couldn’t handle that, because “a brave young man don’t cry.” And every time I got involved with somebody, I got involved with laughing and crying, and that wasn’t “a brave young man.” So I quit getting deeply involved. That was the beginning, I think, of a different kind of life.

The traditional psychotherapies of the early and mid-twentieth century were insight therapies. If patients could learn to intellectually analyze the original childhood sources of their problems in enough detail, then freedom and healing would follow. Or this was at least what their psychotherapeutic theories said was

supposed to happen. But alcoholism is a disease above all of *frozen feelings*, rigidified into extremely destructive behavior patterns. The early A.A. movement realized that you heal *sick* feelings not with intellectual explanations, but by replacing them with big, full blown *healthy* feelings. This had been the contribution to western spiritual teaching of St. Augustine, the great African saint:²⁶ serenity is not *apatheia* (if that word is translated as “apathy,” the absence of all strong emotion). True serenity is instead *eupatheia*, learning to feel our emotions fully while also learning how to attach them to the appropriate objects, and in a *balanced* way.²⁷

A.A. did the same thing with the concept of a Higher Power. They were not at all interested in intellectualized and rationalized doctrines of God. They agreed with the Lutheran pietist movement (which they had learned about through Frank Buchman)²⁸ and the Methodists (we remember that most A.A. people used *The Upper Room* as their primary meditational work during the early period, from 1935 down to 1948, and prayed from it every morning).²⁹ They believed that we came in contact with the living presence of God at the level of *Gefühl*, of feeling, and not through intellectual theories and explanations, or mechanical ritualism.

So alcoholism is a disease of *frozen feelings*, of fear of all genuine emotions, that locks the real self into some totally isolated inner region of the mind, and quickly loses itself in thinking and theorizing and surface impressions and phoniness:

I played all the surface games, and I started *immediately* to live most of my life in my mind. And I would, when I met you, start to think what kind of a guy you were, and what kind of responses I had to make to you, and what kind of person would appeal to you, and I tried to be *that* person. And this developed for me very rapidly into the kind of

thing where, if I stood around with a priest when he'd come to the orphanage, I always stood like *this*, so he knew I was a praying man! [*Laughter*]

By the same token, if we was down back of the barn, and the tough guys were there, I rolled my shoulders and pretended I didn't give a damn, and I wouldn't take a damn, and I'd do anything anybody else would. And they usually challenged me to make it come true, and I had to do it till I was scared to death. *You* know! If you had money, I'd rattle the few nickels I had, and try to impress you with my ability. If you asked me about atomic power, I'd explain it to you — I never got out of the eighth grade, but I'd explain it to you! I had to try to appeal to something that I seen in you.

And by the same token, if you really offered me friendship, and came at me, I think out of this — kind of what they call a primary alcoholic [set of personality problems], the guy who's really sick inside — kind of came the responses. And if you came at me and tried to be my friend, or felt or seen something that I couldn't see, and opened your hand to me, I kind of would hesitate, [and I had to] refuse it. I was talking to a girl the other night: she said if somebody touched her, she'd jump. Well, I was like that, I was always on guard. I never assumed you'd touch me in friendship, and I was always on guard.

And if you kept coming at me, with all the best intentions in the world, I'd hurt you, 'cause I couldn't handle the emotions involved, and the best thing was to turn it back. And then I had a new kind of pain, the kind of thing called isolation and loneliness — a terrible, frightening kind of loneliness. It was like standing outside of the world, and watch the world go on. And I was a part of *none* of it.

Because *everyone* who is an alcoholic has basic, root, fundamental problems in dealing with other human beings openly and easily, *everyone* who is an alcoholic has problems somewhere with *sex*, and with forming stable sexual relationships. It can take the form of blatant, compulsive promiscuity; of bizarre private sexual practices; of continually being trapped into relationships involving physical or gross psychological abuse; of turning into a sexually frigid, isolated loner — one way or another the sexual and relationship problems are going to emerge. Part of the Fourth and Fifth Steps is getting the alcoholic to look at these problems openly for the first time, in a non-shaming context, so that the powerful healing process of the program can start to work here too.

At first, admitting to another human being what the real problems are in this area can be the most humiliating thing the man or woman has ever experienced. But if the right kind of A.A. sponsor or spiritual guide has been chosen — someone who really works the program, and actually displays the kind of serenity the program produces — to the person's surprise, the admission is not met with horror or shock or rejection, or a denial that it really happened, or any other kind of shaming behavior. And so the deep sense of helpless, total personal shame begins to evaporate away in a positive and healing fashion. And finally the recovering alcoholics get to the point where they can talk openly about their own most deeply humiliating experiences in a lead before a large audience of other recovering people.

This is not the same as being encouraged to flaunt our own dysfunctions in a brazenly defiant and hyper-aggressive way, where we are attempting to anger and shock others in a way guaranteed to provoke a negative reaction, as some very bad psychotherapists tell their patients to do. This is not being told to parade around publicly holding a large sign on a pole that says something like "I am a shoe

fetishist and *proud of it*.” A good twelve step program that is working right is instead operating to cleanse and heal the toxic shame into which these experiences locked us: the inner sense that I AM a bad and shameful person, that this is my ownmost personal identity, and that I am not only fatally flawed *as a person*, but that there is nothing I could ever do about it. As long as I believe this, I cannot ever let anyone else get close to me as a person, because once the other person discovers “who I really am,” this other human being will of course reject me on the spot. A good twelve step program teaches us to say, “this is what I did — I don’t have to keep it a deep, dark secret anymore, and I do not feel humiliated to the base of my personal existence any more by the fact that I did it — but I’m beginning to recover now, and (with God’s help) to put that part of my past behind.”

Nick talked openly and unashamedly in that lead about the way he believed when he was a young man that no girl could ever really be attracted to him, and the way that he had been made to believe — by a single chance remark — that he was some kind of deformed freak, who never ever dared let anyone see him without being fully clothed. He had come to be fundamentally shamed by *being in his own body*.

Some of you, I suppose, especially the Al-Anon people, wonder why I was never People like me are never glib at parties. We *want* to go, and we *talk* about it, and we get all ready — and never get there. I was the kind of guy, even in an orphanage — if they had a little, some kind of due-age or birthday or something, and dragged me — and I was the guy they always brought in by the ear. [*Laughter*] They had to go hunting for him. When they brought him in, then they had brought in a girl, who was usually the tallest,

fattest, skinniest, and most bow-legged in the school, and they held us like *this*. She was just like me, and they held us together like *this*, and they said, “Nick, this is Mary, have fun.” [*Laughter*] And they turned us loose, and I went out the window, and she went out the door! [*Laughter*] There was *no way* of staying there!

And you know, I . . . in A.A., I know I’ve met some of those gals, who felt *inside* like that: like they were awkward or tall or something, and had to get out of the room too, so I make amends for snubbing them. So I usually say at meetings, in deference to them, that there was not one thing on earth at that time I would have liked more than to stay there, and I wouldn’t have give a tinker’s dam whether they were tall, fat, or whatever — just that I had had a good time (whatever that meant, and I didn’t know), and that I would have left feeling that she *liked me*.

That’s something I never really . . . I was always involved with thinking about it, but I never accepted that anybody really liked me, and cared about me. And so I really would have loved to have stayed, but I couldn’t do it. Something was wrong inside of *me*.

And I built a whole bunch of misshapen images, and *never checked them out*, you see. For example — I’ve told it before — I’ve got some crooked bones in my chest and in my side. One day I’m down at the old swimming hole we had, and somebody says to me, “You’re *pigeon-chested*.” [*Sympathetic laughter*] And I said, “What’s that?” He said, “Well, you’re *pigeon-chested*, you’re a freak!” [*More laughter*]

I didn’t go to anybody and say, “Hey, I think I’m a freak.” I just covered myself up and didn’t go swimming! [*Laughter*] I gave up basketball. I was a

queer! I didn't know what that meant, but I was one of 'em. [*Laughter*] And I lived quietly.

Now it didn't beat me entirely. A guy — a friend of mine — says that the terrible things that happened to us in our drinking days was not the death that came at the end. It was the million little deaths, the giving up of things that we wanted. The starting in school, the brilliant ideas, the great things we were going to do — and letting the booze lead us away from it.

I didn't go check, I just accepted it. I became known as a "turtle." I went in swimming before anybody else, and I stayed out in the middle till everybody left, and then I come in. So I got a title out of that: "turtle." I could swim forever, they said. But it was all built on false premises, because I didn't want you to see my chest.

Some thirty-five or forty years later, in prison one time a doctor said to me, "Where were you raised?" and I told him, and he said, "Man, you sure had rickets bad. Very bad. Your bones never set till you were about twelve." That's the reason they were crooked: they were soft. Well, I could *accept* that. And I could have done that years ago, and just accepted the fact that I had been unfortunate to have some crooked bones, and went on and become a great swimmer or football player or something. But I didn't do that. I just avoided, and I *hid*.

The poor little boy, consigned at an early age to an orphanage where they could not afford to give the children an adequate diet — and in an era before people really realized the importance of vitamins and a well-balanced diet in childhood development — had suffered as a result from a severe Vitamin D deficiency, from which he had developed rickets at the period when his bones were forming.

It was no one's fault in the sense that no one had done this to him consciously and maliciously, it had just happened that way. And it certainly did not mean that he himself was intrinsically flawed as a person — doomed to be a freak, a sissy, a revoltingly ugly person who would never achieve anything positive. He mentions that some of the girls at the orphanage had bow legs — they too had suffered (without anyone there realizing what was going on) from the very same vitamin deficiency in the meager diet which was all the impoverished nuns who ran the orphanage could afford to give them.

Now with this kind of tension, this kind of pressure . . .
 A young lady sitting here just said a while ago, when they told her she was an alcoholic, she was *real pleased*, because it raised her social status about three degrees! [*Laughter*] I kind of like that! When you live with this kind of pressure, if it hadn't have been for booze, I'd have been insane long before this. Booze is the name of my disease, and alcoholism — I'm alcoholic, I certainly am — but alcohol was my attempt to find an *answer*.

So Nick K. as a young boy, just like the little Ken M., was already totally embarked on his tragic life script long before he ever touched the first drop of liquor. In A.A., the purpose of reviewing the past is not to feel sorry for oneself, not to figure out “who to blame” (a father, a mother, a racist or sexist culture, or whatever). It is not necessary to intellectually work out all the minute details of what happened and when and why. It is essential only to identify enough about what kind of sickness it embedded in my personality to enable me to pray adequately, in the Seventh Step, for God to start healing me and turning me into a very different kind of person — the good-hearted and lovable little child of God — whom I truly am down deep, and in reality always have been.

It's hard to pray to God effectively to heal something when I am asking him to heal a thing that is the exact opposite of the real problem: then, every time God tries to help me, I get in his way and block him, because I think he's not really answering my prayer. The little boy Nick would have foolishly prayed to be harder and tougher, cruder and more insensitive in his dealings with girls, handsomer and more physically attractive. But these weren't the problems at all. God does not ask us to figure out all these things perfectly, just to get a slightly more adequate idea of where our problems are really coming from, and then to be ready and willing to let him help us and heal us in the way he knows will work best, instead of us continually telling him what to do and getting in his way and blocking all his divine healing from working.

It should be mentioned that one delightful irony in what Nick was talking about here — the reason for the uproarious gales of laughter at certain points — was that, after Nick had been in A.A. for a while, and after God had started healing some of these misimpressions he had formed about himself, it turned out that one of his greatest problems over the rest of his life was that *he was in fact almost irresistibly attractive to women!* If there was any personal problem which some A.A. members might have felt that Nick never totally came to grips with, it was the fact that all too many women would fall all over themselves when he barely looked in their direction, and that he perhaps (in the judgment of some) was involved in all too many relationships with a multitude of women in the latter years of his life. At his funeral, Nick's friends had to offer condolences not only to the woman to whom he was married, who had taken her stand by his coffin, but also to Molly, the woman Nick had actually been living with, who had in turn taken her stand at the front door to the funeral home.

Brooklyn Bob in particular felt that the way Nick was living with Molly at the end of his life was an outrage to all true twelve step morality. But the majority of the A.A. people felt enormous gratitude to Nick for what he had taught them about the spiritual life, and felt a deep compassion for all the people involved, including not only Nick's wife, but also Molly, who was loved by everyone in the program who knew her. And so they simply said, "We all have feet of clay. Once I did my fourth and eighth steps, I realized that I was not fit, and never would be, to sit in judgment in that kind of way over any other human being in this world." On the other hand, I think that nearly all the good old-timers would have also agreed with that wise and good Methodist preacher Charlie Cook, who was the minister at St. Paul's back in the 1970's. Charlie told me once that, based on his many years of pastoral experience, "I have never seen a married person have an affair with someone else without at least one person being terribly hurt before it was all over." And these good old-timers would have advised A.A. members who were tempted that direction with a one-word piece of firm advice: "Don't."

But the people at the conference where Nick was speaking were also able to laugh with him about the absurdity of the way his life had turned out. One of the big reasons A.A. people laugh so much, is that they have come to understand how incredibly silly so many of the things are which we human beings do to ourselves, and all unnecessarily. A.A. is different from any of the other great historical spiritual disciplines of human history (except perhaps Judaism at times), in that very many A.A. people are convinced that the Higher Power itself laughs with us. God created angels to act like angels, and he loves them when they act like good angels. But God also created monkeys, and he loves them too, and a band of monkeys in action can be one of the funniest things to watch you have ever seen. God created human beings too — and not to be angels but to be

human beings. A group of human beings trying to do something together can sometimes be more laughable even than a barrel full of monkeys. Maybe this is why God loves drunks. Drunks can do outrageously funny things.

Even in recovery (or perhaps especially in recovery) alcoholics go at life with a kind of passion and outrageously unconventional behavior that makes ordinary human beings seem incredibly dull and boring by comparison. Like St. Francis of Assisi and his early followers, or like the Hasidic Jews of eighteenth-century central Europe, they still in recovery do things which ordinary people would never dare to do, things that even sometimes seem to normal people to be totally crazy — but sometimes also filled with a larger-than-life love that makes the apparent craziness actually work, so that it does great deeds for God.

Many people in A.A. are convinced that God himself has a marvelous sense of humor, and that some of his greatest acts of grace come when he pokes us in the ribs, so to speak, and makes us start laughing ourselves — laughing uproariously at our own, all-too-human silliness, and suddenly finding ourselves miraculously freed as a result from what would otherwise have been the tragic consequences of our own foolishness.

A.A. people firmly resist the notion of there ever being A.A. “saints.” To those who are already all too prone to flights of egotism and arrogance, nothing could be more dangerous than being tempted to regard oneself in such a fashion. But if there were such a thing, we would have to call them the Laughing Saints: the fearless ones who go nonchalantly where others fear to tread, who move through danger, peril, and chaos with a laugh and a calm smile of quiet confidence, and who have gained that deepest peace of soul through putting the tyranny of the self to rest.

Chapter 10

Black Fig Wine and Jail Cells

After Nick had spent seven or eight years in the orphanage, his father remarried, and Nick went to live with him and his new stepmother. He was around fourteen or fifteen. His lead at Ann Arbor in 1976 continued the tale at that point.³⁰ Having to learn to deal with his father again was not easy.

The Prohibition Era had begun when Nick was nine years old, and from then until he was twenty-two, the sale or use of alcoholic beverages was outlawed throughout the United States. But in the Polish immigrant world in which his father lived, drinking was part of the social life of the culture, so Nick's father had learned to deal with the anti-liquor law by brewing his own beer, and by making a thick, dark, sweet wine out of figs, all of which he kept down in his basement. And Nick's dad viewed the ability to drink alcoholic beverages in large quantities — and still somehow or other stagger around and function — as a measure of being a worthwhile human being.

Many people have a very adverse physical reaction to something like strawberries or milk or ragweed pollen or bee stings, and we simply write it off as “an allergy” and do not harass them. There are people who reach the point where a single bee sting can kill them. Neither poor young Nick nor anyone around him realized that ten percent of the human race really cannot physiologically handle

alcohol ingestion very well, that in this portion of the population it produces a progressively more toxic reaction over the years, and that Nick was one of that quite sizable segment of the human race. But the teen-aged Nick was led to believe beyond a doubt that the ability to drink large quantities of alcohol and to “hold your liquor” was necessary proof of your manhood and your adulthood. Only a “sissy” or worse would refuse to drink.

Not only that, Nick’s dad was a colorful figure who seemed always to meet the world head-on: forceful, outgoing, gregarious, gifted with an apparently indomitable self-confidence and self-assurance. He loved to be around people, he appeared to thrive on it, and no matter how many people were around — whether old friends or total strangers — he always seemed perfectly at ease. He seemed to radiate an air of “you will like and accept me the way I am, or there’s something seriously wrong with *you*,” and this was not at all the way Nick felt about himself. He felt totally cut off from the rest of the human race, miserably lonely and rejected, and yet when he was put with other people, the strain of that wore him out, and he walked away feeling even more a failure. And in his defeat, he felt as though he was nothing more than a tremendous disappointment to his dad.

My father . . . was a big six-foot, four-inch Polack who made . . . more black fig wine and home brew than anybody in the state of Indiana who never *sold* a bottle. He had connections with some priests for the big quart ginger ale bottles. He dearly loved people. He had crocks going in the basement all the time: one cooking, and one half done, and one finished. And we sat down there — he held us by the ear — and we capped the old bottles, and he put ’em in the cupboard, and it had to be the right temperature, and he took a hell of a lot better care of them than he did his new

wife, I tell you that! *[Laughter]* He heard one go off at night, and he was down there! *[Laughter]*

And he dearly loved people. I think one of the tragedies was — he and I had horrible times — but was that I couldn't be like he was. If he met you, he would invite you over.

If you sold the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, and you came in the house, he'd say . . . first thing he'd do, is pour you some home brew and gave you a glass of that thick wine. And if you were a smart salesman, you'd drink 'em both, and say, "That was the best stuff I ever drank." He bought the encyclopedias! *[Laughter]*

But don't you say, "I don't drink." He said, "There's something suspicious about a man who can't relax and have a little drink. *Don't trust him!*" And out of the house you went. If you was giving away gold bricks, he wouldn't buy 'em." *[Laughter]*

Every Saturday night was party night, and they had the guitars here. They had an old hunchback played the concertina. He invited all his friends over, and they drank home brew and — in those days, it was before all you women got liberated — and the women stayed in the kitchen and cooked. And the guys got half-bombed, and went out there and ate, and *then* the women come in, and got half-bombed too. And they drank and danced the polka, and patted each other's wives on the rump, and had a great big fight about two o'clock in the morning. *[Extended hearty laughter]*

It was a great life! And the next day, you know, he'd say, "You see what you done to me? But I'll get you next week!" It was really kind of a rich, rewarding life! *[Loud laughter]* . . . AND I NEVER FIT INTO THAT.

Nick did not know how to deal with that earthy and apparently simple world, where male-female relationships seemed to be so

natural and free and unselfconscious, and where some people got in *a little bit of trouble at times*, but always seemed to know *how and when to stop* before they ended up fired from a job, committing an act of serious physical violence, or being thrown in jail.

Moreover, Nick had gone to live with his father and his new step-mother just as he arrived at the age when boys first truly begin to discover girls. The orphanage had given him no clues about how to form healthy relationships with members of the opposite sex. He did not seem to fit into the hearty Polish immigrant lifestyle at all. Adolescence quickly became for him a torment and a misery to which he could discover no workable solution.

When I came out of the orphanage, I was now fourteen or fifteen, trying to . . . everybody's talking about dating girls, and I can't date 'em! I'm too bashful to date a girl. I asked them, I dreamt about them, and I never went. Never had a date. So! And never had any success, once drunk, by the way! [*Hearty laughter*]

But anyhow, I couldn't. I could dream. I lived up here [*pointing to his head*], in illusion and delusion.

And when I was about fifteen . . . I by this time had learned something in the public school, when some of you here learned it: If you can't appeal, and you have a hunger and desire for attention and affection, and can't satisfy it — you start doing things backwards, and start pretending you don't give a damn, doing all the wrong things. And then you attract to you those four or five other people who are mixed up in the same way, and you kind of form a little gang, a little clique. And you're kind of locked in together. And you run around trying to exceed each other in doing the wrong thing — sometimes when you were frightened, sometimes when you didn't want to — but because it seemed the thing to do, to show 'em “*we don't care.*”

And I got into one of those gangs, and we had [an idea] one day. They were going to have one of these “we’ll be blood brothers forever” [rituals] — I suppose some of you belonged to that. You cut your fingers, and you hold them like *this*, so the blood runs from here over to here between you, and then from then on, you’re really blood brothers — you got a mixture of blood. And they said, in order to make this memorable and everlasting, we’ll steal something to drink. We were about fifteen

On this particular day, I took some of the black fig wine and some of the home brew [from my father’s basement], and took it to this meeting, and we had ONE OF THESE GIRLS there that I was telling you about, one of them that I meet in A.A. today — she was called Fat Mary, and her mother was a bootlegger. And she had some . . . she had several talents! [*Laughter*] That was in the days of the old James Cagney movies, you know, when the girls carried the gun. The gun molls always carried the gun in their hose. There ain’t many women who’re old enough to remember that, but they used to do that. And old Fat Mary came this day, she had on a pair of her mother’s hose, and had a garter here, and a half a pint here, and a garter here, and she went like this [*motion of pulling up a skirt to the top of your thigh*] — and that was further than *I’d* ever been! — [*loud laughter*] and stood there and got out that half pint. [*Continuing laughter*]

And the guys tackled my home brew, and black fig wine, but they kind of shied off of this smoke. And I kicked it down, and coughed and sputtered and damn near strangled, and turned around and put one down on top of it, and a miracle was performed. A real, true miracle was performed. A kind of magic.

And the whole, total thing I know, after some years of inventory, was that I got free from Nick. Free from Nick’s comparisons, free from running around saying “What are

they saying? What am I doing wrong? How can I make him *like* me? Or her? I got free of that.

There is in an alcoholic, way down underneath, a deep self-loathing. All human beings can be affected at times by the fundamental existential anxiety of rejection, abandonment, and aloneness. But it gnaws at the alcoholic continuously, and in him there is a deep-rooted conviction that he could only be a real success and avoid plunging headlong into that abyss of nothingness — *mê on, das Nichts* — if he could somehow turn himself into something totally different from what he *now* is. But since what he believes he now is, is what down deep he believes he really is, it is a futile attempt that will always be doomed to ultimate failure.

There is a depressive aspect to it. Playing comparison games and blaming games and hypercritical games with other people can seem to bring temporary relief: “I am better at this than him.” “I am more successful at this than her.” “So-and-so is obviously a real failure.” “He was the one who messed that up — not me.” “She’s really in bad shape — unlike me.” But the comparison game can only succeed if you are genuinely totally perfect at everything, and since no one ever is, the plunge into depression will inevitably come.

Alcohol paralyzes the higher judgment centers in a peculiar way. At one level, it can sometimes make it easier for a while to play out the fantasy game of “I am somebody different from who I truly am.” The problem is that the alcoholic still believes that “who I *truly* am” is a worthless person. So young Nick simply could not truly break out of the belief that no one could ever really like him or care about him.

The alcohol, by clouding his critical judgment, at first would seem to help him to take those endless fantasies in his head about romance and acceptance, and turn them into actualities. But it also

deadened his ability to do what had to be done to genuinely bring any of these imaginary scenarios into its full-blown reality. And every limited and partial success which drinking *seemed* to purchase for him, also forced him to be aware all the more of how far short this fell from the golden visions of total success which he had created in his daydreams.

Worse yet, the alcoholic's shame-filled underlying belief was still that "who he really was, was a worthless person." And this was also a fantasy — an evil fantasy, a magic curse placed on him if you like, whose magically destructive power lay solely in his belief in it. The same drink that he used to loose the other, brightly-colored fantasies — those of magical acceptance and success — also set loose his dark fantasy of being under an unbreakable magic curse. So even if taking a drink helped him force himself to make the first step to lift what he thought was the curse on his life, his magical belief in this curse would also be set loose by the alcohol and make him sabotage himself before he was finished.

But no alcoholic who is still drinking understands all that. So there at the blood-brother ceremony with Fat Mary and the bottle of bootleg whiskey she had tucked under her garter, fifteen-year-old Nick thought he had found the magic cure.

Nothing great — erotic or exotic — happened. I just felt free. And I had a great afternoon. I drank a little too much, and I got home. And I spent the rest of my life, up until the day they took it all away from me, trying to recapture that feeling that afternoon. I don't think I ever quite touched it. I went past it, under it, over it, around it, between it, and I always missed it. I was always one drink short. *[Laughter]* And then suddenly — I was one drink past it, so what the hell, I decided! Blew the damn thing again! *[More laughter]*

Now for the first time in my life, I can *have* a date, right? I can go up and ask this pretty young lady for a date next Saturday, and I could dream all week — great wonderful anticipation — and God, would I love you!

Well, there's a thing that Molly [the woman with whom Nick was living at the end of his life] says about alcoholics, that really, the most of you who live with us won't believe in the first place — you won't think about it. We've done terribly harsh, hard, troubled things in our lives, and hurt a lot of people, and paid a hell of a price. But inside the alcoholic is a kind of *innocence*. He really don't fit in this world very good.

And the things that a lot of other people do *frighten* us. And because our hungers and things are unsatisfied till we come into A.A., when we get drunk we *try* to do these things that other people are doing all the time, and we have big bursts of activity that come out in tragic manner.

But we simply are not good without God's help — and without each other. We just don't fit well. And that's one of the reasons we have so much darn trouble . . . so much trouble.

But alcohol seemed to the fifteen-year-old Nick to be the “easier, softer way,” the magic answer that did not require anything so painful as getting to genuinely know God or accepting help from other people. I could escape the magic curse — completely by myself and without having to admit helplessness or vulnerability or loss of control — by just taking a swig of the magic elixir.

So now I can have it in me, I can dream all these great, wonderful dreams — I'm going to wind up with a *friend*. If you talk to people who knew me when — and Al would have come down with us if he hadn't got the flu — he

would tell you, “Nick, you were a nice guy — if you didn’t drink. But we didn’t *know* you.”

Now you think about your husband or your wife that-away. *Nobody got inside of that shell.* I kept the guards up, and I had a bunch of roles I played, and that was me, and you had to accept that. And sober, it was a nice guy. And then it would go off to the other extreme.

It was more than just the drinking. So an alcoholic never solves his real problem by just attempting to use will power to stop drinking, or stop drinking so much. The Nick you saw when he had no alcohol in him at all — however nice a guy he appeared to be — was as phony as the Nick you saw when he was dead drunk. *And nobody ever got behind that surface level to see the real Nick.* Because an alcoholic who has never genuinely worked the twelve steps will never let you.

Nick himself did not know who the real Nick was. Because what he was working so hard to prevent you from seeing was *also* phony: a set of beliefs about himself that he had been led to believe were true, but were totally false — lies — fantasies as unfounded in reality as either the daydreams he tried to act out while drunk, or the “nice” Nick he tried to present to you when he was not drinking.

He said he learned the truth about the real Nick from Molly: “inside the alcoholic is a kind of *innocence*,” paralyzed from acting by a good deal of *fear*. That is, inside every alcoholic is a good-hearted little child, who simply wants to please, and do right — but a little child who has also been made to feel badly frightened and deathly afraid of being rejected and abandoned to die.

It is the incredible fear which causes the problem: When an extremely small baby begins to scream and lash out with its little fists and arms and legs in pain and terror, the tiny baby does not have enough strength to do real harm to a full-grown adult. But a husky

young man who is dropped by alcohol into that same bottomless abyss of terror can erupt into extraordinarily dangerous and irrational behavior.

But even if you removed the alcohol, the old Nick — nice and polite and reasonable as he appeared — was still never revealing the innocent child down deep. All you got there was the play-acting of a frightened child trying to appear grown-up to avoid being scolded and beaten up. The driving fear underneath was always the principal motivator.

An additional problem was that, temporarily, drinking seemed to be a form of self-medication that genuinely worked. The alcoholic could go to the party, or give the public speech, or go back to work for the afternoon, or ask for the date.

Now I can go to the dance, and I may have a few drinks. But nobody ever drank fast enough, NOBODY ever drank . . . you sit at the table, and after *you'd* ordered *three* rounds and . . . everybody's got their glass, *they're* still on the *first* one! Your three are empty, and the damned fool's wondering how the hell you're going to order another one without looking like a drunk. So you got to hit the bar — you got to go make seventeen trips to the john, you got to have all kinds of special connections.

Had a wonderful friend in A.A., said his wife refused to take him on vacation any more because he always got drunk. He never got past a tavern. So this one year (we're all geniuses!) he had a great vision, and perfected a thing, and he promised his wife faithfully, "Honey, if I can go to Arizona with you, I will *not* stop at any tavern." And by God, he didn't. But he got drunk every day.

He disconnected the windshield [washer] hose and ran it up so it popped out right here [sticking out through a hole he'd bored in the car's dashboard], and then he hooked a

jug on the other end, and he'd pump himself a shot! [*Loud laughter*]

And she said, "I couldn't figure out till the trip was over, how the hell come he sat out in the car [all by himself all the time]!" [*Even louder laughter*]

Gotta figure out a way! Some way of *fooling* people like this But anyhow, so now I'm the guy who can take a girl, and go to the — some of you remember these things — go to the dance. And I wind up at the bar. And somebody else takes my girl home, but my pride'll not let me admit that, so I got to go hunting this guy "who stole my babe," you know. Well, he didn't steal my babe, the booze took me away — got exactly what they wanted with me, but I couldn't admit that, so I gotta go hunt and fight him. And I'm the world's worst fighter, I was always getting

On my psychiatric report — when I was hunting for my age, I wrote to the prison, one of 'em — and I got back a copy of one of my psychiatric reports (this was before A.A., this one was taken), and it said there, under different headings: "Recreation: drinking and brawling." [*Laughter*] Says, "he *claims* an interest in baseball." [*Laughter*]

Then down in the analysis part, this one psych who must have been pretty sharp — I hadn't thought about it till I read it, it bothered me for a few days — it says, "Brawler — always fights until he *loses*." [*Long, hearty laughter*]

Although Nick did not realize it at the time — no practicing alcoholic does — the real character of his behavior was always self-defeating in the long term. A practicing alcoholic seems to have a deep, subconscious need, like the doomed hero in an ancient Greek tragedy, to perversely bring about his own destruction — the fate he himself most fears — by his own hand. In all of these ancient plays, the central character encounters warners who try to tell the tragic

hero what he is really on the way to doing to himself, and the doomed figure *never listens* to the people who warn him. In the opening scene of the *Oedipus Rex*, the old blind prophet Teiresias *tells* Oedipus how he is bringing himself by his very own actions to fulfill the dire words of the oracle of doom. But Oedipus just loses his temper, accuses Teiresias of being his enemy, and drives him away. It is not until the end, when Oedipus is wandering off as a blind beggar who has lost everything he ever held dear, that he finally sees the truth of Teiresias's diagnosis. Too many alcoholics, just like poor Oedipus, never truly hear the words of the warner until after they have already lost it all.

When I think even about my work life, you know: I start with a big . . . the best three-inning man in the business — boy, I'm gonna be president in six months! And one day I take a drink, and the job went away, the booze went away — the whole thing — always losing, couldn't stand success.

Always losing *just when* success seemed right over the hill. But that really told me something, when I went back and took another inventory, and I found out it's true. I was [trying to live with] built-in conditions — I didn't dare succeed. Because I was afraid of the results. I could live in my dreams and anticipations *better* than the results.

So my life then, I began to reach — very rapidly, very rapidly — to reach a point where I worked to drink, and lived for weekends. And the weekends bled over into Monday and Tuesday, and now I'm no longer trying to be sociable, and no longer trying to please people.

Alcoholics, racked by their sense of failure and neediness, sink into a festering sea of resentment: of self-pity and hatred, rehearsed over and over in circles in their minds. And then the booze starts to

work a different way. Instead of helping them to luxuriate within the gossamer illusions of all their Technicolor fantasies of success, it plunges them ever deeper, with their minds ever more muddled and confused, into the unbearably hellish tortures of their resentment.

I'm that guy who sits down at the bar, and if you walk in, if you're a normal drinker, you know you're gonna have trouble with him. If you come in, and you got money, you got a good suit of clothes, and a good-looking hat, and two good-looking babes, and drive up in a new car — I start brooding about that. 'Cause all my friends are married, and got houses, and clothes, and cars, and kids, and I ain't got a change of suit. And if I brood about this long enough, I realize you got everything, and I ain't got nothing, and part of that must be *mine*!

Because there's supposed to be a different kind of division of the spoils here. I got nothing, you got everything. And so I'd get up, and try to take some of it. And I really was not a good fighter.

Regardless of whether he does or does not admit it on the surface, the alcoholic comes to hate the whole world and to believe that the world has abandoned him and done him wrong. His hatred can become particularly focused on those who seem to be in authority, and running everything: his boss, the judicial system, the president of the United States!

As the psychiatrist M. Scott Peck discovered in his practice, and talked about in his book, *The Road Less Traveled*, when people hold universalized beliefs about “what the world is like,” or “what life is like,” these are actually covert ways of talking about God. All human beings, regardless of the surface theories they hold, are aware at least at a subconscious level that all the rest of existence derives its fundamental, underlying character from the Higher Power which

is its source. So — whether he admits this up into the conscious level, or buries it under negative statements about “what the world is really like,” and “what life is like,” and disparaging statements about “those idiots who’ve been put in charge of things” — the alcoholic in his secret heart of hearts *hates and fears God* and believes that *GOD has abandoned him and done him wrong*.

With Nick, his hatred of God and anything to do with religion or spirituality, was totally conscious. At that point in his life, he made no hypocritical pretense concerning his real resentment. And along with this came a hatred not just of priests and religious leaders, but also of bosses, school teachers, judges, and policemen.

I began to develop an aversion to God, and things of authority. Here I was a freak, a misfit in life, unable to put together anything. And I had an intense dislike for God, and for any form of authority. And if I was fighting with you, and a cop came in, I would hit the cop! And that’s *bad* business. That’s terrible. And in the next few years, I had two assault-and-batteries . . . I don’t know how many times I was arrested [without doing jail time]

Nick was well aware that some alcoholics can keep the really bad things from happening — can keep from hitting the end of the line — until they are middle-aged or even older. But other alcoholics, like him, started getting into truly serious trouble almost from the very beginning. Some alcoholics hit the end of the line when they are in their twenties, and others do not even make it far into their teens. But the last station on the railroad track, the place where everyone finally has to get off the train whether they want to or not, is the same for all alcoholics: death, or locked up in a place where someone else has the keys. It can be death by gunshot wound,

or liver damage, or heart attack, or automobile accident, or being hit by a car while walking drunk, or falling down a flight of stairs, or freezing to death after lapsing unconscious in the snow, or (with surprising frequency) suicide. Or if you end up locked up, the place may be called an insane asylum, or a rest home, or a court-mandated “halfway house,” or a penitentiary, or a jail. But all alcoholics end up there, early or late, if they do not seek treatment and take it *dead seriously*. The author of a book on the application of the twelve-step program to the treatment of codependency commented on the way that recovering alcoholics “work the steps with a passion” unlike that of any of the other twelve-step programs that later developed out of A.A. That is because the only alcoholics who get into long term recovery are those who finally realize that *their very lives are literally at stake*, every hour of every day of all the rest of the days of their lives.

Nick knew that he himself had hit the end of the line more quickly than many. But the number of years it takes you to get to that point makes no difference at all to the way your mind really works down deep.

My life was like this — ZOOM! We have a guy in A.A. in South Bend who says, “I can sit down with the youngest guy in this room, and we can talk about our lives, and we can compare, from the drinking down to the crash — if the crash is here, if you’ve had that ego burst that’s going to let you in the program. And [let’s say that for this young guy] the crash is here.” And he said “the only difference is that his was compressed. He burnt the candle on both ends, and it might’ve taken me thirty years, but the incidents were much the same, [even if] the circumstances and the places may be different. We were brothers. We belong together, and we belong in the same thing.”

And my life was like that. I had maybe a dozen arrests. I went to the penitentiary just like some of you go to the sanitarium. Exactly the same — when the streets got too rough, and I couldn't get another drink, and I reached that frightening point where, no matter how much I drank, the fear was in, and my mind wouldn't go out.

Some people (it is easier if they are people whose families have money) do something outrageous when things get too rough — perhaps make a suicide attempt which they know will be discovered and thwarted in time — and their relatives pack them off to a sanitarium or a rest home, where all their thinking and decision-making will be done for them for a few weeks or months or years. Nick insists that a surprising number of the people in prison cells are there because, when they got to exactly that same inner point of unbearable pain, they semi-deliberately did something where they knew that they would be apprehended and jailed as a consequence. The prison was their safe and comforting sanctuary of retreat.

Alcoholics, whatever the difference in surface styles, seem invariably to be basically alike at the bottom. The exterior veneer, the apparent gross differences in external behavior, are of no ultimate significance. It makes no fundamental difference, for example, whether you are a maintenance drinker who sips small quantities of alcohol all day long (without ever getting obviously drunk), or someone who stays dry (or in control) most of the time but then erupts into a wild binge of uncontrolled drinking culminating in grossly antisocial behavior. Though it does not make any ultimate difference, Nick says that he was the latter:

I was a binge-type drinker. Five days was my max. First two days, if I was with you, and I said to you, "What'd we do last night?" you'd say, "Hell, you weren't drunk. You

know what we done. You walked straight, you talked straight, your manner was good, you were polite, you were decent, no trouble. You're not drunk. You're kidding me!" But about the third or fourth day — 'cause I quit eating — I'm not one of you people who didn't want to eat — I would've ate, but I never had much money. And I wouldn't eat, and not buy booze! I knew what was most important! So if nobody gave me a sandwich, I didn't eat. So I . . . but about the third day or fourth day — my lips and my mind, my legs — would start to go.

But my mind wouldn't go back, I couldn't get in that haven of rest. Now I'm in the land of fear, and it's a hell of a place, boy. I couldn't stand that. And I couldn't get out of it. No matter how much I drank, I'd just get more rubber-legged.

At the end of one of these binges, in a total blackout, Nick would do the really bad things. The next day, when he saw how people were looking at him, he knew he had to stop the drunk. He would start swearing mighty oaths to everyone:

"I'm never gonna do it again." And "I was gonna be better." I didn't know what I'd done, but I could tell, by the way you looked at me, that I'd done *something*. [Laughter]

And it was something I should adjust immediately. And I was going to, forever! I quit a thousand times. And I'd like to say this for my friends — and you don't believe [this] yet — that every time we quit, we were *not* lying. I *knew*, to the bottoms of my big toe, that that was never, ever, ever gonna happen again. *Never*.

Sometimes happened before dark! [Laughter] But I wasn't lying. I really knew I had it whipped.

When things finally got too bad — no job (or a job he couldn't stand), no more money, people pressing him to pay debts, everyone around him furious at him, everyone putting demands on him which he could not even understand (let alone fulfill), the alcohol (no matter how much he drank) no longer seeming capable of blocking out the inner pain, and above all, *the constant necessity of making decisions for himself* — when it all finally got too painful to stand anymore, he would do something that got him tossed in jail. No matter how much he complained about it, *the prison cell had become his refuge*, his place of safety — the place where some people at least felt sorry for him, *the place where he no longer had to make real decisions for himself*.

So Nick would tell all his friends that he was never, ever going to get drunk out of his mind like that again, and do any of the things he had done on his last drunk. And insofar as the chaos of fantasies and phoniness and confusion that made up his conscious mind was aware, he was totally sincere in his promises. *He himself* was totally convinced that *he was not lying*.

But then, you see, I didn't have any money, or any place to go. And so one time, when I kicked [in a glass showcase] — I was trying to get another little drink — and I kicked in a showcase and wound up in jail, and I found out something.

All my creditors felt sorry for me. The wolves were all *out there*, the troubles were all *out there*.

The guys behind the bars who were shaking a drunk (those of you who are jailbirds know): the fellows walk you up and down. Not 'cause they feel sorry for you. They just can't stand to see you shake! "I just got over the shakes yesterday, look at this bastard, running around here *vibrating*. Stop that!" You know. *[Laughter]*

“You got to stop it! Walk, damn you, walk! Drink some coffee, have a cigarette.” They roll you a cigarette, “Here it is, hold it, get going, man!” They want to see you on your feet. ‘Cause they can’t stand that troubled body, carcass, moving around. And then I’d be doing the same thing for the guy behind me.

So *I had a sanitarium*. It was built in.

The alcoholic who has not yet worked the steps wants a caretaker. It can be an institution (like a sanitarium or a prison) which provides all his meals and eliminates the need of making any real decisions on his own. Or the alcoholic can try to find some other human being to become neurotically dependent on.

In the latter case, the alcoholic expects the other person to be his caretaker because it is somehow (in his alcoholic reasoning) “his due.” If anything at all goes wrong in his life, it will then automatically become (in the alcoholic’s mind) “the caretaker’s fault.”

So the alcoholic oscillates in his attitude towards the person upon whom he has become so neurotically dependent (the “*co-dependent*” as the caretaker is called): Sometimes he works hard at trying to make the other person “feel sorry for him,” and strokes the other person’s ego by making the codependent caretaker feel super-compassionate and loving. But at other times, he falls instead into a total hatred and loathing for the other person. This happens whenever the alcoholic, who sees himself as the perpetual victim, suddenly decides that the poor caretaker is one of his greatest persecutors.

So the alcoholic wants someone to feel sorry for him, to have sympathy for him, to “love him enough.” The problem is that, past a certain stage of drunkenness, other people feel, not pity and sympathy, but repugnance and disgust.

Nobody running around feeling sorry for the *drunk*. Nobody feels sorry for them today, in the sense that *we* can understand.

I think I should say right here, something that I happen to firmly believe in. In the experience of Alcoholics Anonymous, if you're going to learn to live and walk free of that kind of terrible *dependence* that makes you hate your loved ones, you come into A.A., not into a sanitarium or institution. No matter how you get dried out, come in and take this twelve-step program. Put your wife, gal, brother, sister, kids, in Al-Anon or Alateen, and let them get free of that sickness. And you get so you can walk, one day at a time, without it.

And you [get] free of that kind of *dependence* that needs *cover*: Where you're getting mad at your bride or your husband, and you fight 'em and argue with 'em. Then you come [dragging back later] with that "Damn, I'm sorry" crap, and go through all that stuff to get *cover* over your head, and get *front*, and get your clothes back and get put together.

And then you get drunk, and got to go home and beat the hell out of 'em, simply because you hate the fact that you're utterly and absolutely, terribly, frighteningly *dependent* on 'em. And you're a "free man," right? You don't give a damn about nothing! The hell with the whole damn world!

And I got to run over there and pretend to this favor of this husband, in order just to get *covered*. 'Cause I can't supply a *front* for myself, and I've GOT to have a *front*.

The Greek word for "truth" or "reality" was *alêtheia*, formed by putting the prefix *a-* that meant "not," in front of the root *lêth* that meant "to be unnoticed," "to escape awareness," or "to escape secretly." So the word for truth, *a-lêtheia*, literally meant "noticing

seriously for the first time something *that was already there*”: it meant “stopping the escapism and fantasy and denial.”

One well-known Greek word formed from that root *lêth* was the noun *lêthê* (the name of one of the rivers in the Land of the Dead), a word which meant “forgetting” in the sense of letting something which we already actually knew lapse back into our unconscious memories, buried down below the level of conscious notice. So the word for truth, *a-lêtheia*, also meant “un-forgetting” something we already knew but had forgotten.

The Greek word for “truth” or “reality” was therefore an action word. It meant stripping away the covers that prevented us from seeing what had authentically happened and what was actually going on. It meant ripping away the false fronts behind which all the secrets were hidden. It meant tearing down the denials, the evasions and excuses and rationalizations, which blocked our view of what was genuinely there. It meant breaking through the covert barriers of resistance, and stopping all the fleeing games by which we avoided ever having to look squarely at the target. Almost always it seemed to involve, sooner or later, going back into our memories and making a voyage of rediscovery. It is in our very own memories that we find, either the truth itself, or the intrinsic nature of the falsification, the lie, the cheat, which hides the truth from us.

In order for me to make an authentic decision — one for which I myself will take complete personal responsibility — I must invariably disclose, in one way or another, who-I-really-am. So those who are fleeing the truth must search with all their power for an institutional setting, or another person upon who they can be neurotically dependent, or a supernaturally guaranteed, magically infallible set of oversimplified legalistic rules which will foist all the real responsibility onto something or someone else.

Alcoholics invariably seem to have secrets which they have never ever told anyone about. I have to keep who-I-think-I-really-am *covered up* and *covered over*, so it will never be revealed. I devote all my efforts to keeping up a *false front* towards the entire world. I demand that my spouse, my children, and my family keep up my false front, represent my false front towards the world, and keep the real truth hidden behind a code of total silence, even within the most private family discussions.

The twelve steps are directed in part towards stripping away the subterfuges and lies and falsifications behind which the alcoholic hides. When the fourth and fifth steps come up, a good sponsor will often remind his or her pigeons that *all alcoholics in some way lead a double life*, and that no healing will occur unless these steps are done fearlessly and thoroughly, because *we are as sick as our secrets*.

When the alcoholic first comes to A.A., he has at least a semi-awareness that the front he displays towards the world when he is on his good behavior — that is, when he is not drunk and acting out — is phony. He regards his behavior when he is acting out in particularly dangerous and destructive fashion as something somehow alien — not-really-who-I-am in some totally inexplicable fashion, so that he genuinely cannot understand afterwards “why I did that.” What he never realizes is that the terrible “secrets” about who-he-really-is are *also phony* in one way or another.

Everyone coming into A.A. and genuinely working the program discovers a stranger — and that stranger is *me*. The real me. And Nick learned from Molly that the stranger is *an innocent* — someone whom I cannot help loving once I truly become acquainted with him. What a marvelous gift this is, to discover that I actually *like* this stranger who is me!

Real healing in the twelve steps means learning to open up and be genuinely vulnerable: telling the truth about who I am and what I have done, even the parts that were (up till this time) shameful and humiliating to the core, and being willing to express my real feelings and my real needs and wants and my real beliefs — and all with *parrêsia* (total freedom) and *haplotês* (total simplicity). No more covers, no more false fronts. Now no human being has the strength within himself or herself to do that by his or her own unaided power. This is why God's power must be called upon to enable us to do what no human power could accomplish.

As long as we try to continue providing a *cover* for ourselves, a *false front*, we will end up repeating the same sick games over and over with the people upon whom we allow ourselves to become so neurotically dependent. And fleeing into an institution — whether sanitarium or prison or some other kind of social organization that provides all our needs and eliminates any need for real decisions (some people try to use the military, the priesthood, or the convent this way) — will not solve our problem either. Both the fear and the rage will still be there.

If you want to eliminate that from life, don't put in the place of this [neurotically dependent relationship] another kind of institution . . . It won't work.

The answer to alcoholism is in the program of Alcoholics Anonymous, and *no other place*, for any considerable length of time. It will give you your freedom, and let you stand before God, and say, "I don't have to pretend today. Just let me be me. ME!" Not sorry, but happy and free. Outside of A.A., there's no such choice.

Happy, joyous, and free. I don't have to think of myself as a sorry excuse for a person, I don't have to feel sorry for myself, and I don't have to try to make you feel sorry for me.

“Wide is the gate and wide is the path that leads to perdition.” But there is only one workable route to happiness, joy, and freedom. There is only one path that genuinely leads out of the slough of despond — the fearfulness, the rage, the resentment, the self-pity, and the sense of failure, futility, and helplessness — the path whose entry is the narrow gate.

Chapter 11

The Murder of Joseph Desits

So Nick was in and out of jail a number of times over the next few years. Just like his drinking, his inner hatred and anger grew progressively worse and worse, and the violence of his crimes became ever greater. He summed up this period, and the final, ultimate tragedy, in a few brief words in his lead at Ann Arbor:³¹

So I sat there, in and out of these jails, in a rapid sort of fashion. My hate and anger got bad. I began to have violent extremes. Had two assault and batteries with intent to kill, *killed a hell of a nice guy*. WRONG. Was tried for first degree murder, and went to prison for second degree murder.

The early morning hours were a bone-chilling 18 degrees Fahrenheit in South Bend on Saturday, February 24, 1940, fourteen degrees below freezing. A light snowfall had blanketed the area. Then (as now) a string of bars and taverns lined Michigan Street just south of downtown — the fresh snow (and the garish red and blue neon lights and brightly painted signs illuminated by constantly blinking incandescent bulbs) temporarily masking the dirt and grime and peeling paint from those who were still at their Friday night drinking sprees. The streetwalkers stood out on the sidewalks in the

biting cold, but the higher-class prostitutes were able to stay inside where it was warm, in the houses that anyone who really wanted to find could so easily discover.

At 1:45 that morning, young Nick Kowalski burst into a house of prostitution in the 400 block of South Michigan Street with his “cannon” (a 16 gauge shotgun), and blasted a man named Joseph Desits in the right side. The impact of the blast, at such close range, also tore away part of the flesh from the victim’s right arm.

In the Saturday evening edition of the *South Bend Tribune*,³² the world news headline reflected the beginning phases of the Second World War, where Great Britain, under Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, had already entered the effort to stop Adolf Hitler:

**‘We Fight Nazi World
Rule:’ Chamberlain
*Four U-boats Sunk; Planes Visit Prague***

But the bold, black, banner headline stretching across the top of the front page announced the violent shooting in the bawdy house, with a large picture of the victim lying unconscious on a bed at Epworth (now Memorial) Hospital, and a separate photo of Nick, who was staring back at the camera with the crazed, bright-eyed look of a psychopathic killer in his eyes, and his mouth twisted up into a confident, self-assured, half-smirk. The expression on the face can only be described as bone-chilling.

**‘Wrong Victim’ Shot; May Die
Joseph Desits Is Badly Hurt;
Nab Assailant**

N. J. Kowalski Held; Assault Laid to Argument

A case of mistaken identity and the urge to shoot put Joseph Desits, aged 31, Milner hotel, in Epworth hospital today with a gunshot wound in his right side and landed Nicholas J. Kowalski, 27, of 521 South St. Joseph street, in the city jail on a charge of investigation.

Mr. Desits, a Studebaker corporation employee, and a friend, Herbert R. Bertch, 40, also of the Milner hotel, were sitting in the parlor of 424½ South Michigan street at 1:45 o'clock this morning when Kowalski burst into the room and fired a blast from a 16 gauge shotgun at Mr. Desits, Mr. Bertch told police in a statement. The charge struck Mr. Desits in the right side, some of the shot tearing flesh from his right arm.

Condition Serious

Epworth hospital attaches report Mr. Desits' condition as serious. He is reported to be suffering from an internal hemorrhage.

Arthur Beyers, whom police list as an operator of a house of ill fame at 424½ South Michigan street, stated at police headquarters that he believed Kowalski intended to shoot him, because they had fought several weeks ago. Beyers told police that he and Kowalski had been drinking together earlier in the evening in a South Michigan street tavern and had heard Kowalski make several remarks about shooting someone.

Furnishes Description

Beyers, police said, furnished them with a description of the man he believed did the shooting, and Patrolman Arthur M. Campbell arrested Kowalski in his home at 2:30 o'clock. Patrolman Campbell quoted the man as saying, when arrested, "How bad is he (Desits) hurt?" A double-

barreled .16 gauge shotgun with several shells and also an empty one, believed by police to be the one fired at Desits, were confiscated.

Maxine Bibb, Negro maid at 424½ South Michigan street, in a statement to police said Kowalski threatened to shoot her if she prevented him from entering the house.

Bertch told police when Kowalski burst into the room with gun pointing at Desits that he attempted to push the gun away but Kowalski fired at the same instant. Desits was taken to the hospital in the city ambulance.

Bertch is being held by police as a material witness.

In the next day's *South Bend Tribune*, the huge Sunday morning edition,³³ war news had taken over the banner lead headline position at the top of the front page:

HITLER PLEDGES FIGHT TO END Calls Russia, Italy, Japan 'Our Friends'

A file photo of Adolf Hitler in his military uniform illustrated the lead article. Hitler has his little black mustache, a look of pompous self-importance on his face, and a large swastika prominently displayed on his left arm.

But the shooting of Joseph Desits was still front page news. Nick, sobered up now and having to face the blunt reality of what he had done, made a full confession. As has been mentioned earlier, in one way or another, before they get into recovery, *all alcoholics lead a double life*. With some, like Nick, it is a dramatic shift back and forth between Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. When enough alcohol gets into his system, the quiet "nice guy," extremely shy and inhibited, suddenly turns into Mr. Hyde, a raging, murderous madman. But

once the alcohol has been taken away, the polite and cooperative nice guy — friendly old Dr. Jekyll — comes back once again.

As the police interrogators continued to question him, and the alcohol began to wear off, the only thing Nick could think of to say was the incredibly weak statement that he had just been holding the gun and it went off accidentally.

Police Learn How Fight Led To Shooting Former Ball Player Still in Grave Condition

While Joseph Desits, aged 31, Milner hotel, lies in a critical condition in Epworth hospital today, Nicholas J. Kowalski, 27, of 521 South St. Joseph street, is being held on open charges following his signing of a statement in which he admitted the shooting.

Mr. Desits, a Studebaker corporation employee and former semi-professional baseball pitcher, was shot in the right side by a blast from a 16-gauge shotgun.

In his statement, Kowalski said he was drunk and got into a fight Friday night in a tavern in the 400 block South Michigan street. After the fight he went home, got the gun and went to 424½ South Michigan street, listed by police as a house of ill fame. Kowalski said:

“I rang the bell. I think a colored woman opened the door. There were two guys sitting in the living room. I didn’t know either one of them. I was talking to this one guy. I had the cannon on my arm. The darned thing went off. He grabs his stomach. Didn’t holler or anything.”

The man sitting with Mr. Desits was Herbert R. Bertch, 40, also of the Milner hotel. He was questioned by police and released.

Kowalski told police he was looking for Arthur Beyers, whom police list as operator of the house at 424½ South Michigan street, or a man named Geyer with whom he had had the fight earlier in the evening.

Poor Joseph Desits lingered for three days before dying there in the hospital. Nick did not even know him, and had never seen him before in his life. Nick was drunk out of his mind, armed, and intent upon murder. He was so drunk he could not even remember whether the man he had been planning to shoot was named Geyer or Beyers. And so, in an alcoholic nightmare, he shot and killed a total stranger. The *South Bend Tribune* announced Desits' death on February 27th³⁴:

Desits, 30, Dies of Gun Blast

Special Jury Session Called for His Assailant

Following the death early this morning of Joseph Desits, aged 30, of the Milner hotel, from a shotgun wound in his right side, suffered in an affray Friday night in a resort at 424½ South Michigan street, the machinery of prosecution was put into motion promptly today by Prosecutor Arthur F. Scheer. He asked Circuit Judge Dan Pyle to convoke the county grand jury and the judge ordered a special session Thursday.

Prosecutor Scheer said that the state would merely present all the facts against Nicholas J. Kowalski, 27, of 521 South St. Joseph street, from whom police say they have obtained a signed confession that it was he who fired

the fatal blast. Kowalski is being held in the county jail without bond. Mr. Scheer stated that the state would not ask the grand jury to return any particular type of indictment against Kowalski, but said that in all probability the indictment would be for first-degree murder.

Desits, a former semiprofessional baseball player, died in Epworth hospital at 2:20 o'clock this morning. He had been wounded in the side by a .16-gauge shotgun blast.

"The heck he did!" was the only comment offered by Kowalski when informed by jail attendants this morning that Desits had died. Kowalski showed signs of considerable distress, attendants said, and refused to converse further about the crime

Kowalski, who said he was intoxicated at the time, stated in his confession that earlier in the evening he had had a fight with Arthur Beyers, whom police identify as the operator of the resort, or Charles (Chuck) Geyer, in a South Michigan street tavern. Following the fight, Kowalski said, he went to his home and procured the shotgun, which he referred to as his "cannon." Loading it, he went to the establishment in search of Beyers and was admitted by a maid, Maxine Bibb, who was terrified at the sight of the gun slung under Kowalski's arm. He then fired.

Desits was born in South Bend June 9, 1909, and lived here all his life. He was employed by the Studebaker corporation.

In fact, Nick remained in the county jail for two years before trial was finally set. He was sentenced to life in prison, and transported to the Indiana State Prison at Michigan City, Indiana, to begin serving his time. The guilt he felt for what he had done must have been incredible, and was all the more difficult to handle because he had pushed it all down below the level of conscious awareness. He just knew that he wanted to die himself, and made a series of suicide

attempts. The last attempt — a massive overdose of illegal drugs manufactured surreptitiously in the prison from drain cleaner and other incredible substances — was almost successful.

The house where the shooting occurred is no longer there. The location is now covered over with expanses of grass and trees and flower beds, along with sidewalks and parking areas, surrounding the new United States Post Office building. The bars have moved a few blocks further south on Michigan Street, and are still in business.

Doing Time in the Penitentiary

After sitting in the South Bend city jail for two years, in 1942 Nick was put on trial, given a life sentence and taken off in handcuffs to serve his time at the Indiana State Penitentiary at Michigan City, Indiana, about a hour's drive west of South Bend.³⁵ This was no temporary place of refuge, no “sanitarium for the poor,” no “treatment center for those who had no money,” where you could go in for a while, get dried out, live for a period freed of all responsibility and decision-making, be fed and housed by the caretakers, and then go back out to start drinking again. This was a sentence for life.

Many years later, Nick spoke about how he felt at that time, in a lead which he gave at Ann Arbor, Michigan,³⁶ shortly after he had turned 65, and after being sober for 32 years and a free man for the last 23 of them:

I didn't care. I was through caring. I went [behind the prison walls with the despair of every] alcoholic who has that kind of explosion in his life, where he just knows that nothing is ever, ever gonna get better. It's *never* gonna be right. It's never, ever gonna be decent. *Nothing*.

And I went into prison, and I just followed my nose. And there was no big shot, no tough guy, no nothing. I just

[shut the world out, and tried to shut off everything down inside] my mind. If you got one of those minds that you can sit at a meeting and turn the radio off in your head, or turn it on, and not hear anything that was said, you've got a mind like mine. I can do that. And I went into prison like that. And I shut my mind off, and I turned my face to the wall, and I decided that I was *through feeling*. That nobody or nothing was gonna make me turn around.

And I could not do that life sentence. I just couldn't do it. I was gonna stop the damn clock somehow. But then I had these dreams, you know, this terrible kind of hunger, that only an alcoholic knows. And that terrible kind of . . . and *I just want somebody to care, just once.*

So I'd lay in my damn cell, and think about committing suicide. Always in my suicides, it was a very happy occasion, 'cause all the doctors were standing around crying, trying to save this poor little life. *[Laughter]* And it was slipping away, and they were saying, "Oh, how sorry we feel, 'cause we didn't understand before, you know. We could a' helped him, before he done that. Now it's TOO LATE." And I'd be saying there, real piously, in my dream, "Boy, I sure showed them," you know. *[Laughter]*

The truth of the matter was that, if I'd have been successful, they'd have said "The Polack's getting some rest, and by God, so are we," you know! *[Laughter]* 'Cause I was trouble everywhere. *Mostly to myself, mostly to myself.*

So then, I done four years like that. One little thing to tell you, to show you my attitude up to that point: When you went into the prison in those days, they gave you a pair of earphones, and there was a plug in the wall that you could get three stations — White Sox ball game, and music, and maybe some other story or something. Earphone here — and I rolled mine up and hung it up on the wall, in the center.

A guy named Willie Mason, who was another lifer, and had charge of those — he come by, and he said to me, “Nick, you don’t use your earphone.” And I said, “Well, you know, but they’re mine.” And he said, “Yeah, but they’ve been hanging up there for a couple of years, and we’re way short, we’re out of ’em. It’s tough around here. Let me give ’em to somebody that wants to listen to the ball game.”

I said, “To hell with him! Those’re my earphones, and by God, they’re gonna hang there till they fall off the wall. *Nobody* takes my earphones!” [Laughter]

Far as I know, they’re there yet! [Laughter] That was my attitude. That was my attitude.

In that lead, which he gave in 1976, Nick passed over his three suicide attempts rather lightly. In another lead however, which he gave ten years later,³⁷ he gave a good deal more detail:

I don’t know whether you’re alcoholic in that *lonesome sense*, in that you never fit anywhere on earth — no place you are comfortable. If you understand that, you know what I’m talking about.

Twice I tried suicide, like, to get some attention. You know, I slashed my wrists. I didn’t know how much blood I had, I mean, after about the third drop I’m banging on the bars with a cup, saying “I just killed myself,” you know. [Laughter] Then you have that terrible thing happen to you. Nobody but us knows how you feel when they take you over after you’ve destroyed yourself, right? Put a Band-Aid on it and put you back in your cell, you know. [Laughter] Here I done this terrible thing, and *nobody cares*. *Nobody cares*, you know. Confirms what we already have convinced ourselves.

I done that twice, and then the last time, I start saving up all the kites and bluebirds and all kinds of stuff that you

could get in the prison. And I worked in the machine shop so I had good connections. I made cigarette lighters and stuff, swapped them for this stuff. And I had a whole bunch of it, and on my birthday I said to Bob Brown, who was the third last guy executed in the state of Indiana — he was in the next cell — I said, “Bob, it’s my birthday.” “Happy birthday, kid,” he said. I said, “I think I’m gonna stop the clock.” He said, “How you gonna do it?” I said, “I been saving stuff for months. I got, oh . . . kites, jackets, all kinds of stuff here. I’m gonna take it all at once.” And he said, “Now listen, and listen carefully. If you’re gonna do it, take it in hot water, it’ll work faster.”

That’s what A.A. says to you and I. He didn’t try to argue with me, he didn’t try to change my mind. If I had enough, I had enough, and he was satisfied with that. I shaved his legs and his head when they electrocuted him — I worked in the parole department then. Good guy. Tough guy. But he’d let you do what you wanted to do if you were willing to pay the price.

So I took ’em, and I went away, and then, in the hospital, I’m back because of a guy named Johnny Gorham, who wanted to prove to the doctor that the doctor was sick, so he brought me back by reduced charges over a period of about ten days, and then I came back.

Hostile, depressed, and now acutely suicidal, Nick found himself sentenced to life in the penitentiary, and knew that he could not do the time. This is the mystery of human existence in itself. We are all of us at one level locked up in a box of space and time. Outside that box of material space and chronological time is the eternal God.

The Indiana State Penitentiary was only a metaphor for human existence itself, Nick eventually discovered. We have all of us received life sentences to this particular material universe. If I choose to view it all as a constraining prison, a punishment, a vale of

tears in which everything tossed my way seems so totally unfair, then *I will never be able to do the time.*

For as long as I live in this world, I will be doing time. To be a human being is to be a temporal creature. All the major works of western philosophy written since the eighteenth century have lain under the shadow of Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, which argued that the human mind cannot even imagine specific phenomena that are not schematized in space and time. Kant believed that the noumenal world of Reality-as-it-is-in-itself is not accessible to me either directly or indirectly. God, if he exists, must be out there, outside this spatio-temporal box.³⁸ But we are inside the box, borne along by the unceasing flow of chronological time, where each event which involves these phenomenal objects is followed by the next event; where the movie on the screen runs through the sequence of individual frames one by one, the hands of the clock slowly tick around a fraction of an inch at a time, and the pages of the calendar are flipped one by one.

And sometimes we get to the point where we can no longer stand the pain or the fear or the guilt. Or perhaps it is something simpler and more elemental. Perhaps we simply get to the point where we can no longer tolerate an existence that has turned into what feels like utter boredom and meaninglessness — what the poet Baudelaire, in his *Flowers of Evil*, called the *ennui* of existence. Why does the moth fly into the candle flame, Baudelaire asked, even though the fire will destroy it? Because the moth has gotten bored and wants to stir things up and get some excitement and adventure. An Al-Anon once told me that she had come to the conclusion that she was an addict too, and that her drug of choice was adrenaline. That is why human beings are lured into evil, Baudelaire said, in spite of their awareness that it will be suicidal and destroy everything.

The two great architectonic philosophical systems of the early twentieth century were Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* and Alfred North Whitehead's *Process and Reality*. Both works, starting with the problems that Kant had raised, saw the exploration of *time and process* as the key to unlocking the greatest secrets of philosophy.

In order to obtain authentic existence as a human being, I must learn to do the time. Nick eventually discovered that this was what he had to learn if he was to survive at all, not just in the penitentiary, but if he ever regained his freedom and was set loose once again in the world outside.

Almost a quarter century after his release from prison, after learning to earn his own living at an honest job, getting married, having children, and going about the world wherever he wished without having to worry about prison bars, and locks and keys, and prison guards with guns standing over him constantly, Nick said simply:³⁹

I'm still doing time. I'm sent for doing time: *God's time NOW*. Before we done our own time. I done what I wanted, when I wanted, *right now*, soon as I wanted, and it kept me caged so I couldn't do nothing!

Part Four

Ken and Soo Found the South Bend Alcoholics Anonymous Group

Chapter 12

Ken and Soo Start Their A.A. Group

By the end of 1942,⁴⁰ Ken M.'s drinking had become so uncontrollable that (according to the story he related to an A.A. friend years later) his family had gotten the papers signed in court to force him into a sanitarium against his will.⁴¹ His family had money, of course, and his brother and the other officers of the M. B. Skinner factory would be able to keep the plant functioning without him. The prevailing medical judgment, there in the early 1940's, continued to be that Ken would never be able to be released. He had been going to an excellent psychiatrist, to no avail, for many years. Although Ken was only fifty-one, he would live out the rest of his days, the doctors said, in agony and despair, incarcerated behind bars.

As he and Nick K. would have readily agreed, the last station on the railroad track was no different essentially for either of them: as far as they could see, they had both been condemned to spend the rest of their lives behind bars, descending ever deeper into a living hell of rage, despair, and terrifying fears. Past a certain point, the inner hell would become so great, that it was irrelevant that the food and the rooms were a little nicer at Ken's place of imprisonment, and the chances of being beaten up or killed by another inmate much

less. Upon attaining a certain point of suicidal despair, Nick's situation could actually have looked more attractive — if I still remain too cowardly to kill myself, I can start behaving in ways that will eventually get some insanely violent bully to do the job for me. Ask any recovering alcoholic, if you believe that no human mind could actually reason that way.

But at the very last moment Ken M.'s psychiatrist, Dr. Grant E. Metcalfe,⁴² made a discovery and asked Ken's family to give him just one more month before they sent Ken off permanently, so that Metcalfe could try out one last, desperate, faint hope of cure which he had just come upon.

A man named Joseph Soulard Cates (his friends called him "Soo") had recently started going to Dr. Metcalfe also. Soo was an alcoholic who was a mechanical engineer. Soo had been working in Buffalo, New York, and had gotten sober for several months by going to meetings of a new group called Alcoholics Anonymous. There was a thick volume describing the new treatment program, published in April 1939, which A.A.'s referred to familiarly as "the Big Book." But Ken said later on that Dr. Metcalfe himself did not know much more about the program than had been contained in the Jack Alexander article which had appeared in the March 1, 1941 issue of the *Saturday Evening Post*. This was a 7,500 word description of only the most basic features of the A.A. program, with the lurid title "Alcoholics Anonymous: Freed Slaves of Drink, Now They Free Others."

Soo C. had come to South Bend, Indiana, in September of 1942 to work in sales for Ball-Band, and had quickly started back to drinking again. He had started going to Dr. Metcalfe, and it soon became clear to the psychiatrist that Soo had been able to stay sober for a far longer period of time under A.A. care than he ever seemed to be able to carry off under the kind of conventional psychiatric

treatment which Metcalfe was giving him. And here he had another patient, Ken M., equally intelligent and capable, and equally perplexing in his total lack of response to conventional psychiatry.

Metcalfe had apparently already been attempting in the fall of 1942 to get Soo and Ken to try to start up an A.A. group in South Bend, but without getting either man genuinely committed to making the effort. If Ken were committed that would be the end to that option. So Metcalfe begged Ken's family for a thirty-day reprieve before sending him off permanently, and then started to work on Soo and Ken together even harder. Their task, he told them, was to start an A.A. group in South Bend, just the two of them. There was no A.A. program in operation anywhere closer than Indianapolis, Fort Wayne, or Chicago at that point, and there is no indication that they even knew about these little groups. So they had to start up a group all by themselves, and there was no time left to "discuss the question further." Oh, how alcoholics love to *talk* about doing something to avoid actually having *to do it*! If you give the alcoholic his head, he will *never* get beyond continual *talking*.

Finally Ken and Soo spent a long evening in a bar together, drinking until they were totally soused (naturally enough), and agreed with one another to actually give it a try.

I expect that *all the people* immediately involved were incredibly surprised, after the two men buckled down and finally did it, that it not only worked but worked so quickly and so well. Ken gave his and Soo's joint sobriety date later on as February 22, 1943, which is still celebrated as the birthday of A.A. in the larger Michiana area,⁴³ because the little group they started in South Bend had soon spread into surrounding cities and towns like Mishawaka, Elkhart, Goshen, LaPorte, Plymouth, Gary, Hammond, and Michigan City in Indiana, and across the nearby border into places like Niles and Benton Harbor in Michigan.

We have one account of these events in Ken's own words in a letter he wrote to W. Blake Stevenson on April 10, 1961, in which he dates the beginning of his collapse into uncontrollable drinking back to 1934–5 (the period during which his mother, his father, and his seven-year-old daughter Janet died). Over the following six or seven years his drinking got only worse and worse. By 1941, he says in this letter, he had become a hopeless drunk, and by the end of 1942 (as we already know) his family had obtained the court papers to commit him.⁴⁴

In 1941, after six or seven years of drinking ever more heavily, I found myself, to my utter horror, “hooked” — in a state of advanced alcoholism. Battling with everything I had, month after month I slipped down the spiral that leads to bedlam. I was on a quart or a quart and a half a day — absolutely powerless, finally reaching a point where I was on the brink of losing my business, my family, my home, everything in life.

A mechanical engineer moved here from Buffalo. He also was an alcoholic. BUT — the last two months in Buffalo he had joined a new little group called Alcoholics Anonymous. He had moved to South Bend in September, '42, stayed dry for a couple of months but, with no A.A. group as a refuge, had slipped back into drinking again.

He heard of my plight [via Dr. Metcalfe], came out to see me and suggested that we start up an A.A. group in South Bend. After three months of agonizing fear (what would I do with my TIME if I didn't drink?) I finally said, ‘Okay.’ So on February 22, 1943, Joe [Soo] and I started the South Bend A.A. group. That was my last drink.

On October 22, 1943, Soo (who lived in an apartment building at 128 S. Scott, just around the corner from the Studebaker mansion in South Bend) wrote a letter to A.A. headquarters in New York city:⁴⁵

This is to notify you that a group has been formed in South Bend and seven men comprise the group The meetings have been held in my apartment and I have been asked to do the necessary, such as writing this letter and acting as secretary.

Since Soo had already had some experience of A.A. in action back in Buffalo, Ken insisted in later years in regarding Soo as the founder of A.A. in South Bend. But in fact, Soo died in the summer of 1944, and it was Ken himself who was the key leader in A.A. in South Bend during most of its formative years.⁴⁶

By early 1944, there were still only four genuinely committed members who were to remain permanently sober: Ken, Soo, Harry Stevens, and one other.⁴⁷ But a basic nucleus had been created from which rapid growth could now occur.

Ken was a genius at the advertising business — that was the way he had made the M. B. Skinner Company flourish in spite of the Great Depression — and for A.A. to get off the ground in the Michiana area, someone with Ken's talents was needed. God's providence is remarkable in supplying the right person at the right place. He does not discard any of our skills and talents which we developed while drinking — he merely shows us new and better ways to use them, for Him.

So after they had enough of a group to make sure they could keep it going, Ken started working on the editor of the *South Bend Tribune*, which also owned radio station WSBT in South Bend. The editor was well known as an ardent and intolerant prohibitionist, which at one level made it easier to talk him into giving a little help to the A.A. group. But Ken then had to take great pains to gently but clearly separate Alcoholics Anonymous from the Prohibitionists, because no genuine alcoholics were going to walk into a group of

what they regarded as shrill, fanatical, religion-ridden, ax-wielding, bluestocking Cary Nation's, and even more because, in fact, A.A. people had no particular interest in preventing the vast majority of the population from drinking alcoholic beverages.

The small portion of the population who are diabetics have no desire to pass laws preventing the rest of the people around them from eating chocolate cake all they want to. Why shouldn't they have a piece of chocolate cake or a candy bar whenever they actually feel like it? It doesn't do these non-diabetics any harm.

Ken finally obtained permission to give a short address on radio station WSBT during the Christmas season. Ken's radio talk (slightly rewritten each time) was given every year at Christmas Eve for eleven years in a row. The first one was also reproduced verbatim in the *South Bend Tribune* for December 24, 1944:⁴⁸

**Man Who Won
tells Liquor Curse**
LIQUOR 'FIGHT' TOLD ON WSBT
**Man Who Won in Appeal
to Those Who Drink**

This is an anonymous talk and the reason I am not giving my name will be explained a little further on. But I can't help but feel that someone out there in the radio audience is going to be interested in the story I have to tell.

Two years ago, the day before Christmas, at 1 o'clock in the afternoon my wife gave me \$10 to go out and get a Christmas tree and some presents for our little children. Now I want you to understand that I had been trying for several days to be good. You know what I mean; to lay off

the liquor. Each of the past five Christmases had been a total blank as far as I was concerned; and you know that isn't right when a man has children. I knew it myself, but I couldn't do much about it, it seemed.

I'd been thinking a lot about it. I figured that I was going to stay dry that Christmas or bust. So, as I say, for maybe three days I hadn't been drinking anything and I had my mind really made up that I wasn't going to spoil the kids' fun this time. In fact I told my wife about it and she felt pretty happy and pitched in to get the various things ready.

Well, as I say, I had \$10 in my pocket. I jumped into the old jalopy and started down to a shopping center about a mile from our house here in South Bend. When I got down there I said to myself that I could probably pick out a lot better tree if I had just one drink under my belt for a little harmless Christmas cheer, so I went into a tavern and ordered one.

Now listen, I'm not talking about the kind of drinks that ordinary people take. When a man has built up to better than a quart of whisky a day he's not satisfied with these panty-waist highballs. What I called a drink two years ago was half a water tumbler full of gin with a twist of lemon peel and some soda water in it. So I had one and with an alcoholic's wonderful logic decided I'd have another; couldn't go out on one leg.

Then Another Tavern

I got out in the street and decided that it wasn't fair to give all my business to one tavern when there was another just three doors down so I went in there and had two more. By this time it was becoming very clear to me that I ought to go on downtown and tell a bartender friend of mine the wonderful news that I hadn't had a drink for three days, so I did.

I don't have to tell you what happened. It wasn't long before the \$10 was gone. As a matter of fact I didn't really come to for three or four days. I wasn't even home on Christmas. Another total blank for me. Another ruined Christmas for my children. Another bitter, tragic and heart-breaking disillusionment for my wife. I don't have to tell anyone who has observed alcoholics that they always get drunk at the wrong time. Always at the time that will hurt them, their families or their careers the most. Like the guy in the funnies says, 'They'll do it every time.'

For some time after this experience I kept saying to myself why? why? why? Why does a guy with good intentions start out like this and then fall into exactly the same trap again? Why can't he handle his liquor like other people? The reason why I couldn't understand this was that I didn't at the time understand alcoholics. Today, in sincerity, in honesty and in deep humility I think I can say that I do understand alcoholics.

In February, 1943, I joined that wonderful society here in South Bend known as Alcoholics Anonymous. Last Christmas eve, instead of being in the back room of a tavern I was up on a stepladder trimming our family Christmas tree. Tomorrow night I shall be doing the same thing. For 22 months I have been dry.

For 18 months I have been rejoicing in the reawakened affections and confidence of my family. For 18 months I have been restoring myself financially and regaining the lost respect of my fellow men. At the present moment there are 45 members of this society in South Bend, all of whom are doing the same thing.

Sympathy, Not Preaching

In the warm friendship of this group I have for the first time found complete and sympathetic understanding of the drinking problem. There is no preaching, EVER. When I go to a meeting, it is a wonderful thing to look around and

say, ‘Every guy in this room understands me, every guy in this room has been through what I’ve been through, every guy in this room has solved his drinking problem.’

The funny thing about it is that Alcoholics Anonymous has no antagonism toward liquor as such. We are not crusaders and we are not reformers and we are not prohibitionists. We know that only one man in 200 has that strange allergy which makes of him an alcoholic. This man is just as unpopular with bartenders as he is with the general public. In truth he is a desperately sick man and until Alcoholics Anonymous appeared on the scene there was very little hope for him.

Alcoholics Anonymous, founded some 10 years ago now has untold thousands of members with 300 chapters all over the United States. It has no organization, no by-laws, no officers, no dues, no racket of any kind. It is simply an anonymous society of former drunks banded for the purpose of helping each other stay dry; and it works.

We are anonymous because, in certain professions, a member’s very livelihood depends upon our respecting his privacy and for no other reason.

With all our activities we have only one rule — any candidate for membership must admit himself that he can’t handle liquor and wants personally to stop. The inquiry must originate with the patient himself. A postal card addressed to post office box 1342, South Bend, will bring further particulars at once. If you know that you should stop drinking and can’t quit, write us and we’ll show you how. Alcoholics Anonymous is truly the way out.

The mistaken idea that Alcoholics Anonymous was part of the prohibition movement did not die easily. Two years later, Ken had to write a stiff letter defending A.A. against attacks from pro-liquor people (including one of his own longtime friends) who regarded

the new South Bend A.A. Group as part of the attempt to totally ban the sale of alcoholic beverages in the area.⁴⁹

South Bend, Indiana

March 18, 1946

Mr. Vince Fagan

516 W. 3rd St.

Mishawaka, Ind.

Dear Vince:

In your letter just received, you make — for the second time — the accusation that “the A.A. name locally is becoming connected with prohibition and even local option.”

In God’s name, my old friend, where do you pick up these screwball ideas? No accusation could be more baseless, no accusation more false.

Exhibit 1. Every candidate who comes to us is given a preliminary talk — a formal statement which all old-timers memorize to be sure they present our rudiments accurately. From paragraph two — away up front — I quote:

“A.A. has no racket of any kind. There’s not a reformer in the entire bunch. One of our mottoes is, we aren’t fighting anything or anybody! We are *not* prohibitionists. We are *not* ‘crusaders.’ We have nothing against alcohol whatsoever. Backed up by life insurance actuarial tables, we make the assertion that only one man in 150 ever becomes an alcoholic. The other 149 find in alcohol a pleasant social lubricant, a safe sedative after a day’s work, a comfortable crutch for their old age, and we say more power to them. We believe alcohol has been of inestimable benefit to the human race over the thousands of years it has been known. Our only concern is the one alcoholic — which is you — and me.”

Exhibit 2. In the only official publicity — that is, inspired by us — that we have had since we started up, appears this, and I quote from the South Bend Tribune of December 24, 1945:

“The funny thing about Alcoholics Anonymous is that it has no crusading spirit against liquor whatever. We are not prohibitionists at all. Life insurance tables show that only one man in 150 has the disease of alcoholism. To the other 149 who can handle the stuff we say ‘good luck to you’ only the alcoholic interests us A word to bartenders. it is not the purpose of A.A. to take away from you a single customer of the type you care to have. The man we are trying to reach is the one who walks into your bar, runs up a check for \$12.75 and sneaks out without paying. The one who passes out cold on the floor. The one who comes up to your bar and after a few drinks becomes abusive, insulting and pugnacious — thus giving your place a bad name. In other words we are only interested in reaching the confirmed alcoholic who can’t handle his liquor and who makes trouble wherever he goes.”

(All of which, by the way, earned us terrific “bawlings-out” from the Anti-Saloon League, the W.C.T.U. and the rest of the prohibition bigots!)

Exhibit 3. In the three years I have been in the local chapter, I have never once heard — even in the privacy of a “closed” meeting — a single word of sympathy for prohibition. In fact, to the best of my memory — which is reasonably good — the subject has never come up.

With best wishes,

Sincerely yours,

[Signed] K. G. Merrill

This position remains unchanged in A.A. even now, fifty years later. It is not simply a matter of goodhearted tolerance. For alcoholics to get into recovery, they have to learn that there is a

profound difference in the *way* alcoholics drink, what they drink to *attain*, and the *physical effects* of the chemical on their bodies. They do not drink like “normal” social drinkers, and after they have a bit of recovery under their belts, will often remark among themselves that they find the behaviors of “normal” drinkers astonishing and mystifying, and indeed have difficulty understanding “why normal people bother to drink at all!” If they do not learn this important difference, they will not make it in recovery; so any attempt to mount campaigns to bar the bulk of the population from drinking would simply muddy the waters, and possibly make it more difficult for the true alcoholics to recognize their own special problem.

And recovering alcoholics also remember all too well, that when they were still drinking, no laws on earth ever prevented them from obtaining something intoxicating somewhere or other. They found a source some place, or brewed it themselves, or found some other mood-altering drug to serve as a replacement, and they gave not a whit whether what they were doing was illegal — the compulsion drove them too strongly. So banning the sale or consumption of alcohol by law would have little or no effect on the segment of the population which is at the greatest risk.

And even then, getting real recovery and real serenity means, above all, learning to squelch the temptation to go around changing other people. “But it was for their own good” is the most common excuse alcoholics used when they were drinking to excuse dictatorial and manipulative behavior that always ended up plunging them into deep resentment, when the other fellow “refused to change!”

So A.A. people (a) do not care if other people want to drink, (b) would laugh at the futility of trying to ban all drinking, (c) know that any attempt to do so would have little or no effect on the people who truly cannot handle alcohol at all, and (d) are themselves totally preoccupied with growing spiritually and gaining ever greater

serenity, which embarking on a fool's errand like trying to prohibit the use of all alcoholic beverages would totally undercut at the roots.

(It is true that, during the period of national Prohibition in the United States during the early twentieth century, the national death rate from alcohol-related problems such as cirrhosis of the liver and drunken driving accidents exhibited small but significant reductions. To say that the Prohibition experiment was a "failure" is not actually true. Strategies such as banning the sale of beverage alcohol or making it more difficult to obtain or raising the legal drinking age, can be justified as governmental public health policies. But the point here is that this kind of legislation will not "cure" genuine alcoholics or turn their lives around, and no one should be confused on that issue.)

Ken continued to give his short radio talk every Christmas Eve. Part of his 1945 talk was an attempt to educate the general public about the disease concept of alcoholism. Too many of the prohibitionists created the impression that if you just preached to people about the evils of alcohol, that alcoholics would easily be able to stop drinking by simply exercising a little ordinary will power!⁵⁰

Alcoholics Anonymous — we usually abbreviate this to A.A. — is a national fellowship of drunkards, past, present and always potential, banded together for the purpose of keeping each other dry The South Bend Group was founded February 22, 1943, by two men. Within six months there were five members. There are today at least 60; so we are on our way!

Alcoholism is not a moral nor a religious question at all. It is a deadly, a baffling and a tragic disease. We make the jolting statement that it is just as cruel and just as ignorant to scold, threaten and ostracize an alcoholic for drinking as it is to scold, threaten and ostracize a tubercular person for coughing. If the wreck made by an alcoholic of his life is

tragic, so is the abuse, humiliation and contempt heaped upon that same alcoholic by his family, his associates and the general public. To an alcoholic, drinking — once he has had that first shot — is not a matter of free will at all. We are convinced that an alcoholic has something in the nature of an allergy toward alcohol: something which has the strange reaction of changing or metamorphosing his will power into reflex the moment alcohol is introduced into his system.

This explains something which has puzzled the medical fraternity and society at large for generations. We have all known men of iron will — inflexible and indomitable personalities of driving power in every other field, who, after a drink or two, lose every semblance of self-control. Short of physical restraint, neither they themselves nor anyone else can curtail their drinking until they have reached limits of exhaustion. We'll see how the key thought fit here. With that first drink their will power turned into reflex and they were no more able to discontinue to drink than the average citizen would be able to resist sneezing if I were to blow half a pound of black pepper into his room. It is a perfect simile. That is exactly what happens to an alcoholic the minute he tastes alcohol. Once he has started he continues to drink because he *can't* stop. His will power has turned into reflex, and he's as powerless as is the hay fever patient powerless to resist respiratory explosions, when the ragweed season starts.

There is obviously a strongly autobiographical flavor to the reference to “men of iron will — inflexible and indomitable personalities of driving power.” Ken had almost three years in the program by the time he wrote this. Three years is about the right period of time for some real sense of personal self-esteem to start returning. *Real self-esteem means an ACCURATE self-appraisal.*

The ego-deflation which is necessary at the beginning of the A.A. program is needed to puncture the grandiosity, the wild fantasies, and the continual attempt to play superhuman. But putting oneself down all the time, and denying one's real human-sized (but often quite impressive) talents and abilities is just as dishonest and just as much a betrayal of the truth.

Ken M.'s repeated phrase, "will power turned into reflex," referred to the strange phenomenon that occurs when the alcoholic downs the first drink. In fact, the collapse of the mind's normal rational processes starts to creep in, even as the alcoholic starts to approach that first drink, and it is well begun before the alcohol even touches his lips. It is a kind of temporary insanity which occurs, and is the primary reference of the phrase in the second step of the A.A. program about seeking a power which could "restore us to sanity." This is the part of the disease which non-alcoholics find most puzzling. The normal conscious processes of logical analysis and the rational evaluation of consequences dissolves into fantasy and illusion; the sober personality structure starts to collapse; and as Ken M. put it, the person becomes more like a crazed white rat in a science lab finally forcing himself to run across a wire grid which gives him a painful electric shock in order to eat a substance which will then make him sick. Some sort of blind conditioned reflex seems to take over the brain, he said, or so it feels like when it is happening.

Research since that day has shown however that it is nevertheless something peculiarly and bizarrely different from a conditioned reflex in the technical sense. Behavioral psychologists have tried curing alcoholism on that theory. They have used every gimmick in their bag of tricks in their attempts to stop alcoholics from drinking, and no de-conditioning process seems to work. One group of experimenters was appalled at what eventually happened when they

set up a group of alcoholics in a situation where they could get a drink of alcohol any time they wanted, but had to submit to a painful electrical shock first: within two or three weeks, the alcoholics were lining up for their electric shock every time they felt like a drink, and their alcohol consumption was right back up to where it was before the experiment began!

The statement that the disease of alcoholism was a kind of “allergy” — which Ken M. also refers to — was a suggestion raised by certain researchers during the early twentieth century, that was originally extremely useful in prompting the medical profession to take a more probing and sophisticated look at the way the disease affected its sufferers. Some of the parallels are in fact quite striking:

Some people are allergic to a particular thing (such as contact with poison ivy, or eating strawberries) from birth. Other people go their entire lives apparently totally immune to any effect from the substance. Yet others, after years of apparent immunity, suddenly cross some invisible line and start to show a very bad reaction to the material.

Many allergies — such as an extreme reaction to bee stings — show a progressively more and more severe response with each contact to the poisonous substance. Once the extremely allergic reaction has been displayed, then no matter how many years the person goes without being stung by a bee, even a single bee sting will cause just as violent a response as the last one experienced, if not worse. You cannot “cure” the allergy with medical or psychiatric treatment, so that this particular individual can resume being stung by bees “in moderation”! Once the allergy has developed, the person has it for the rest of his or her life.

Using these observations as a starting point, medical researchers began to discover more about the disease. One of the most important consequences was the realization that *the alcoholic’s*

reaction to alcohol was not itself a moral sin, which could be corrected by exercising a little ordinary willpower.

On the other hand, allergic reactions in the technical medical sense involve histamine reactions, sensitization reactions, and other physiological processes which do not seem to be paralleled in alcoholism at all. At one level, alcoholics behave more like certain diabetics, for example, who crave sweet things desperately, in spite of the fact that their systems cannot handle all that sugar. But whatever is going on in the body, there are clearly purely physiological components to the disease. There is a progressive and irreversible change in the way the bodies of chronic alcoholics metabolize alcohol, and there are also progressive and irreversible changes in the way their brain cells are interconnected. This is why, up until almost the end of the progression, it requires more and more alcohol for the alcoholic to obtain the same mood-changing effect. This is also why, no matter how long an alcoholic has avoided using alcohol — even twenty or thirty years or more — a return to drinking will require the same massive amounts to achieve the required mood alteration. Careful studies have shown that the *tendency* to alcoholism is also partially inheritable, indicating that a fundamental genetic component is sometimes at work.

The important consequences of realizing that alcoholism is a *disease* or *illness* are clear: (1) Engaging in severe public moral condemnation of alcoholics is as much nonsense as telling a person that God is going to send them to hell because they caught the flu this winter, or because they have muscular dystrophy. (2) Although even otherwise first-rate psychiatrists have claimed that truly “curing” alcoholism would mean turning them into people who could go back to ordinary social drinking like “normal people,” this too is as absurd as claiming that a talk therapy ought to be able to “cure” diabetes so that the diabetic could go back to eating chocolate

cake like “normal people” do. Once they become alcoholic, men and women can never, for the rest of their lives, go back to drinking again without very quickly falling into the same shape they were in when they first began the recovery program — or even worse shape. As Ken explained it:⁵¹

Convincing proof of the accuracy of this hypothesis lies in the case of a man in a neighboring community who had been dry for three years. Walking down the street one day he slipped on the proverbial banana peel, conked his head on the side of a building and was knocked cold. A well-meaning citizen seeing him lying there, rushed into a tavern and came out with a half a tumbler of whiskey which he proceeded to pour down the unconscious man’s throat. Three minutes later he came to. Eight minutes later — remember he did not know he had had a drink — he was at the bar, drinking his head off. He didn’t know what the hell had happened to him. All he knew was that he was off again. You couldn’t ask for a better illustration than that of how alcohol changes the will power of an alcoholic into reflex.

With a full understanding of this changing of will power into reflex, our problem is now down to preventing the alcoholic from taking his first drink. I am sure I am not overstating the case when I say that the only thing which has ever been developed to handle this situation is Alcoholics Anonymous.

Cures, sanatoriums and institutions have never affected permanent good in even a fair percentage of cases. I remember they used to call the northbound Chicago and Alton noon train out of Dwight “the Whiskey Special” — a tribute to the large number of institute patients who got drunk on the way home after taking the cure. Perhaps the highest percentage of cures attained by institutional care — 8% — was to be found in a sanatorium just outside of

Boston where a combination of medicine, psychiatry and what they called philosophy was used — at 250 smackers per week with a three months term favored.

A.A., with no expense to the patient, has over the years, in thousands of cases, shown a record of 75% complete rehabilitation. You will notice I do not say cure. We are never cured. Nor are we reformed drunkards — we are simply drunkards who do not drink, and there is a terrific difference. In other words, we know our allergy will never change, but we have found a way of life under which alcohol is no longer necessary nor, thank God, after a few months, even desirable. A permanent insulation against a disease heretofore considered hopeless — alcoholism — is effected.

At the end of this 1945 radio talk, Ken attempted to sketch, very briefly, the main points of the twelve-step program. It is in fact a very nice little summary of the steps and how they are worked:⁵²

Just how is this real, this actual, this visible modern day miracle accomplished? The A.A. method was formulated by its founders into a program of twelve steps. In the South Bend Group these steps are taught the new candidates as they come in, in three doses of roughly four steps each, in three evening classes, and candidates must complete this training in our technique before they are considered as full members.

To go into these twelve steps properly is a large order, and would take a lot of time; so for the purposes of this talk, which I am trying to keep brief, we will reduce them to three basic fundamentals. These are:

1. We try to square ourselves. Make restitution for the wrongs we have done while drinking. Most alcoholics have been loose with money, hurt their friends' feelings, made their wives and their families grievously unhappy.

Although we have no feeling of shame or guilt or sin over having been an alcoholic, we do feel an ethical responsibility for bad situations we have created, and we try to atone for them.

2. Realizing — usually having proved to ourselves countless times — that we were powerless over alcohol — we humbly, sincerely and honestly ask a higher power to handle the problem for us.

3. We help other drunks at every available opportunity. Partly from gratitude, partly from compassion, partly from the miraculous effect it has upon ourselves. When we are working with others, we are free from the desire to drink, ourselves.

There is only one rule in A.A. A person seeking membership must admit that he is an alcoholic and come to us under his own steam. Experience has shown that men pushed in by the boss, the wife, or relatives just don't get anywhere. A guy has got to admit that he is licked.

So long as a man follows the twelve steps, which are a new way of life which literally take possession of him — he is safe. As a matter of fact, for the first time in our lives, we are free. Perhaps for the first time in our lives we are faced with reality — meeting problems instead of withdrawing to the fantasy world of alcohol whenever anything important has to be met. Where we were lonely before we have a host of friends today. Where our homes were torn to shreds, they are now sound and happy again. With the revived affection and trust of our family, the warm friendship of our A.A. fellow members, with the restored confidence of the communities in which we live, we feel that our feet, through God's help, have been set firmly on a path which leads to serenity, to a new destiny and to a victorious life.

After three years in the program, Ken had gotten to the point where people who really work the program hard usually get by that point: filled with a new sense of self-esteem, getting a rich satisfaction out of life almost every day, unlike anything he had ever experienced before. He was still a bit over-analytical and over-rationalistic in the way he talked about the program, still a bit too full of intellectual theories about how it worked, but that too is not untypical of someone getting ready to reach his or her third anniversary in the program.

The important thing to remember is that three years earlier this talented and accomplished and incredibly hard-working man had been literally killing himself with alcohol — and he himself knew that was what he was doing, and he did not even *care*. It is close to impossible for anyone who is not an alcoholic to understand that living hell. A skillful enough torturer can eventually break any human being at all, by applying enough pain to cause the personality structure itself to collapse. The tortured creature who then betrays his country's secrets is not even the same person any more — in fact, is not really a person at all, but only a pain-crazed animal thrashing in agony, like a dog or a deer hit by a car and left to die on the highway.

Now, three years later, Ken had found a degree of friendship, happiness, and serenity which *he had never experienced before* in fifty years of living on this earth. This too is nothing which anybody can remotely envisage who has not experienced it at first hand for himself. It is more than a little taste, here on earth, of a different kind of dimension of reality — of the indescribable glories and joys of heaven itself.

Newcomers to the A.A. program are frequently appalled when someone who has been around a while comments that “I’m grateful I’m an alcoholic.” But alcoholics, with their “whole hog or nothing”

personality,⁵³ seem to have only two basic choices in life. As Carl Jung put it in his letter to Bill W., alcoholics are spirit-driven people. They either drown themselves in the murky depths of alcoholic spirits, or rise into the sunlit heights of the divine spirit. They must find themselves eventually plunged into a hell of inner psychological pain which no ordinary human being can even imagine, or they work the A.A. program and find themselves raised up to spiritual peaks which most human beings will never see except from afar. It has been said that “all real grace is free grace, but cheap grace is never real grace.” To be confronted with the choice between the upward and the downward roads — but then to be given by God’s grace both the painful goad and the opportunity to move over onto the higher path — that is something for which a person can quite properly feel grateful.

Chapter 13

The First Twenty Members

In a letter he wrote to Ed Young (who had moved to Muskegon) in 1960, Ken M. listed the names of the first twenty members who came in during the initial two or three years of the South Bend A.A. program, Ed himself being one of that number.⁵⁴ Along with the list of names, Ken also gave the assurance that everyone on the list (except for three or four who had died in the interim) was still in the program and still sober. These twenty were Ken Merrill himself, Joseph Soulard “Soo” Cates, Wy Spence, Mac Olsen, Jim O’Neil, Jim McNeil, Bob Davis, Russ Reed, Les Beatty, John Henderson, Fred Clements, Gil Eliot, Art Wilson, “Swede” Edstrom, John Dillon, Chuck Keller, Harry Stevens, Wayne Seaver, John Morgan, and Ed Young.

We know a bit about some of the people on the list — Ken and Soo, of course, were the founders. Harry Stevens’ role as the sponsor of the A.A. group at the Michigan City prison will be talked about in subsequent chapters. Chuck Keller was one of the founding figures in the spread of A.A. to the Elkhart/Goshen area east of South Bend, which will be discussed in the second volume of this work. Of the others we have only bits and pieces by comparison, but from the snippets of information that have survived, we can see what a diverse group of individuals they were.

Some of the details that we can recover come from Nick's List.⁵⁵ Nick Kowalski (when he was quite elderly) did some research and assembled a handwritten list of people involved in early South Bend/Elkhart area A.A. The material in this handwritten manuscript is very important, since Nick had access to written information that has since been lost (the names of people who served as secretaries to the group, lists of people who attended certain functions held at specific dates, and so on) as well as his own memories to draw on.

Art Wilson

Art was an electrical engineer, one of the founders of the first Alano Club which was begun in 1945, and also one of the early secretaries of the group. Nick's List tells us that he taught one of the South Bend A.A. beginners' classes. The group had been giving a set of three classes for newcomers, but Art wanted to give a special class on the first step (*"We admitted that we were powerless over alcohol — that our lives had become unmanageable"*). This first step is the initial admission of defeat in our attempts to live our lives powered only by our own will and determination and understanding of things — the beginning of the final genuine surrender to God's grace which can come only when we finally hit bottom — which is so very difficult for both alcoholics and Al-Anons. It is the admission that *"I cannot* do it by myself any longer, and will finally have to cry out for help, and actually *take* the proffered help, no matter how humiliating that may seem to me." So it was decided to expand the series, to five classes in fact, and put Art, along with Johnny Morgan, in charge of the first one.

The first step in the A.A. program is the hardest — finally admitting honestly to myself, that my life has become totally unmanageable, that my unending inner misery has turned my life

into a living hell and that I feel totally defeated by my struggles with the external forces of the world around me, that I am sick and tired and cannot stand it any longer (*any* of it!) — and that maybe, just maybe, my being a genuine alcoholic is what is causing it all.

Being an alcoholic is not just drinking to excess. It is a way of thinking and feeling about the world, a way of acting and behaving, of which the drinking is only an external symptom. Simply making ourselves stay away from the bottle, or making ourselves limit ourselves in our drinking and attempting to control it with conscious calculation, does not mean that we are not alcoholics, or that we are no longer alcoholics. This is like using skin-colored makeup to paint over the red spots, and then telling ourselves that we do not have some particular infectious disease, such as measles, which is covering our bodies with an inflamed red rash.

The admission of our *essential* powerlessness and helplessness and vulnerability is the most frightening thing in the world to have to do. I cling to the illusion that “I am in control” — or if I tried a little bit harder, drove myself more harshly, was a bit more cunning, or just a little bit “lucky” for a change — “I *could* be in control.”

But as the Big Book says, “there is One who has all power — that One is God.” If all my fantasies and illusions were in fact true — if I were in fact smarter than the people around me, stronger than the people around me, nastier and more violent than the people around me — even then, as Karl Barth once said, “You do not make God by speaking of man in a loud voice.” In plain, brutal fact we are none of us human beings *super*-human. We are not superhumanly clever, superhumanly powerful, superhumanly good, or even superhumanly bad and incompetent. All that we do, we do only humanly, with finite limitations as to how long we can keep on going. Some people can keep on going totally on their own steam longer than others, but this does not make them “super”human.

There are not, and have never been, men and women who can go on forever — not on their own merely human power.

So the first step in the A.A. program, the *admission* step, is all-important. It is the admission, finally, that I myself am not God. Until we have taken this first step, none of us can even begin to do the next two honestly. They have to be taken in order: (1) “We admitted we were powerless over alcohol — that our lives had become unmanageable.” (2) “Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.” (3) “Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God *as we understood Him*.” And with this last step comes the Third Step Prayer, where the Big Book suggests⁵⁶ saying the following:

God, I offer myself to thee — to build with me and to do with me as thou wilt. Relieve me of the bondage of self, that I may better do thy will. Take away my difficulties, that victory over them may bear witness to those I would help of thy power, thy love, and thy way of life. May I do thy will always!

This is called the surrender phase. In the Koran, the Arabic word for surrender or submission is *Islam*. It is from the common Semitic root SLM, whose root meaning is to be whole. From this same root come the Arabic words *salama*, to be safe, and *salam*, peace. (In Hebrew, the word *salam* is pronounced *shalom*, but likewise means peace and well-being.) So there is a marvelous word-play going on the Koran: to be *saved* from our misery and inner torment, and to attain *peace*, well-being, and serenity, we must first *submit ourselves* to God’s care and guidance.

In Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount (regularly used as the basis for discussion in A.A. meetings in the earliest days), the opening statement of the sermon is “Blessed are the poor in spirit,” which

means of course, those who finally realize that, at the spiritual level, we are none of us more than beggars, with no spiritual power of our own, except for what God gives us from his treasury of infinite power. “Blessed are the poor in spirit,” the Sermon on the Mount begins (Matthew 5:3), “for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” They are extraordinarily *makarioi* (blessed or happy) because they have discovered the gate that opens onto the road which leads into the continual conscious awareness of God’s loving presence.

When Bill W. was first putting the A.A. program together, he read William James’ *Varieties of Religious Experience*,⁵⁷ and realized that the common thread running through all sorts of human spiritual experience down through history, in all the religions of the world, was the necessity of taking as our first step, a surrender of ourselves, an “ego deflation” Bill W. called it. Until that took place, we were fundamentally unteachable, either by God or man. Presumably God would have the ability to totally overpower our fragile human spirits, but strangely enough, God actually seems to respect us too much to do this — God will not rape our minds, and requires that our submission to his love be a willing submission.

The freeing message for Bill W. of course came when Ebby told him that he did not need to call this higher power by the name God, or conceive of this higher power in the way one particular religion dogmatized about it. Ebby told Bill that he could surrender himself to whatever he, in the honest intuition of his own heart, considered to be a Higher Power *worth* loving and turning to for help.

The A.A. people later on commonly told newcomers that they could simply use the spirit of the group gathered around the A.A. table as their higher power if they wished, and pointed out that this was a better higher power than the one they had been serving, which was simply the liquor bottle. It was also a better higher power than putting ourselves in total, blind servitude to money, or worldly fame

and prestige, or some job that we drove ourselves to work at every waking moment, or the continual chameleon act of the groveling, fearful people-pleaser, or the belief that we were guilty of being bad people if we were not always “saving” or “taking care of” somebody else, or the desire to have everybody in the barroom cowering before our fists (or our tire iron or our automatic rifle), or compulsive, obsessive, uncontrollable sex, or mindless staring at the television screen or computer monitor (to keep from feeling, or thinking anything beyond the purely mechanical).

The spirit of the group around the A.A. table was of course what traditional Christianity called the Holy Spirit, referred to in the last section of the Apostles’ Creed (the section on the work of the spirit) as “the communion of the saints,” that is, the mutual spiritual bond between God and all those whose lives are being hallowed by truly living in conscious awareness of his continual presence.

So Art Wilson the electrical engineer was convinced that the first class newcomers attended should be devoted to the first step alone, and the group decided to team him up with Johnny Morgan the barber to do just that.

A.A. people are perfectly ordinary people, from all walks of life, and all are equally respected and equally valued, and all who open themselves up to God’s guidance will find themselves given extremely important things to do — things that are important in God’s eyes, and that might save the life of one or two other human beings, which is the noblest and finest task of all in God’s eyes. To have acted as the intermediary through whom God saved the life, literally, of one other human being — would that not make one’s own life worthy of a heavenly crown? A heavenly combat ribbon, to wear on my dress uniform so to speak, signifying that I had saved the life of a comrade under fire?

Bob Davis

He also helped in founding the first Alano Club in 1945.⁵⁸ This was a place for recovering alcoholics to go so they would *not* have to go to bars and places where everyone else was drinking, in order to chat with people, and take a break and genuinely relax.

They obtained the use of the basement of the Civic Planning Association house at 117 E. Madison. It was nothing but a typical old basement, filthy and grimy. But Bob Davis, Art Wilson, and others in the early A.A. group pitched in together and cleaned it up, and turned it into a comfortable clubhouse. This is the kind of small budget creativity for which A.A. has always been famous.

Nick K., in his researches,⁵⁹ reconstructed the sequence of early meeting places used by the South Bend A.A. group: “The first meetings were closed,” he said, “until approximately Oct 1943 when a few open meetings were held Sunday mornings at the LaSalle Hotel.” That fine old building still stands at 237 N. Michigan Street in downtown South Bend just up the street from the Morris Auditorium, although it is no longer used as a hotel. Around the end of the century, the building was bought by the Catholic Charismatics and converted into a headquarters for their religious movement.

South Bend A.A.’s first involvement with the Madison Street location did not occur until the next year, when it was at first used only as a place for the weekly open meeting:

By 1944 there were regular open Sunday 4:00 o’clock meetings at the Civic Planning Ass. house at 117 E. Madison. Late in 1945 the first Alano Club was founded in the basement of this building. It was started and cleaned up by some of the following early members — Frank D., Tom B., Carl L., Chet L., Vern O., Vern M., John M., Mac Mc., John E., Art W., Bob D., Les B., and others. The Club

stayed here until April '52 after the opened meetings moved to larger quarters at the St. James Ep. Church 100 block North Lafayette early in 1945 where as many as 227 people gathered at Sunday meetings.

St. James is the beautiful, small red brick Gothic church building, a block or so north of the courthouse in downtown South Bend, which serves as the Episcopal Cathedral for this area. If you attend services there, it feels like you have walked into a perfect small town Anglican church back in England — a fairly high church service, sung with incense and processions and altar boys (and girls) and full medieval vestments.

Ken M. and his wife Helen attended that church — an old timer or two in that congregation still remembers them as staunch supporters of the church, and speaks of what a lovely woman Helen was — and also of Ken M.'s enormous pride in his shiny 1937 Packard roadster with the rumble seat! Ken and Helen's influence was probably the means by which the A.A. group first obtained the use of the premises, but weekly open meetings continued to be held in the church basement for over fifty years, the only difference being a shift at some point from Sunday evening to Friday evening.

Ed Young

He taught one of the classes for beginners in A.A. in the earliest period, when there were only three classes (Wy Spence and Mac Olsen taught the other two). He was also at the A.A. Retreat, held at St. Joseph College in Rensselaer, Indiana, from June 6–8, 1947, at which Ralph Pfau (Father John Doe) distributed the first of his famous Golden Books, *The Golden Book of the Spiritual Side*.⁶⁰ Ed apparently moved out of the South Bend area fairly early on, and in fact none of the surviving South Bend old-timers could remember

him. The letter Ken M. wrote him on February 4, 1960, was addressed to “Ed Young, The Muskegon Chronicle, Muskegon, Michigan.” It was clear from what was said in the letter that Ed was still sober, but it also had the sort of personal information in it about various people which you would give to someone who was no longer in immediate, current contact with the other people in town.

Fred Clements

He was also at that famous A.A. Retreat held by Father Ralph Pfau in Rensselaer, Indiana in 1947.⁶¹

Gil Eliot

He and Van S. taught the fourth in the series of beginners classes after they expanded to a five-class format.⁶²

Jim McNeil

He (along with Harry Stevens) played an important role, according to Nick Kowalski,⁶³ in the groundbreaking (and ultimately quite successful) attempt to form an A.A. group within the walls of the Indiana State Prison at Michigan City, Indiana. There will be more about this in a subsequent chapter.

What should be noted here is the incredible energy and sheer creativity of these people, once they had been freed from the ball-and-chain of alcoholism which shackled their bodies and minds and spirits. There was a burst of creative ideas about ways of doing things here in the larger St. Joseph river valley in the mid-1940's — sometimes incredibly novel and courageous ways — *and* the willingness to do the arduous labor required to carry these ideas

through. The A.A. program does a lot more than simply free people from the overwhelming compulsion to drink, even though that in itself is a genuine miracle in the original theological meaning of the term.

Jim McNeil engaged in continual service work: he was one of the early secretaries of the South Bend A.A. group, taught the second of the five beginners classes (along with Russ Reed), and was on the list of those attending the A.A. Retreat at Rensselaer in 1947 at which Father Ralph handed out copies of his first Golden Book.⁶⁴

Jim O'Neil

None of the surviving old timers remembered him, even Pat Wilkie, but Jim was apparently still living and staying away from the bottle in 1960 when Ken Merrill sent Ed Young the list of the twenty earliest members. Perhaps like Ed, Jim had moved out of town. He would have had fourteen to sixteen years of sobriety when Ken wrote that letter, an early witness there in north-central Indiana to the fact that the program did work, and could gain people long term sobriety.

John Henderson

A man from Mishawaka, Indiana. This is the next city upstream from South Bend along the St. Joseph river. Although the two cities have grown together with no discernible boundaries between them any more (at least to the eyes of a casual visitor), they still have totally separate central downtown areas, and each has its own separate mayor, city government, police force, and so on. Somewhat disconcertingly to outsiders, what appears to be exactly the same city street will sometimes abruptly change its name when one crosses

over into the other town's legal bailiwick. Mishawakans very definitely do not think of themselves as South Benders, and vice versa, and the Mishawakans in particular will make this clear very forcibly if asked about it.

The only early mention of John Henderson, other than in Nick's List and Ken M.'s letter, is the appearance of his name among the signatories in a letter to New York A.A. headquarters⁶⁵ from eleven men who formally broke away from the South Bend East Side Group on January 17, 1946 to create what they called the "Independent Mishawaka Group."

Their stated reason in the letter was that the South Bend East Side Group had gotten too large, but there may have been other factors as well — the brusque "effective immediately!" sounds like people who wanted to break their connections with that other group, and wanted to break them *right now*. At any rate, there was for a long period afterwards, a fervently loyal and fiercely independent Mishawaka group, many of whose records have survived. They had their own separate post office box for a while, with a Mishawaka address instead of a South Bend address. The 1946 letter, which is still in the New York A.A. Archives, says simply:

At our last meeting the undersigned, all living in or near Mishawaka, Indiana, due to the unwieldy size of the South Bend, Indiana, "East Side" A.A. Group of which we have been members, decided to withdraw from that Group and form an Independent Mishawaka Group, effective immediately. We respectfully request that you enter our new Group in your New York Records as follows: Alcoholics Anonymous, P.O. Box #4, Mishawaka, Indiana.

Sincerely Yours, [signed]

Dewey S., James C., Clyde McQ., Carl R., Paul B., John H.,
LA. W., Frank R., Joe D., George S., Russell A. Michigan
City

Peace was eventually made, so that a common South Bend-Mishawaka intergroup office (and central mailing address) is now maintained, under the direction of representatives from both the South Bend and Mishawaka groups, as well as representatives from a number of surrounding towns in north central Indiana and southwestern Michigan: Niles, Buchanan, Plymouth, Osceola, Granger, Koontz Lake, Walkerton, Bremen, and Rolling Prairie.

John Dillon

He also appears on Nick's List,⁶⁶ where it says that he was one of the early secretaries of the South Bend A.A. Group. Ken M.'s son D.M. wrote down his recollections of John⁶⁷:

John Dillon . . . was a close friend of Dad's in the early days. He was from St. Louis, and he had been much involved in soccer (including being a referee) in his earlier and trimmer years. He was an expert on interstate trucking rates, which in those days of regulation, was a highly technical and even arcane subject. My recollection is that Dillon grew tired of [what he felt were] the incessant meetings in A.A., and eventually withdrew from it. He did, however, remain sober which was, in Dad's opinion, a near miracle.

John Morgan

Johnny Morgan, who was a barber, was one of the early secretaries of the South Bend group, and one of the group who founded the first Alano Club in 1945. He was at the Rensselaer

retreat conducted by Father Ralph Pfau in 1947. When the shift was made from three beginners classes to five, John was teamed with Art Wilson, the electrical engineer, to teach the first class,⁶⁸ where they attempted to explain to the newcomers what the surrender or submission to God was that had to take place before the other steps could be worked, and healing could start to take place.

In the last ten years or so of Ken M.'s life, the erudite, accomplished author, musician, and advertising genius discovered that his closest friend — the one man with whom he could be truly comfortable — was Johnny Morgan the barber. As Ken's son D.M. recollects it⁶⁹:

Johnny Morgan was a barber whose shop was on a street like E. Calvert, near Mishawaka but still in South Bend. He was a tremendously caring person and became a very dear and loyal friend of my father's. This was especially evident in the early 1950's when Dad's emotional problems were so severe.

In some ways, the elderly Ken M. could probably feel much more comfortable when he could get back closer to his own roots, for he had not spent his childhood and youth in a world of wealth and privilege. He did not have to put on the continual pretense of being sophisticated and worldly wise with Johnny, who simply did not pay any attention to such things, or even care. At a more profound level, A.A. teaches *everyone* who takes its program seriously, that education and I.Q. scores and external accomplishment literally do not mean a thing, and that real friendship has to do with matters of the soul that run far deeper than those trivial things.

There is an old poem which used to be included in school literature books, in which a traveler across a barren desert sees,

toppled over in the sands, the remains of a huge stone statue, the visage now totally defaced, with the mute words below, stating that this is a statue of “Ozymandias, King of Kings,” and boasting of how all the people of the earth quake before his power, which will guarantee him an immortal name through all the ages to follow. The marvelous irony here, of course, is that he is long forgotten and most of the land which he boasted about ruling over with such power is nothing but trackless sands today.

When I am truly confronted with my own mortality — lying in a hospital emergency room with a potentially deadly injury can do it — I realize acutely that in the final analysis there is only me and God, and that none of these other things really matter at all. If we simply live long enough, we learn the same thing more gradually. How many of the things that we worried about when we were young — where we thought that all the world hung on whether we succeeded or failed in this or that petty enterprise — matter one whit twenty or thirty years later? The business enterprise is long gone — the building sold or demolished — or taken over by someone else who does not even know that we once worked there.

The books we wrote giving answers to all the world’s great problems — the last copies were tossed on the remainder table where people were begged to pick them up for a dollar or two. If any copies remain, yellowing and disintegrating as they gather dust on the back shelves of a library somewhere, who will ever open them again? At best some callow young graduate student, forced to make his thesis look thoroughly researched with some *wissenschaftliche*-appearing footnotes to totally obscure works, will perhaps sneer, as he casually turns the crumbling pages, at the obvious naiveté of our pronouncements, given all that had occurred since we wrote those lines. How many of our boldest words will seem now quaintly dated, the long dead preoccupations of an era long past?

In his old age, Ken M. found that Johnny Morgan had the truly important qualities of soul that matter.

Les Beatty

Les the electrician was one of the early people involved in starting the Alano Club on Madison Street in South Bend in 1945. His name also occurs on the list of those attending Father Ralph Pfau's famous 1947 A.A. retreat at Rensselaer, Indiana. He and Wayne Seaver taught the third in the series of five beginning classes for the newcomers.⁷⁰

Gil L., a current A.A. member with a good many years in the program, remembers Les the electrician well, and says that Ken M. himself was Les's sponsor. Ken's son D.M. says that "Dad talked about him a lot," and that "they were very close in the early days."

Les Beatty regularly took a strong leadership role in the movement in its early days. Nick K. wrote that in 1950,⁷¹

We were invited by Dr. Herbert G. Mc. to start an alcoholic program at Northern Indiana State Hospital, later called Beatty Memorial. Harry F. of Hammond, a good friend of Dr. Mc., helped make this possible. All towns were represented, South Bend by Les B.

1950 was a watershed year in the development of A.A. around the globe. The First International Convention was held at Cleveland in July of that year, and A.A. members everywhere suddenly began to realize what a huge movement they had become.

It was also clear that one of the two founders of A.A., Dr. Bob, did not have much longer on this earth (he died later on, in November of that year), and the other founder, Bill W., had become aware, in the process of watching Dr. Bob's health fail, that he

himself would not have forever either. So right after the conference closed, Bill W. put together a pamphlet called *The Third Legacy*, and had 50,000 copies printed off to distribute around the world. Assemblies met in more than two dozen states and provinces to select delegates to a General Service Conference which met in New York in April 1951. A central governing body was thereby created for A.A., which would serve as the successor to Bill W. and Dr. Bob's leadership, and continue the movement for the long term future.⁷²

Les Beatty went to Indianapolis along with Lefty Rightley to represent South Bend at the newly created state-wide A.A. organization called the Indiana State Assembly,⁷³ which selected Robert White (Panel 1) as the Delegate to the 1951 General Service Conference.⁷⁴ And Les was called upon as a South Bend spokesman and representative yet again two years later:⁷⁵

On August 6, 1953, Les B. was asked to introduce to the Indiana Commissioners on Alcoholism and hospital doctors the better than 40% recovered alcoholics whom A.A. groups had sponsored over a two-year period on voluntary . . . commitments.

Les Beatty's sponsor, Ken M., died in 1963. Pat Wilkie, a Scotswoman who had been in the British RAF during World War II, came into the A.A. program in South Bend in 1958, and remembers that Les Beatty, by some point in here, had his own A.A. group, called the Les Beatty or Randolph Street Group, which met in a church located on that street.

The 40% success rate which Les said the South Bend A.A. groups were getting in 1953 when they worked with alcoholics who had been put into an institutional setting for treatment, was extremely good. The methods which were worked out in the St. Joe

river valley for getting alcoholics sober and keeping them sober, were highly successful. In his Christmas Eve broadcast over radio station WSBT in South Bend in 1950, Ken Merrill said that in South Bend, “three out of every four who have come to us during the past eight years have been put back on their feet.” The prison group which they set up at the Indiana state penitentiary in Michigan City in 1944 likewise had a thoroughly documented 75% success rate during its early years.

It is difficult to make meaningful comparisons with present day A.A. experience in this part of the country. Because we know how to recognize the symptoms of alcoholism much earlier in its progress, a number of people come into A.A. in the St. Joe river valley today who have not gotten nearly so desperate (Ken only considered 1% or less of the American population as alcoholics, whereas the real figure is more like 10%). So some people who come into A.A. today are not in bad enough shape yet to be willing to take it as seriously as people did in the 1940’s and 50’s. And modern A.A. meetings in this area are plagued by the presence of court appointed people attending only to avoid a jail sentence (who only rarely end up taking the program seriously), and people who are also involved with seriously addictive drugs (who go back out primarily because of the lure of the drugs rather than because they have an overwhelming desire for alcohol, as becomes clear when they are interrogated afterwards).

The A.A. program was never designed to deal with major drug problems, and addiction to crack cocaine (which is the most serious problem in this area today) is so extraordinarily difficult to beat that only a very small percentage of the people who try to deal with it by going to A.A. meetings actually succeed. And A.A. never was designed to convince people who still wanted to drink that they should want to stop drinking. That is a job for the preachers, or

public health agencies or public interest foundations, or some other group of that sort. The assumption in A.A. has always been that people have to first realize that they desperately need to stop drinking before A.A. can really work with them at all. And it is clear that if A.A. people start going around preaching about the evils of alcohol, they will destroy their ability to work with the people who actually do want to get sober.

Nevertheless, in the present day A.A. meetings in the St. Joseph river valley area, those groups which still seriously practice the kind of good old-time A.A. which was practiced back in the period this book is talking about, still have an extremely high success rate. In the good meetings that I have been able to track over the past fifteen years, if we count the newcomers who attend that group meeting every week without fail for an entire year, 90% of them will get through that first year without drinking. And if we check up on them later, no matter how many years have passed (and even if they have shifted to going to different meetings), 90% of the ones who got that first year of sobriety are still sober today. That is around an 80% overall success rate, or in other words, given the fact that all such measurements can only be made rather roughly, the A.A. meetings in the St. Joe river valley who still teach and practice the same things that were taught back in the period of this book are still achieving the same kind of impressive success as the old timers.

This is important to stress. A.A. people who are willing to sit at the feet of these good old timers from the St. Joseph river valley from the 1940's and 1950's and learn from them — Ken Merrill, Nick Kowalski, Jimmy Miller, Bill Hoover, Brownie, Ellen Lantz, Goshen Bill, and Ed Pike — will find that their way of doing things will get alcoholics sober and keep them sober just as well now, half a century later.

(Wilford Oliver “Lefty” Rightley)

Wilford Oliver Rightley, the man who accompanied Les Beatty to the Indianapolis meeting which selected the Indiana representatives to the 1951 General Service Conference, was also a well known early A.A. member. Since he was not on Ken M.’s list of the twenty earliest members, he must have come in after whatever date Ken had chosen as his cut-off point. But he was nevertheless a fairly early member, and certainly deserves a few words in this section. He was given the nickname “Lefty” in a joking word play on his last name. He was in fact right-handed — the nickname had nothing to do with that. Pat Wilkie said that Lefty had been a whiskey salesman, and initially gave up his job when he joined A.A. But after four years of sobriety, he had not been able to find another job which paid nearly as well, so he started back again at the old job, traveling all around the country in a car with the trunk filled with liquor. The other A.A. people were terrified for him, and felt that this was simply asking for a disastrous slip, but in fact he continued to stay sober.⁷⁶

Gil L. said that when he first got sober in 1968, Lefty was running what was the last of the old time house meetings in the South Bend area, and Ken’s daughter Martha P. remembered Lefty very well also.

Mac Olsen

Of Mac we know only that, at the very beginning, when there were only three beginners classes, he taught the third one (Wy Spence took the first class, and Ed Young conducted the second in the series).⁷⁷

Russ Reed

Russ was one of the early secretaries of the South Bend A.A. Group. He and Jim McNeil (the Jim McN. who helped Harry Stevens sponsor the A.A. group at the Indiana State prison at Michigan City) taught the second class after the South Bend people shifted to having a five-class series.⁷⁸

Swede Edstrom

Also one of the early secretaries of the South Bend A.A. Group.⁷⁹ When Nick Kowalski first got out of prison, he had Swede as one of his sponsors for a while, and would talk in later years about things Swede had taught him.

In 1993, a man who was by then one of the old timers himself, Jeff R., talked in his lead about Swede, who had been his first sponsor, and how Swede had brought him into the A.A. program all those many years ago:⁸⁰

You tell me what happened, because I don't know. On this particular day . . . I walked into a bar over in Mishawaka which no longer exists But on this particular day, for whatever reason, I walked into this gin-mill, sat down, ordered a beer, and *could not drink it*. I walked out of the bar, and I had heard about a place in South Bend called Twelve Step House I went to a cabbie, and I told him I wanted to go this place, and he said, "You got a drinking problem, buddy?" I said, "What do you think?" "I know a guy from A.A. I'll take you over to his house."

So we went over there, and this particular person's name was Swede. And he was my sponsor into A.A. What happened with Swede, this guy pulled up in front of the

house, and let me sit in the cab and went up to check out with Swede. And what Swede had told him, he said, “Well, what the hell good am I gonna do with him, sitting out in the cab? Get him in here!”

Swede sat down and talked to me for a little while, and I was quite shaky. And he had a *parakeet*, which he allowed to fly around the house. And at this point, I was quite upset with myself, and that parakeet *baffled* me. [*Laughter*] So we talked a while, and Swede said, “Jeff, how far are you willing to go to get you sobriety?” I said, “*Whatever it takes.*”

He says, “O.K., now you come out here in the kitchen with me.” He says, “I know you’re going to think this is strange. But in your condition, I’m going to give you a drink. And I hope in hell it’s the last one you ever take.” Well, it was.

Swede took him to the hospital first, Jeff said, to have him checked out, and then took him over to Twelve Step House to spend several days suffering through the withdrawal process. But Swede’s rough-and-ready approach worked perfectly. Jeff said he himself was in his thirties back then when he first went to old Swede, but thanks to that man, he could say (now that he was an elderly man himself) that he had now spent over half of his life sober.

It is important to remember that it is very difficult, even today, for anyone other than a recovering alcoholic to “give a damn” about someone who is a drunk in any truly committed and effective way. If you have not genuinely “been there yourself,” then with the utmost sensitivity and the best will in the world, you will still never fully love them in the way they need to be loved, or see through their con games in the way that only another con artist can.

(Vince Edstrom, the Matt Talbot

Group's House, and Pilot House)

Parenthetically we might note that, although Vince Edstrom's name did not appear in Ken M.'s list of the twenty earliest members (so he apparently came into the program after whatever cut-off point Ken had chosen for that list), Pat Wilkie⁸¹ said that Vince, who was Swede Edstrom's younger brother, was also in the program, and that Vince was in charge of Pilot House, a halfway house that "rose from the ashes," so to speak, as a replacement facility when the Matt Talbot Group's Twelve Step House, on William Street right off Lincolnway, was effectively destroyed as a functioning transition program. When Bob Firth (Brooklyn Bob) first came into A.A. in 1974, he said that he stayed for a short while at Pilot House, which was helping many alcoholics at that point.

Pat said that when some of the supposedly recovering drunks who were housed in the Matt Talbot Group's house (South Bend's first A.A. halfway house) turned it into an illicit gambling den for the neighborhood (!), some of its supporters grew discouraged, and it was felt that it would be a better housecleaning to start over completely anew at a totally different location, which was when Pilot House was started.

But the original idea was quite novel. Pat said that to the best of her knowledge, what the Matt Talbot Group created was the first halfway house of this type for recovering alcoholics in the entire country. The editor of this book felt a certain initial skepticism about that broad a claim. It would in fact require more research to verify whether this was so. Pat herself did not come into the A.A. program in South Bend until 1958, and had no firsthand knowledge of A.A. in the 1940's and early 50's. Nevertheless, the Matt Talbot House was clearly the first facility of that sort in the part of the southwestern Great Lakes area which we are looking at in this book.

Pat recalled, for example, that when the Gary, Indiana, A.A. people decided to start such a facility, they came to South Bend, and modeled their Gary halfway house on the South Bend program.

The problem, deeply felt at the time, was created because the local hospitals would not take drunks unless A.A. did a 24-hour-a-day sitting service on these alkies, and there were also a lot of alcoholics who really did not need to be in a hospital, although it would take them a while to learn to stand firmly on their own. A physician, Dr. Nelson, was on the governing board of the halfway house, and gave everyone a physical when they first applied to live there, to make sure that real hospitalization was not required.

Matt Talbot (1856-1925), from whom the old South Bend A.A. group took its name, was an alcoholic Irish laborer from Dublin who “took the pledge” in 1884, and stayed sober for the rest of his life through continual prayer, meditation, attending mass every morning before work, and penitential acts such as sleeping on a bare wooden plank every night, and wearing three chains around his waist under his clothes as a “slave of Mary.” Ralph Pfau (Father John Doe), the Roman Catholic priest who joined A.A. in Indianapolis in 1943 and became one of the four most important early A.A. writers, printed his Golden Books through his own publishing operation which he called the SMT Guild, where the initials stood for Sons of Matt Talbot, and campaigned at one point to have him canonized as a saint (Talbot has attained the status of “venerable” now, so that could come to pass). So it may have been under Father Pfau’s influence that this early A.A. group in South Bend, which is a heavily Catholic town, named itself after Talbot. Pat Wilkie, a Scotswoman and definitely not a Catholic, belonged to the Matt Talbot Group and regarded that as her home group, but when I asked her who Matt Talbot was, she just muttered in her noticeable

Scottish accent that he was “some crazy Irishman who wore chains under his clothes and that sort of thing!”

Wayne Seaver

Nick said that Wayne and Les Beatty taught the third in the series of five beginners classes.⁸²

Wy Spence

When the South Bend Group first started to give regular formal classes for beginners to introduce them to the twelve steps and the program, Wy taught the first of the three-part series. He was also one of the early secretaries of the South Bend Group.⁸³

Wy then apparently left the South Bend area and went out west around 1948. In the letter Ken M. wrote to Ed Y. in 1960,⁸⁴ he put the comment towards the end that “incidentally, Wy Spence was just made president of a bank out in Denver where he has been living the last 12 years. Good going!”

CONCLUSION

These were the people who served as the initial nucleus of a movement that spread outward rapidly from South Bend, up the St. Joseph river valley as well as down the river to where it emptied into the lake, along the southeastern coast of Lake Michigan, and even further afield. They spread it eastward into the area of Elkhart and Goshen, Indiana, further down in Indiana into Bremen, LaPorte, Plymouth, and Wakarusa, and north across the state line into Niles, Michigan, and even further, into Benton Harbor up on Lake Michigan itself. In spite of the proximity of Gary and Hammond to

the huge Chicago city complex, A.A. in both of those Lake Michigan cities seems to have originally been initiated by contact with the South Bend program, at least as much if not more than through their theoretically easy access to the early A.A. groups in Chicago.

Perhaps South Bend seemed a “friendlier” city, or the South Bend model seemed more appropriate to cities of their size, or an Indiana city seemed more like “home” than the huge city of Chicago, in spite of the fact that it was geographically closer.

Then again, those twenty A.A. pioneers banded together in the small Hoosier city had something special about them. They not only had an indomitable spirit, and a deep spiritual depth to them, they had a few people especially graced by God with the gift of words — they could not only demonstrate this higher way of life in their daily tasks, they could explain it in ways that opened the doors to others. There were some of them who, by surrendering themselves so totally to God, and by being willing to speak with such true and total honesty about themselves and their own deepest feelings, were able on many occasions to become truly *transparent* to God, allowing the light of God to shine through their words and deeds like little window panes.

I pray that the bits and pieces of their lives and words which have survived, may continue to be transparent in the same fashion for those who read this volume, for no merely human words or teachings ever saved anyone — only God, and the unmediated light of the divine grace and power and love, can do that. If you the reader can see God’s light shining through even a single one of these tiny window panes — sometimes no more than a fragment of a piece of glass that has survived the intervening years — nevertheless, by keeping the eyes of your spirit fixed on that small ray of light shining into the dungeon of your soul, you can, with enough unwavering

determination, discover the unlocked door leading out of the dark prison into the full sunlight of the Spirit.

Part Five

Nick K. and the A.A. Prison Group

Chapter 14

Joining Hands with the Convicts

In 1944, the new A.A. group in South Bend, barely a year old, was presented with a unique challenge — a request by Tim Costello, a convict at the Indiana State Prison at Michigan City, to bring the A.A. program to him there at the penitentiary.⁸⁵ There were a few other prison groups in the United States at that time, none of which had been in existence for very long. The one at San Quentin in California, under Warden Duffy, had been started in 1942 and had been the first.⁸⁶ But no one in South Bend, or Michigan City either, knew about any of those experiments. As far as they knew, this was a journey onto completely uncharted ground.

We must remember that the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous had only come out five years before, in 1939, and the Jack Alexander article in the *Saturday Evening Post* (the first major public notice of the new A.A. program) had not appeared until 1941. The movement was still very much in its infancy even in 1944, and not at all widely known in the way it was to become during the years that followed. Even if we take the May 1935 meeting between Bill W. and Dr. Bob as the starting point, the program had still only been tested for less than ten years. No one genuinely knew for sure, from experience,

for whom it would work, and for whom it would not. Hardened convicts, still behind bars, represented an unknown set of problems.

We must also remember that early A.A., coming out of the Oxford Group, was still definitely slanted at that time towards the upper social groups. Bill W. had been a successful Wall Street stockbroker before the Great Depression, and Dr. Bob was a skilled surgeon. In South Bend, Ken M. was a well-to-do factory owner and a widely published author, and Soo C. was an engineer who served as a sales representative for a major firm. Could a program tailored to people like these make sense at all in the totally different context of admittedly quite violent and larcenous men, murderers and thieves, who had been in and out of prisons all their lives?

Yet the plea for help had come. Tim Costello, convict, had written a letter crying for aid. The twelfth step had said that we must give the program away in order to keep it, and the Big Book warned all who read it: “half measures availed us nothing.” Nothing less than a total and *fearless* commitment could maintain the alcoholic’s sobriety. One had to turn away from the material world and its goals and judgments, and enter the world of the spirit, where all men and women are beloved children of God.

In early Christianity, one of the marks of the holy man or holy woman was *parrêsia*, a word that meant literally “to say everything” (*pan* + *rhêsis*). It meant a kind of totally unselfconscious freedom of speech or boldness of language. A true holy man would speak to an emperor just as bluntly as he would speak to a peasant. He did not try to be “polite” when this meant nothing more than cowardice or complicity in evasion and denial. The holy man is one who has returned to the marvelous childlike freedom that enables him to step forth and say, quietly, like the little boy in the story, “but the emperor has no clothes.” Those who wish merely to preserve the system are outraged by such people. And there was in early A.A. — and still is

to a degree — a marvelously outrageous quality to some of the characters one encounters. They may at first seem completely crazy, preposterously naive, and impossibly foolish. But thereby they force us to see the truth of the statement: “God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.”⁸⁷

And so a group of delightfully outrageous people set themselves stubbornly to attempt something which human wisdom would have said could never work, because one man cried out for help, over and over, and would not cease, and because several other men heard this cry and remembered the words of the Anonymous God of the Burning Bush, spoken to a man who had hit bottom himself: I have heard the cry of those who are in the pit of total misery; if you will help me save them, in that you will find your own salvation also.⁸⁸

Tim Costello was the convict who wrote the letters that started the process. Alfred F. “Al” Dowd was the warden at Michigan City at that time. Nick Kowalski (who was one of the earliest members of the prison A.A. group that was eventually begun) gives the credit to two members of the South Bend group, Jim McNeil, and especially Harry Stevens, for coming out to them.⁸⁹ Ken M.’s daughter Martha P. says that her father was also visiting the warden, weekend after weekend, during the period when they were trying to talk Dowd into letting them try forming a prison A.A. group.

One South Bend A.A. member whose memory goes back a number of years said that there was tension between Ken M., who was more psychologically oriented in his understanding of the A.A. program (even though he and his wife were both religious people, and were pillars of St. James Episcopal Church in South Bend), and Harry Stevens, who wanted to put more emphasis in the A.A. meetings on the spiritual side — a tension which eventually produced the first split in South Bend A.A. So perhaps it seemed

best there in 1944 to let Harry S. take the prison group as his own special project, especially once it got going. He served as the official sponsor for the group from its beginnings down to 1952.⁹⁰

Now few people could tell a tale better than Nick, so perhaps it is best at this point to let him relate the rest of the story of the beginnings of the A.A. prison group in his own words:

In 1944, a guy named Tim Costello, long dead, tore a fascinating, wonderful, God-gifted trail through the prison's A.A. program . . . We had the second [most famous] one in the world,⁹¹ due to Tim Costello. And I got to talk to you a little about Tim, because he showed me what God gives everyone:

In this room tonight, there're people here who never seem to accomplish much in the world, because they're always busy around here, washing the dishes and cleaning up, and putting things together. And you get mad at 'em, a lot of the time, 'cause they've got pretty strict ideas about how the program works, and they'll argue, and talk to you about the things you should do, and the things you shouldn't do. And you raise hell with 'em, and say "Lousy no good so-and-so's," and this and that. But they're *always here*.

About two weeks after they're dead, you realized they saved your life maybe fifty times. Hadn't have been for their sternness with themselves, and with you and me, their candid honesty that we need from time to time — if you're like me, clear up to tonight, *including* tonight — I'd have often gone off the deep end.

We need 'em and we love 'em. And those of them that are here would know that nothing you say to 'em can pay them back, because *God* pays them for doing that. They don't need things from us, they need [only] the spirit of God. In the sobriety they obtain, and their companionship,

and even telling you the candid truth, they gain a kind of grandeur that God gives few people on the face of the earth.

But I think sometimes we should remember them while they're alive, and give them thanks, because if it wasn't for them, we might wouldn't be here tonight.

And Tim was one of these people. And God provides them, you know that. He's got one for you and one for me, and here's a consummate value.

It was the famous Jack Alexander article that started Tim Costello on his quest. Alexander was a tough-nosed investigative reporter, who had just finished an exposé of the New Jersey rackets, who had been assigned the task of investigating Alcoholics Anonymous by the owner and publisher of the *Saturday Evening Post* magazine. Back in that era, it was (along with *Life* magazine) one of the most widely read periodicals in America. Alexander had come to the task as a professional cynic and skeptic, fully aware of all the con games that had ever been played on the American public. In fact, he said later, when he talked to the first four A.A. members who were sent to him, he was immediately suspicious that these might be professional actors hired to make the scheme look successful. They were too good-looking and too well-dressed to match up with the tales they told him of their lives before they came to A.A. In his long experience, drunks like they claimed to have been did not turn into people like they obviously were now — it was humanly impossible.

As Alexander attended their meetings, audited their financial books (for everything they were doing was opened up to him freely), and talked with person after person in the movement, it finally began to dawn on him that this was no con game. These were the most painfully honest people he had ever encountered in his life — honest almost to a fault — and whatever it was that they were doing, they

were admirable people, and the most horrendous drunks he had ever seen were getting, under their tutelage, not only sobriety, but a total transformation of their lives. They looked so different after they had been in the program for a while, that it was in fact extremely hard to believe that they were the same people who had first stumbled in — you had to see it happening with your own eyes to believe it.

And so the March 1, 1941 issue of the *Saturday Evening Post* appeared all over America, with Jack Alexander's story as its lead article: "Alcoholics Anonymous: Freed Slaves of Drink, Now They Free Others." In it, the reporter gave a good and sympathetic description of how the program basically worked, and most important of all, he gave his own assessment (and with that, the imprimatur of the highly respected and trusted *Saturday Evening Post*) that the program actually *did* work.⁹² The article also gave the New York A.A. address to which people could write for more information.

Now, three years later, Tim Costello, a convict in the Indiana State Prison at Michigan City, read that article in an old copy of the magazine that was lying around, and realized in his heart, with total conviction, that this was the thing — and the only thing — that could save his life.

Tim went to the warden and asked if he could write a letter to A.A., and the warden said, "What's that?" He said, "Well, it tells you here, read the article." And the warden said, "I ain't reading no article about alcoholics, I got a whole damn prison full of 'em!" [*Laughter*] Well Tim says, "Can I write a letter?" "Hell no, they're not related to you. This is a maximum security prison. The only people you can write to are relatives."

So Tim went back to his cell, and wrote a kite — some of you know what a kite is, it goes *under* the wall. It went out — in this case, the priest is dead too — it went out

through a Catholic priest, then to New York. And then they got it in New York, and they sent it to South Bend, where there were *four* men sober — I could name 'em for you, God love 'em, here right now.

One was named Harry Stevens. God provides that second guy, that guy for assistance — the little, mild-mannered man, who like the fish in the dam, keeps butting against the wall. Couldn't turn his head. Harry Stevens just died a few years ago, had a stack of cards *this* high. If he *ever* got a call from you — *ever* — he wrote your name, address, and phone number down. Once a month, he sat down and wrote you a postcard. Said, "I was just setting down here tonight thinking about you, wondering how you are. If you ever feel like it, give me a call, I'd like to see you again." Didn't make any difference, [if] some of them guys [wouldn't respond at first]. He wrote them cards for years. Lots of guys, four or five years later, when they got ready to come, they knew who to call. He'd be there, he'd come, he'd go. He didn't worry about himself, he put together a pretty good life.

He come up to the prison, said that "I'd like to talk to an inmate named Tim Costello." The warden said, "How do you know him?" He said, "I got a letter from him." [*Laughter*] The warden said, "No, you *can't* get a letter from him." He says, "I can't? I got it right here." So the warden went in, and he said to Tim, "How'd you get that letter out, Tim?" Tim said, "Hell, I'd never get another one out if I tell you that." [*Laughter*] And he said, "You're going into the hole." And in the hole he went, three days in the hole.

Seventy-two hours later, he comes out, walks around the prison saying, "I don't know what the hell went wrong," sat down and wrote another letter. [*Laughter*] To New York, went back to Harry Stevens. Harry Stevens gets the letter, he comes up to the prison, he says, "Warden, I got to talk to

that guy, I got another letter from him.” [Laughter] “By gosh, you did, you’re not gonna see him.” Goes inside, threw Tim back in the hole. [Laughter] When you was a real bad guy, they used to shave your head — shave your head, and they put you in a big checkered wool suit, and they put a little red card on your cell. That meant you were a *bad man*. And they locked your cell before you went out for privileges, whether it was recreation, you know, or visitors. Four months without privileges. Had lots of time, so he wrote another letter. [Laughter] God gave us some wonderful power!

To Nick, this whole tale was in fact the story of God at work. Was it mere coincidence that the *Saturday Evening Post* article fell into the hands of a convict only now, three years after it had appeared? Only now, *after* a tiny A.A. group had been started in South Bend, Indiana, with two men like Ken Merrill and Harry Stevens in it? And was it only coincidence that the prisoner who found the article was an uncommonly stubborn man, and was *ready* now to pursue that bright gleam of hope?

At precisely the moment when Tim Costello had truly “hit bottom,” and *knew* that his alcoholic body, his alcoholic psyche, and his alcoholic spirit could go on no further, the magazine article appeared. As St. Augustine emphasized in his *Confessions*, God’s grace comes to us most commonly mediated through the natural order, through the other people and the things we encounter — apparently by chance and coincidence if we look only at the surface of things. But in and through the black and white page of the magazine print, Tim caught a glimpse in his spirit and in his heart of the light of God and God’s hope. He could surely not have consciously articulated this at that time, and was not consciously aware that this was God whom he had glimpsed. But somewhere deep inside, he knew that he had to make any sacrifice necessary,

and he had to carry out any human task, no matter how daunting, to get the deeper glimpse of that divine Light — full of love and goodness and hope and peace — for which his soul thirsted to its core.

When people have gained a bit of time in A.A., and have grown into some real serenity, in spite of the fact that a merely human observer would see them as people who had been unbelievably heroic, and who had gotten where they had got by dint of an unbreakable will, these serene souls themselves will insist that, no, it was God who did all the work — I merely finally decided to let him do it — and no, it was not unbelievable courage and heroism and some implacable willpower of my own which kept me in unwavering pursuit of the goal — I merely finally decided to let go of myself, and let God's power work through me. The barest glimpse of God and God's power — even when I myself did not realize consciously that it was God — gave me the power to do all things necessary. The good God never gave me any task to carry out that was in fact too hard for me to do — or if it was, then he himself just picked me up and completely carried me in his own arms through the hardest part.

So in the final analysis, all is God and all is grace. But strangely enough, God actually respects us. He will not rape our souls. Most of the time, he gives us the choice of turning away from him and trying to take everything over again ourselves, and going our own ways once more — even though this invariably leads to our own ultimate destruction.

So Tim Costello was a true hero, and his indomitable will was going to finally carry him through to victory, but paradoxically, it was also true that all was God and all was grace, and the greatest act of human will (and the hardest) is to will to let go of my own will, and to turn the outcome of my actions over to God, and not to grow

discouraged when, at first, the outcome does not come out like I myself wanted it to be.

And we must always remember that God respects us as people. He will not force himself on us for long, and will eventually let us reject him and turn away. God respects each of us, and created each of us as a unique individual, with unique talents and skills and personality, and with a singular and distinctive role which he designed us to play in his world. As St. Thomas Aquinas said, *grace does not destroy nature but perfects it*. The A.A. program is not some set of mechanical rules and moral strictures which attempts to turn all its members into pale clones, devoid of all personality and marching like zombies to some otherworldly model of bloodless sanctitude. God delights in our uniqueness, and in the sometimes sheer craziness of our behavior.

A group of recovering alcoholics can be more fun than a barrel of monkeys. They can be stubborn, and cantankerous, and ornery, and God in his pure love for them actually gives them what they want. They can take on apparently impossible tasks, and God in his delight enables them to carry them out. And then their ears, which they eventually learn to attune to God, hear in some way (how? this is another divine mystery) God laughing at them with glee (for there is no sense of humor greater than the divine), and they suddenly find themselves laughing at themselves too. Gee, we were crazy people! Gee, we still are! Thank you, God, for loving us so much, and for weeping with us, hearing us in our moments of despair, strengthening us with the divine courage, leading us on to victory, and then at the end, letting us laugh with you, and with our joint laughter, we will be able to let all the tears and anguish go.

What Tim Costello realized at some intuitive level was that he was worthy of having his life saved. And Nick wanted all his

listeners to remember that they too were *worthy of having their lives saved*:

You know, a lot of people in this room once thought they were junk. And they tried to make junk out of a pretty damn good piece of equipment. You beat it to death, you ran it over a cliff, you busted up cars, you busted yourself up, you got in tragic situations. Still works pretty good! *He didn't make junk*. When you turn yourself over to him, he'll make you a *talented* man.

And he needs every one of you, and brings you here because he *needs* you. And he needs you here, not to be me or somebody, or Jack or Jim or somebody, but to be YOU. Because of a special quality you have, he brings you to these tables. It ain't something that I aren't or you aren't — he brings you here 'cause he needs that quality [which you *already have*]. The difference in your fingerprints and mine. And he wants you to bring it, and put it on the table, and talk about it, and converse with it, and work with us, so that there will be, *between* us, the quality that's open to everybody.

There is a little phrase in Luke 9:51, where it says that Jesus “set his face to go to Jerusalem.” Now when the Bible is used as a source of metaphors for the spiritual life, just as references to Egypt often stand for the spiritual bondage in which we have been held (be it slavery to alcoholism, or to uncontrollable anger, or whatever), so references to Jerusalem often stand symbolically for salvation and the goal of our spiritual desires. Two stubborn men — Tim Costello and Harry Stevens, each of them with his own special God-given uniqueness and his own special role to play in God's drama of victory and salvation — “set their faces to go to Jerusalem.”

So Tim writes another letter — goes to New York, comes back to Harry Stevens, Harry opens the letter, it said, “I don’t know what you guys are doing, but don’t *do* that, you’re killing me!” *[Laughter]* That’s the kind of innocence we talk about in A.A., that kind of wonderful openness, that we do things that people will not try.

Harry comes back up to the warden, he says, “I can’t sleep, I got to see that guy.” The warden says, “You better learn to sleep, ’cause you ain’t gonna see him.” Harry says, “Well, I’d like to talk to ’im.”

The warden later became a fan of ours. He says, “That damn Harry Stevens showed up at my house every night, quarter of five. I’ll go home at five o’clock, my usual evening, watch the radio, boob tube, whatever. Then I go to sleep. He comes, he’s standing out on the porch waiting for me when I come home. I tried being late, he’s still there; get there early, he’s still there. Can’t miss.

I’m not gonna *give* him anything. He can’t take my martinis — he’ll think I’m one of these damned drunks he’s always talking about! *[Laughter]* I’m not gonna *feed* him!”

Although Nick apparently did not know about it, Ken M. was also going a number of miles over to Michigan City every weekend to work on Warden Dowd too. The two of them, Harry and Ken, finally wore him down, and he agreed to let Tim try to get an A.A. group together there in the prison. Nick himself was one of the original group whom Tim assembled. He was in the prison hospital at the time — this presumably was the result of his last, almost successful, suicide attempt.

Tim was trying to bleed me away from that, so he come talked to me. When I got out of the hospital, he said, “We’re gonna have a meeting in the prison hospital, about

Alcoholics Anonymous.” And I said, “What the hell is Alcoholics Anonymous? I’m doing a life sentence in penitentiary, I hate going anyplace, I don’t give a damn what I am. I should worry about Alcoholics Anonymous?” He said, “Please come.”

He said, “I’ve been trying to work with you, and I think you owe me a favor.” And he said, “I’ll tell you two things. One: if you *don’t* go, I’m gonna take you off of them other books you had charged to the library, and put you back on western stories. *[Laughter]* And secondly, if you *do* come,” he said, “I got a connection in the prison dining room for raisin pie.”

I still have a passion for good raisin pie. And he said, “I’ll get a raisin pie, and we’ll have it at the meeting.” And this guy, he would go and take two packs of Camels to the guy in the kitchen, one of the other kind, to make him a raisin pie. They’re illegal as hell!!! *[Laughter]* Now Tim’s gotta get in there, and get this pie — some of you cons know how that goes — and get back to the education department without getting caught. And [the pie’s still] hot. And he goes in there, and opens his shirt, and puts that pie down there. *[Laughter]*

And they had a screw there named Cokey Joe, who was crazier than Tim — *he* went around like that naturally. *[Laughter]* And . . . Cokey Joe called him over, and said, “Come over here, Tim.” And he stands there talking to him. *[Laughter]* You know, how the White Sox are doing, who’s gonna win the election, and Tim’s standing there. And finally, when he gets done talking to him, “See you later buddy,” and he reaches out to hit Tim on his belly. *[Laughter]* And so he almost took off like an arrow, from that raisin spreading, took off for the education department!!! *[Laughter]*

So I went to my first meeting, because . . . to get a cut of that pie, and to keep from getting put back on [having nothing to read but those cheap western pulp novels].

It sounds like crazy things, but the important thing is, you know, you hear in A.A., “don’t come unless you have an honest desire to stop drinking.” Don’t do that! Come, dammit, just come! If you have a drinking problem, come! And don’t put in your mind classifications or rules or regulations, JUST COME! ’Cause I didn’t think this thing was gonna work. Never once. I was in A.A. in prison nine years before I got out, it never occurred to me I was gonna stay sober. But I tell you what it done — I told you, I couldn’t do that time.”

Since A.A. produces a real inner transformation of the person, the most important parts of the process take place down below the level of discursive reasoning, in the realm of the feelings of the heart, in subtle but profound shifts in the perspective from which we view the world around us, in the intuitive perceptions that we call “hunches” and “insights,” in that liminal awareness right on the edge of our consciousness, and sometimes even at a level far below that, down within the deep unconscious itself. At that deepest level, Nick in fact *knew* that he was an alcoholic, and that the only hope he was ever going to have in his whole life had been presented to him, and that he too (just like Tim and Harry) had to be willing to make any sacrifices and undergo any hardships if he was to move towards that divine Light. And so — although his conscious rationalizations told him that *he* was not an alcoholic, that it did not *matter* even if he was, that this A.A. nonsense would not and could not work for someone as intelligent and practical and tough minded as him, and that he was “really” only going for the raisin pie and to keep his supply of library books coming — in fact, he *allowed himself* to be

persuaded into going to that first meeting, and into continuing to go to subsequent meetings.

That is why A.A. has always stressed that line from the epistle of James, “faith without works is dead” (James 2:17), and uses phrases like “fake it till you make it,” and “where the body goes the mind will follow,” and “don’t think, don’t drink, go to meetings.” Our own conscious rationalizations not only do not give us good advice — particularly if we are alcoholics! — but they do not even tell us truthfully who we really are, and what we are really doing at any given point, and what our real motivation is.

At A.A. meetings, one often hears from raw newcomers — stated in a plaintive, perplexed, “see how hard I’m trying” kind of voice — “I’m new to the program, see, and I still haven’t really figured out how it works, so I think I’ll just pass tonight.” They do not realize yet that A.A. has more than a little in common with Zen Buddhism. There is nothing to “figure out” in the pale rationalistic sense in which the newcomer still thinks that he must “understand” it, or not much anyway. The most important things are the work of God, or are going on deep down in our hearts and in the subconscious itself. No one of us human beings will ever “figure out” how God works miracles — or even does ordinary everyday things! And the subconscious and the subliminal are, by definition, outside our own conscious purview.

So come to meetings, come to meetings, come to meetings. Don’t pass judgments. Don’t play the comparison game (“I’ve never done what she says that she did when she was drinking, so you see I’m really not an alcoholic”). Every once in a while, give an honest try at doing one of the things that is suggested, and a genuinely honest evaluation of whether it in fact made things easier or better in any way. It does not matter at all whether you consciously believe that it will work. It is not faith in the sense of

conscious beliefs in conceptualized notions which will save us, or ever saved anybody. The faith that saves makes us keep on coming back, no matter how angry we get, no matter how much our intellects tell us that it is all nonsense, no matter what surface rationalizations we give ourselves to salve our pride. “I’m only going to meetings because my spouse bullied me into it.” “I’m only attending because it will look good to the judge when I have to go back for my second court hearing.” “I’m only going for the raisin pie!”

Just go, and be patient, and *let* it work. As St. Augustine said in his *Confessions*, “You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are *rest-less* until they find their rest in you.” And as the A.A. Big Book says in addition, “We found that God does not make too hard terms with those who seek Him.”⁹³ God does not even require of us, when he first reaches out in his grace to us, that we be consciously aware of the fact that it is actually him whom we seek.

“The heart has reasons which the head knows not of.”⁹⁴ Don’t worry about what you’re actually doing, or why you’re doing it, or flail away trying to “figure out how it works.” Just come to meetings, and start actually listening to your heart.

The Anonymous God

When Moses asked the voice from the Burning Bush what his or her name was, the voice at first said only “I am who I am” (Exodus 3:14). This simple message was the starting point for most of traditional Christian theology throughout the patristic and medieval period, in both western Catholic and eastern Orthodox Christianity. Almost all catholic and orthodox theologians were agreed that, strictly speaking, if the Higher Power who rules this universe has a “name,” that name is simply “I AM.” Otherwise, God is *anonymous* in the strict philosophical sense, for all other

names or descriptions that were given to this Higher Power were no more than metaphors or analogies or concessions of some other sort to the finite and limited capacities of the human mind. None of these metaphors or symbolic descriptions were literally true, only sign posts pointing toward a higher inexpressible reality. And the best Jewish philosophers from the ancient and medieval world, like Philo and Maimonides, along with the great Arab philosophers of medieval Islam, held the same position.

So in all reasonably orthodox Christian thought over the past two thousand years (and in orthodox Jewish and Islamic teaching, as well), speaking bluntly, if you can form a clear image in your mind of what God is, and you are taking this at all literally, you are only worshipping an idol.⁹⁵ Such a God does not exist, except in your own inner subjective fantasies.

What we are given are metaphors. The Hebrew Bible (what Christians call the Old Testament), the Christian New Testament, and the Muslim Koran are full of metaphors designed to act as sign posts, helping us look in the right direction when we are seeking to find the real Higher Power. In the Judeo-Christian Bible we see symbolic images piled one upon the other: the Higher Power is our Friend, the good Father (who holds us in his arms and feeds us from a spoon when we are babies, and holds our hands when we are first learning to walk), the Mother Lioness who defends her cubs, that power who works through Lady Wisdom (she who gives birth to the trees and flowers and animals, and the sun and moon and stars and the earth itself as well), the Good Boss for whom we work cheerfully and gladly, the King or Mighty Lord whom we are to serve gallantly and honorably as noble knights and ladies, the great ocean of Love in which we continually live and move and have our being.

How are we to know, then, when it is this Anonymous God who is speaking to us? The story of the Burning Bush tells us that this is the mysterious power who hears us when we cry out blindly into the darkness and the unknown for some kind of help — even if we do not at all believe that there is anyone there to hear us. The story of the Burning Bush tells us that this Anonymous God is the great power of universal life and healing, who does in fact hear our cries, and is willing to move heaven and earth to come to our aid.

Chapter 15

Doing God's Time

When Nick K. was given a life sentence in 1940 and sent off in handcuffs to be locked in a cell at the Indiana State Prison at Michigan City, he says, “I shut my mind off, and I turned my face to the wall, and I decided I was *through feeling*. That nobody or nothing was gonna make me turn around. And I could not do that life sentence. I just couldn’t do it. I was gonna stop the damn clock somehow. But then I had these dreams, you know, this terrible kind of hunger, that only an alcoholic knows *and I just want somebody to care, just once*. So I’d lay in my damn cell, and think about committing suicide.”

Filled with futile rage and resentment, plunged into deep clinical depression, racked with guilt over the heinously botched crime he had committed, acutely suicidal, Nick knew that he could not do the time.

Nick’s story was about more than that however. The quite real and extraordinarily frightening prison in northern Indiana in which he was confined was a metaphor for human existence itself.

Being in prison, of course, means a good deal more than simply being bodily confined behind locked doors. Taking an inmate outside the physical walls of the penitentiary and releasing him into the outside world did not in itself take the prisoner out of the *real* prison, or the *real* prison out of the prisoner’s mind. Every ex-con

knows that. Walking out the prison gate at the end of your sentence does not get the prison out of your brain.

But the core meaning of Nick's story pointed to something deeper even than that. In fact, most of us respond to his story in a way that makes it clear that we do understand at the primal level what the basic agony was which Nick was feeling. You do not have to be locked up in a penitentiary to feel it. We are all of us confronted over and over throughout our lives by walls we could never break through, by orders which we could easily resent but must obey, by intervals of time when we must be alone with ourselves, by periods of tedium and boredom. It can be a marriage or a divorce, a job or a period of involuntary unemployment, my own intrinsic physical or mental limitations or handicaps — or, oddly enough, truly extraordinary skill or talent or beauty, which can also create walls between ourselves and other people.

And we are all of us, at one level, confined within a box of space and time. The dynamic reality of God is somehow “outside” that box of space and time, not conformed to its rules. But the walls of the box obscure our vision, and make it very difficult indeed to apprehend who and what God is.

When God creates each of us as a finite human consciousness, he sends us into the world of *chronos*, of chronological time, and all of us must confront the issue: in what way will I do my time?

At this point in the story, God had given Nick the chance to learn how to do the time — the A.A. meeting had been started — and Nick was going to the meetings, even though he was pretending to himself that he was only going for trivial reasons, like the raisin pie. But if I have spent years messing up my life, and if I have a deeply damaged psyche and spirit, the healing process does not take place instantly. It is just like a broken bone or a deep cut. The human

spirit and the human psyche are just like the human body in that respect: all three take time to heal.

And at first, Nick was deeply into pretense. All practicing alcoholics spend a good deal of the time pretending and playing roles. They are continual actors and actresses — their whole surface is phony, and it is always changing, like a chameleon. So the story of Nick the pretender coming to the A.A. meetings is at first the tale of a man who simply cannot be honest, even with himself, clashing head-on with a different kind of world, the world of the spirit, where genuine honesty is the only way to walk without stumbling and falling. So when he first started going to the A.A. meetings that Tim Costello had set up, Nick says,

I sat on the end, because I'm a big shot. And down this side they'd go, [after] they'd propose the subject. I'm sharp, you know! This guy talks — hell, I could top that! When they come to me, I'm gonna be the biggest thing of the year — nothing to it!

And it comes along here, gets down to the end. And they say, "Nick," I say "Pass." [Laughter] "You keep at it, coming to the meeting, can't you even say your *name*, you know?" [Laughter] "Damn it, you said I could pass, and I *pass*." [Laughter]

Down [the other side of the table, after this] I don't hear nothing. 'Cause you know why? Inside I'm saying to myself, "God! Can't you say *something*? You know they're nice guys, they're trying to help you. Can't you be friendly? Can't you just open up and help 'em out?" So I didn't hear a word [past that point]. Be talking to myself, inside.

They rotated chairing the meeting each week, going around to each person in turn until everyone there had chaired a meeting, then

starting over again. So the week would come when they would remind Nick that it was going to be his turn to be the chairman for the next meeting, and poor Nick was plunged into a week of agony. Whose turn it was next was an automatic, unavoidable process, done in a pre-established rota, and everyone was expected to do his share.

You couldn't do anything, [but] I had to *escape* next week, you remember. They say, "Nick, next week is your week to be chairman, you know, something on the fifth step." "O.K., fine. Next week I can do it."

All week long: We're gonna have the biggest meeting, it's gonna be a drag 'em out, kill 'em dead meeting, man! Best in the world! Wrote stuff, planned stuff, read stuff — never got up there! [*Laughter*] Skipped the meeting. If I could, developed influenza, or a cold or something.

They come around and say to me, "Why don't you come to the meeting " I'd say, "I'm too smart. You guys are dumb. Don't you see that Costello making notes down there all the time? And you're sharing all that good stuff about the banks and the filling stations and the robbery? When you get done doing this time, baby, you gone *get* some time!" [*Laughter*] "Tim is a stool pigeon! He's turning all that junk in."

You know, I was afraid I'd admit the truth. It's always somebody else's fault. So they'd say to me, "Well, come on back." Tim never worried about that. He'd come talk to me, "Come on up there."

The major part of the defense system that an alcoholic uses to continue his alcoholic way of thinking, is to construe all his problems as *exclusively somebody else's fault*. The alcoholic plays a hard game of Victim. Someone else unfairly picked him out *personally* to persecute for something that "everybody else is doing too, why don't you punish everybody else who's doing it?" The

cards were stacked against him — how could you expect him to succeed? *If someone else would change his or her way of behaving, then my life would be O.K.*, and I would not have to be drinking myself into oblivion. There are a whole series of questions which a practicing alcoholic refuses to ask himself or herself:

Q. Was I *in fact* doing something myself that I shouldn't have been doing?

Q. Did I bring it on myself by going into the situation with a super pushy, aggressive, know-it-all approach, trying to tell everybody else how to run their business?

Q. Or did I bring it on myself by going into the situation with an obvious chip on my shoulder (“Hey buddy, I’m not somebody you can push around”), or with a hangdog, tail-between-my-legs cower at every hint of disapproval (“Please don’t kick me, please”).

Q. Did I pick an impossible person to do *that* with? (For example, the person who forms relationships and even marries people who are obviously incapable of sustaining a stable relationship based on both their past track record, and — if I am honest with myself — on their present basic attitude towards things in general.)

Q. Was I *really* powerless? And did I honestly even look at the full set of options I had in that situation?

Alcoholics do not want to ask those questions, because they would rather play Victim, and pretend that their lives would be O.K. if only that cruel Persecutor would quit behaving the way he or she is doing.

It can be as absurd as Nick pretending to himself that Tim Costello was nothing but a stool pigeon spying on the other prisoners undercover. Nick showed later on that he could give marvelous hour and half long A.A. leads without ever making specific, detailed, *indictable* mention of one single crime for which he had not already

served time. The idea that he could not talk at all without giving specific and incriminating confessions of crimes for which he had never been convicted was not only a totally absurd excuse, it was an incredible flimsy one as well. Because the alcoholic does not want to ask, “Well, if I cannot do thus-and-so, what is there in the situation — that is reasonably positive, or at least not hideously negative — that I *can* do ?”

Nick gave an almost identical lead when he was speaking to Al-Anon meetings, because he saw that so many Al-Anon’s play exactly the same psychological games. Because they must pretend to themselves their own superiority (“you see, it’s my job to save other people, and to make sure things work even when everyone else is behaving irresponsibly”), so many of them too find themselves walled off from truly mutual relationships with other people, in a psychological prison of their own making. So many of them too spend their lives changing like chameleons, playing this role or that, pretending to be thus or pretending to be so.

Perhaps they go to church, and know how to look terribly pious on the outside, but inwardly they could never admit that all is God and all is grace — not just for other people, but even for them. Perhaps they say “Oh no, I’m not angry” even when they’re furious, and pretend to be saints and martyrs, and preen themselves in a way that no real saint would ever do, and then get their own back covertly (whether consciously or unconsciously) by continually nagging and criticizing the other person for the smallest flaws, or by dragging their feet and practicing passive aggression, or by deliberately creating chaos to keep anyone else around them from having any real control in the slightest over their own lives. Perhaps they choose to constantly play the role of Caretaker for people who seem exceptionally weak and needy, because then they believe that they can continue to feel superior to at least somebody, and they can

continue to remain totally in charge. The underlying existential anxieties are the fear of rejection and abandonment and the fear of total helplessness and victimization. Unfortunately, in their panic they act in such a way that they always end up in what they fear most — caught in one way or another in the same kind of emotional trap in which Nick had been imprisoned in Michigan City — feeling rejected, miserably lonely, and totally helpless at the hands of people and things they can no longer even pretend to control.

When people first join Al-Anon, they usually do not like to admit that they — just like alcoholics — excuse some of their own most outrageously bossy and pushy and manipulative behavior by saying to themselves, “But it is obviously for the other person’s own good that I am acting. Why I’m saving them from themselves!” This is a topic of course that comes out over and over again in discussions at closed A.A. meetings — new albies have to be told that they will not start getting well until they learn to stop using the excuse that they have a right to do that to the other person because “I’m doing it for his own good.” Or the new member screams, “But don’t you understand? The other person was *wrong*. I was *right*!” And the old timer says back, “Have you ever thought about the fact that ‘dead right’ and ‘dead drunk’ is only one word different?”

And so Al-Anon’s who go into things playing Rescuer always come out the other end playing outraged Victims. And the same theme runs through all their bitter cries: if I could only learn the right tricks for manipulating other people and getting them to behave the way I, in my wisdom, know they really ought to behave, then my life would be all right. *It’s someone else’s fault*. Just like the albies.

And so Nick, in the beginning, continued to insist on the absurd excuse that Tim Costello was an undercover stool pigeon for the cops — his own fear of speaking was all *Tim’s* fault! But he kept coming to meetings (as long as it was not his turn to chair!), and

sooner or later the same thing always happens. The right person comes along — sent by God when you're finally ready — and tells your own life story. Almost exactly the same things happened to him or her too, with only a few surface details different, but in this person's case, all the "not yet's" that you prided yourself on not having done ("like those real alcoholics, the ones who really *need* to be here") had in fact ultimately taken place. And suddenly you see where your present way of life is actually going, and you cannot evade or deny it any more.

Or a person appears who shows you where the open door is *for you* — the one place in the psychological walls you have built around yourself where there is still an unlocked exit, where you can just turn the handle and walk out. And this latter was what finally happened in Nick's case.

[Sooner or later] you get that guy or that girl, so hang in there! And the guy come one day. And we're setting at meeting, they had an open meeting, and had a speaker. And the guy said, "I got to tell you this, fellas. I don't give a damn about you, I don't care about your condition, I don't care about your position *don't!* I don't want it, I don't care nothing about it.

"*Unless* you're so sick and tired of being sick and tired that you're contemplated *suicide*." And I thought, "Maybe he knows a way that don't hurt?" [*Laughter*] So I listened. *And he did.*

He said, "Take this little twelve-step card that pretty lady read, on how it worked and twelve steps. Take this twelve-step card *into the quiet of your own mind*. Sometime, you phony so-and-so, take the card and get away from everybody you're onto next, and *read* it. And when you read it," he said, "if you're like me, you're gonna get

down through there, you're gonna say, 'Well, that might be all right for them ordinary drunks. But that won't help *me*.'

"But don't worry about that. If you've exhausted all the other possibilities of change, say to yourself, **for one day I'm gonna pretend that this damn card is true, that somewhere there's a force, a force of creation, that cares about me. Not how, or why, just that it does. For some reason, it cares about me. It put me here for a purpose. And for that one day, I'm going to ask that force, without question, for twenty-four hours of sobriety, guidance, and direction. And then, in the process of the day, I'm going to talk to at least one other person who is attempting to walk this quiet life, about what happened.** Whether it happened, or whether it don't happen. Because *I've exhausted all the other possibilities*, try — *pretend* — one day at a time.

"Do three things," he said. We had just got a couple of copies of the Big Book. He said, "Take this, read this Big Book. Ask God for twenty-four hours of sobriety, guidance, and direction before you leave your cell. You let *God* talk to *you*, by reading in the Big Book. There's a story! That's God's story to us, about these first hundred people, how they learned to stay sober. Read a little in there, and respond somehow to what you read. Even if it's a page a day. That's God talking to people like you and me. And then you share this by talking about the results — honestly, without pretense — with one other person who's attempting to walk this quiet way."

That last part, of course, was the one thing that Nick at that point in his life was struggling so hard to avoid — that all alcoholics and Al-Anon's initially feel that they must avoid at all costs — talking about themselves and their own experiences with *another human being* who is attempting to walk that same quiet way, *honestly and without pretending*. Alkies and Al-Anon's feel exactly the same way

at the beginning: I must do it all by myself. I must be tough. I must be self-reliant. The most dangerous thing in the world is to leave myself open and vulnerable, because then I will be helpless. I must read books, “figure out how it works,” learn the right tricks and devices.

The one thing I fear most is saying to *any* other human being, “I feel totally *powerless*, and my life seems to be completely *unmanageable*. NOTHING I try to do seems to come out right. The only thing I have left to do is to cast myself totally on the mercy of something or other which can somehow be more powerful than me, wiser than me, *better* than me.” Having to say something like that openly to someone else frightens us almost to death. Usually, when we alkies and Al-Anon’s were children, we got caught in some situation at some point, where doing that would have gotten us beaten into the ground.

But now that I am an adult, and am no longer powerless in quite the same way that children can be, what is the worst that could happen, in an anonymous group, where, if I wish, I never have to face these people again? What if they are people like Ken Merrill and Nick Kowalski? Are men and women like that going to shame and humiliate me? Or are they simply going to say, “I know exactly how you feel. I’ve often felt the same way myself.” At any decent A.A. or Al-Anon meeting whatsoever, that is all anybody will ever say — perhaps just a simple nod of the head and an acknowledgment that this is pretty much the way everyone sitting around the table has felt many times in the lives.

And then — and only then — we can be freed from the monkey on our backs, the worm that gnaws within. And what is the reward? As Submarine Bill (a wise sponsor from the Elkhart area) tells his pigeons, “When I came into A.A., I met a stranger, and I learned to love that stranger, and that stranger was me.” Wouldn’t it be

marvelous to actually come to *like myself*? To be freed of the terrifying fear and the gnawing resentment and the continual dread of humiliation and rejection? To be able to go to bed at night, and drift gently off to sleep, feeling that the day has been satisfied?

The God-sent visitor to the penitentiary continued to explain to Nick how to open the door leading out of his own inner prison, and what would happen as he first began tentatively to crack it open a hairsbreadth.

“I’ll tell you what’s gonna happen before you start. If you’ll do this one day at a time, and just *pretend*: one day you’ll get a day, you go to bed at night, and you have a feeling inside with which you’re kind of satisfied. Somehow you feel like the day has somehow been satisfied.”

Now it’s important to note how Nick puts that. I will only truly be able to say “I feel satisfied” when I can feel honestly that the day has been satisfied. This is part of learning to do the time. Each twenty-four hours is a direct gift to me from God. Invariably it will have marvelous presents in it for me, free gifts of God’s grace, some small and some unbelievably large. Can I learn to go to bed at night, having lived the day in such a way that I can feel fairly sure that I actually utilized and enjoyed a fair number of the generous gifts and graces that were given to me that day? Did I take time to smell the roses? Did I perform some act of generosity for which I genuinely expected no thanks or return?

There is one marvelous person in the A.A. fellowship in northern Indiana who has a regular custom during the winter months, which he developed to make sure he remembers this. When he goes out to the parking lot at the place where he works, at the end of the day, and finds that he has to scrape the ice off his own car’s windshield before

driving off, he will also quietly scrape the hard-frozen ice off the windshield of the automobile next to his. Then he just drives off. He says he never even knows whose automobile it was. He says performing that little private ritual (which someone in the program finally caught him at) gives him a better perspective on everything else he does throughout the day — he is not doing it to “gain merit in heaven” or to “make God think he is a good guy” or anything like that. As he puts it, one of his own greatest character flaws is the desire that can spring up in his soul, “to give someone else what they deserve.” Then, he says, “I have to remind myself of where I would be now, if God had given me what I deserved.” Instead God gave him forgiveness for his own many evil deeds, a forgiveness which he did not at all deserve. And even more, God gave him countless gifts and presents which he also did not deserve, and often did it totally anonymously. Only now, through the eyes of faith, was he able to discern *the anonymous gifts* of God — the ones which God was giving him even when he gave God in return neither thanks nor gratitude. This A.A. member says that giving a total stranger the anonymous little gift of scraping the ice off that person’s windshield, for which he will never receive any thanks, reminds him forcibly of the extraordinarily generous way God has always treated him.

The A.A. program is, like Zen Buddhism, a continual confrontation with paradox. Sometimes we have to “play pretend” to find out what is true and real. If I have spent my life pretending that if I were smart enough or righteous enough or tough enough or manipulative enough or nasty enough, that I could take care of myself totally by myself — then why not just *pretend* something totally different for a while — that there is a gracious Higher Power in charge, who genuinely *cares* what ultimately happens to me? Then evaluate honestly which “pretend act” in fact works best.

If I genuinely think, when I first come into the twelve-step program, that belief in some sort of caring God or Higher Power or Healing Force is only the figment of the imagination of the *hopelessly naive*, then let me at least acknowledge that my belief that I can be in control of my own life in the way I have been trying to do is the figment of the imagination of the *terminally stupid*. So if I am actually convinced that it is *all* pretending, why not “pretend” what makes my life go right? In my old way of life, all I did was pretend, and play roles, and try to convince myself that if I just tried harder I could actually make my total egomania work. It was all pretending, and a lot of it was a pretty stupid kind of pretending.

If at the beginning, *I am only pretending to live without pretense*, I will find that if I do it long enough, I am actually living without pretense. The paradoxes of A.A. are the kind which, if we let ourselves sink into them freely without flailing around so much, will reveal a higher truth and a higher logic. And then instead of sinking in life, we will discover to our amazement that we are able to just float.

When I learn to let go and ask for help, when I learn to stop “trying to figure it all out,” when I learn to receive God’s gifts with conscious gratitude, and when I learn from that how to give freely to others myself, I will see what it means for the day to be satisfied.

And the visitor to the prison A.A. group said that if Nick just pretended all these things for long enough, one day he would get a day that ended that way.

And he said, “If you’re like me, you never had one. You won’t know what it is till you get one. Not ‘Mom ain’t satisfied,’ or the kids, or the warden. You somehow will feel that the day has been satisfied.

“You go on a little bit further, just pretending, saying the prayers *because the people who bring the message to*

you say that's what you do. And pretty soon, you'll get one day in which you'll feel there's a reasonable reason for being alive.

“Did you ever sit on the side of an accident, everybody bloody and running, and you been driving the car, and you ain't got a scratch? You say, how come (to yourself inside) all this guilt you got? How come all these nice people are hurt, and I ain't hurt? You know, I done that. You know? And you can swap that for a day in which you feel that there's a reasonable reason for being alive.”

This last little story has to have hit the young Nick very hard. He had been totally unwilling to look at his own overpowering feelings of guilt for the murder he had committed. He wanted someone to tell him that the central problem in his life was something else — not that.

But no one can kill other people, or injure other people (whether physically or psychologically) without paying an inner price. No one at all. Do not let anyone tell you different. It cannot be nullified by rejecting religion, or rebelling against and ridiculing your parents, or falling into psychobabble about learning to be free from “Freudian superegos and neurotic guilt complexes.” Human beings were created by God so that their intrinsic nature is to be able to empathize with other human beings. We could not hold even ordinary conversations without having at least an elementary idea about what the other person is thinking and feeling when he or she says such-and-such.

So when we injure other people, we see and hear and feel the pain which we have produced, and this awareness enters our memories, and (as Freud correctly said) memories which have heavy emotional loading may be pushed down into the subconscious, but they can never be erased. The brain includes all its subconscious

content in its calculations whenever we make decisions, leaving to the conscious part of the brain the task of coming up with handy pseudo-logical “explanations” to justify some of the stranger and weirder behavior produced by these subconscious emotionally-charged memories.

When we injure other people, therefore, even if we consciously push our awareness of their pain out of our minds, the memories are still there burrowing deeper and deeper into the lower recesses of the brain. So the other person’s pain becomes internalized in us, as the psychologists put it, and the gnawing of this other-pain is what we call true guilt. It is very different from the merely neurotic guilt which comes from breaking blind superego strictures and internalized parental admonitions and the mechanical, legalistic rules of fear-ridden pseudoreligiosity, in ways that actually do no real injury to anyone.

The twelve-step program has excellent ways of dealing with guilt, and separating out real guilt from merely neurotic guilt (and good methods also for distinguishing real guilt from toxic shame). The fourth and fifth steps allow us to at least start sorting out the guilt issues, and the fifth step begins the actual healing of the soul-poisoning kind of shame. The eighth and ninth steps deal with the real guilt which is remaining. But perhaps the most important thing that A.A. does is simply to introduce us to the healing love of a God who genuinely cares what happens to us, and who slowly shows us, by his actual actions, that he forgives us and does not hold the past against us now. In spite of all the harm we did — as well as all the good we should have done that we *failed* to do — we discover that he’s still in our corner, and that he is still rooting for us and giving to us and carrying us whenever we really need it.

And the visitor told Nick that he could be washed clean of even his terrifying guilt. It did not matter at the beginning if he thought

that all this was fantasy and imagination and wish-fulfillment run riot, as long as he did exactly what the messenger sent to him asked him to do. If necessary, do it in a spirit of “let’s pretend.”

And he said, “Just keep pretending.” He said, “If you’re like me, you’re great at pretending. You’ve been playing roles all your life. And you can pretend this one as well. You’re one of the best actors in the world. Part of the way we survive. About the only marketable quality we had was the ability to pretend.

“So you *can*. And one day you’ll look at the chair you occupy tonight, and realize you put to sleep those qualities which are making suicide necessary, in this hour. To sleep! And that you don’t have to give them life again, unless you personally climb back. *You* climb back.”

How do we keep from climbing back into the qualities which made us suicidal and continuously self-destructive? The fourth step is where each of us must identify the things that lead us back into the path to doom. Any kind of festering resentment will do it. Nick found that megalomaniacal ambition could lead him astray every time it started taking over. So Nick’s own personal self-preservation regimen was clear enough in his mind by the time he gave this lead:

When a resentment sticks up in my life, or a tremendous ambition, and it bothers me for a few days, I know I’ve got to do something about that. And I know what to do about it. I know what to do about it. And I get hung up like the rest of us.

And the man who came to talk to the A.A. group finished with a simple admonition. All the self-doubt and skepticism and cynicism Nick was feeling *about everything* was O.K. You not only did not

have to understand how it worked in order for it to work, you did not even have to believe that it would work in order for it to work — just as long as you actually did it.

“Now,” he said, “if you mistrust yourself and you disbelieve in God and you hate your fellow man — give thanks! You’ve got a lot less to unlearn. Because this program *positively guarantees* that if you practice the proper motion, you’ll create the proper emotion. *If you practice the proper motion, you’ll create the proper emotion.*”

Nick sat back overwhelmed. His old thought structures had suddenly been undermined at their base. Alcoholism is a disease of perception,⁹⁶ and suddenly his old way of perceiving the world was tumbling down. He was not sure he recognized anything around him anymore. Everything looked different and strange, and he felt a sense of total disorientation.

So I went to my cell that night, I read the card, I said, “Hell, I’m insane, I’m not an alcoholic. That can’t help me. I know I’m insane. Hell, I’m crazier than a fruitcake. It’ll never help me. But I ain’t got nothing else to try. Ain’t got a friend in the world. There’s nobody I can talk to, nobody I communicate with. In A.A., I’m playing all the roles, trying to be everybody’s man. Can’t be myself. *Men* can’t do that.”

Telling God to change me. And I don’t have to *change me*, all I have to do is let me *open up* and turn me loose.

Can’t do that. Can’t do it.

So I decided to *try*. It’s been a long time ago. That’s the reason I’m here tonight, and the only reason.

The first of the twelve steps reads simply, “We admitted we were powerless over alcohol — that our lives had become unmanageable.” That is what he is basically talking about here, Nick says. And it will work for things in addition to alcohol. It will also work for all the different kinds of things that can lead the people in Al-Anon into ultimate despair: it will start healing their need to be Rescuers and Caretakers, or their catastrophically low self-esteem, or their adrenaline addiction, or their desperate craving to be in control, or their use of someone else to act out and rebel and attack other folks for them, or whatever it is that is driving them into linking themselves with destructive people over and over again. And it will work for drug addiction or a gambling addiction, and for anything else like that where I am compulsively destroying myself, and no amount of will power or self-analysis or talk-talk-talk seems to help.

I’m not a professional do-gooder. I don’t run around the world trying to change people. But I owe Tim, and all those guys who brought me to this day, the obligation to pass that word on. It’ll work for anybody in this room.

And I don’t really give a damn whether you’re an alcoholic or not, whether you’re an addict of any form — *any* form of addiction. If you take that first line and change it [replacing the word alcohol with your particular problem, and] try to work with somebody who has a like problem, and follow down through the inventory steps into the knowledge and experience with God, you can get free of that problem. ’Cause you won’t need it. You just won’t need it any more.

We human beings are all temporal creatures. We are all “doing time” here on this planet earth. As long as all I am doing is trying “to do my own time,” I will end up self-destructive, incredibly destructive to others, and locked at the end into terminal despair. I

will eventually find myself locked up in a cage, a psychological prison cell of my own making. The escape route from this prison is simple: truly realizing that I was sent here to this life on earth to do time, but to do God's time. Nick said it simply and beautifully:

What it done for me, was helped get it possible to do the time. I'm still doing time. I'm sent for doing time: God's time NOW.

Before we done our own time. I done what I wanted, when I wanted, *right now*, soon as I wanted, and it kept me caged so I couldn't do nothing!

But now I do God's time, and I come down here and talk to you people, and meet a few nice people, and we have a nice dinner together, and somehow life is rich and rewarding.

That's it: it helped me to do time.

Chapter 16

Little Boys and Girls in Grown-ups' Bodies

As he started taking the A.A. program seriously, Nick began to discover the same thing that Ken M. had observed: adult alcoholics were, with extraordinary frequency, people who had been traumatized at one particular point during their childhoods with such severity that, at many levels, they ceased to grow emotionally past that point.⁹⁷

As one goes to a number of A.A. meetings, it becomes clear that sometimes it was truly gross physical trauma: a woman who first started to be sexually molested by an adult when she was only three years old (and already with penetration even at that age), a man who remembers his father deliberately running him over with a tractor when he was a child, breaking both his legs, and then (along with a male friend) sexually molesting him while the little boy lay immobilized in traction in the hospital bed.

Although the early Freudian theorists focused on things that happened to their patients during earliest childhood, it has been discovered that the immediate prepubescent period and the beginnings of the transition into puberty can be psychologically just as crucial (in terms of long-lasting traumatic aftereffects) as things that happened when we were two or three years old. And one sees

that in A.A. also, when people talk about their childhoods. A long term A.A. member was ten years old when he walked into the family kitchen after hearing a loud bang; his father had just shot his mother dead, and while the young boy stared in horror, his father put the gun to his own head and committed suicide in front of his son's eyes.

It need not even be perceived as abuse or abnormal trauma at the time. An adolescent boy who is being surreptitiously sexually used by an adult woman may feel a glow of smug pride and think that it makes him more sophisticated than the other guys his age, but in fact there are emotions and feelings involved which are so overwhelming to an adolescent boy that it will be very difficult for him to continue maturing properly at the sociosexual level past that point; it would not be surprising to see him still, in his forties and fifties, acting out like a hormone-crazed sixteen-year-old trying to seduce every woman he meets or involved in some kind of bizarre, compulsive sexual behavior.

Even if *many* men, in the neighborhood where a person grew up, savagely beat their wives and children, it is a mistake for that person later on to minimize the effect of the beatings he himself received. "Oh, it wasn't really *that* bad," and "Well, we just have to learn to leave the past behind us," are not signs of mental health and psychological strength when the person saying it is clearly still bearing all sorts of crippling psychological scars from those events. And if we look at anyone who is an alcoholic, or married to one, or in the same immediate family with one, or who continually forms friendships and intimate relationships with people who drink to obvious excess — and we discover that this person has never thoroughly inspected the necessary psychological implications of this in the context of a good, hard-working A.A. or Al-Anon program — we can be guaranteed that this person has unhealed psychological wounds from somewhere back in the past.

It also need not have been traumas that were overt and open and obvious. One man in A.A. was twelve when his family moved out into the country where there were no other children around to play with, and simultaneously he was jumped up a grade, so that all of his classmates at school were one to two years older. The other kids either harassed him and ridiculed him, or totally ignored him. The teachers were oblivious to him. His mother took adequate physical care of him, but was extremely narcissistic and totally unable to give a child any real warmth and nurturing.

His father had been his lifesaver, because he had been an extremely compassionate man, who understood kids and their interests and their sense of humor. But that year, the owner of the business the father worked for retired and turned it over to his incompetent son, who quickly began to run the business into the ground. That job had been the pinnacle of his father's career, and now he saw it collapsing under him, piece by piece. Now his father would burst out with anger without warning, over extremely trivial things, or even over things which made no sense to the twelve-year-old boy at all.

By the end of that year, the boy had been reduced to walking through most days like a zombie, totally cut off for all practical purposes from any other meaningful human contact, and blocking out all real feeling. An adult would have found such an experience a terrible year, but would have had freedoms and resources and learned knowledge to draw on. A twelve-year-old boy however lacked the psychological resources to hold up at all. It was like a little twenty-foot boat out at sea, being swamped by a series of forty-foot-high waves. A larger ship would have found it a rough sea, but this small boat was simply overwhelmed by the huge waves.

The boy was extremely tough. He survived, and (on the surface) was extremely successful after he became an adult. But having

failed to fully make the transition from a twelve-year-old to a thirteen-year-old, he was only able to negotiate the subsequent phases of growing up in stunted or distorted forms. The twelve-year-old boy locked up inside him was actually stronger psychologically than the fifty-year-old man who came in for therapy, which made it necessary to go at things in a different way than normally. It took four years of A.A. and two years of extensive and creative psychotherapy to start healing some of the psychological problems which were making him so miserable.

The damage can also be done by parents who bicker and quarrel incessantly, and make continual threats of leaving and moving out. Even if the adults insist that sometimes they just get a little hot-tempered, and that of course it is a stable home they are providing, it is hard even for a trained, experience marriage counselor to predict with total accuracy whether that couple are going to stay together or not. For a small child, with no store of worldly knowledge to make comparisons, every threat made by the compulsively argumentative parents is taken as dead serious, and as a fundamental threat to the child's very life. A small child *knows* that little children cannot survive on their own without adult help — they will literally starve or freeze to death — and they respond to what they interpret as impending death in the way that any small animal would. They are terrified literally out of their minds.

As adults, people who suffered this sort of thing often play the minimalization game and try to pretend that “it wasn't really that bad” back when they were children, and try to turn it into an object of laughter. Erich Berne talked about that kind of laughter, and called it gallows laughter — it rings in the ears like the attempt of a man to crack jokes as he is being led up the steps of the hangman's scaffold. It is an extreme pathological denial of the horror of the real situation, and is very different from the gentle, merry laughter of the

A.A. meeting, which is a totally realistic assessment of the total absurdity seen so often in human behavior.

So we can get stuck psychologically at age three or six or twelve or sixteen, or anywhere along the line, and never fully grow up emotionally past that point. Once you spot the age at which a recovering alky or Al-Anon got stuck, their apparently irrational and irresponsible behavior starts to make sense. Yes, the person's body is thirty years old, or forty, or fifty, but his or her decision-making ability is only that of a little child.

There is no doubt of course about the central trauma in Nick Kowalski's early life: when he was only six years old, his mother died during the terrible worldwide influenza epidemic that began in 1918, and then his father simply abandoned him to the alien world of the orphanage. Now that he was taking the A.A. program seriously, and beginning to get honest with himself, he had to confront the fact that his life ever since had been dominated by horrifying fears of abandonment. All human beings have existential anxiety about rejection and abandonment in the same way that all human beings must deal with the existential anxiety of helplessness and death. But Nick had very little to hang onto whenever even a tiny thing forced him to look down into the bottomless abyss of *das Nichts*, of total existential Nothingness and negation and Non-Being Itself.

I got so I talked to the guys at the meeting. I got so I tried to share my fears — terrible, frightening fears. I didn't have to be [the "brave young man who didn't even cry" anymore].

One of the great days of my life was when a guy challenged me to fight, and I could tell him, "No man, I'm scared. I'm the yellowest bastard you ever seen. [*Laughter*] I've got a yellow streak starts here, and goes out through the middle of my feet. I don't want to fight."

One of my sponsors who's now dead, Swede, said to me one day, "When I was a little boy," he said, "a guy called me a phony s.o.b., and I had to *fight him*. All my life, every time I got drunk, somebody was always calling me a phony s.o.b., and I had to fight him."

Said, "I got into A.A., and I took an inventory, and *I'm a phony son of a bitch!*" "Now," he said, "when a guy calls me a phony s.o.b., I say, 'Man, you sure know me!'"
[Laughter]

So I can say I'm afraid, I'm frightened, I'm a little child in a big six-foot of carcass about two years old. And I never really learned to walk out in this world. Without God's help, and without your companionship, I can't make it at all. Can't make it at all.

What a marvelous paradox! Nick started out just pretending to live the A.A. program — although keeping up the act carefully and faithfully all day long — and pretending that there was a loving God who cared. After a while, he discovered that he was no longer pretending any more when he was acting that way, but even more importantly, that he no longer had to pretend *about anything* anymore.

Nick then discovered two things. Openly acknowledging my own greatest vulnerabilities in front of other, non-shaming human beings, suddenly allows me to be genuinely compassionate with other people. And when I tell at least one other human being about my greatest shames, it starts turning me into a person who is more and more impervious to the attempts of others to humiliate and shame me.

And so another delightful paradox appears. Having finally admitted his own profound fear and lack of courage, he turns into a person who can walk fearlessly through a jeering rabble, with their taunts and insults simply rolling off him like water off a duck's back.

At the top layer of the onion that was Nick's psyche was a phony braggadocio, a totally bogus and fraudulent attempt to appear always brave and courageous, always in charge of himself. It was all fantasy, all lies.

The last few years I was inside the prison, I worked with the parole department . . . before I went outside as a trusty. And I used to run around telling all the big lies. All these guys were talking about their success with women — I'd never had any, see, but I had to make mine up. And I couldn't go with ordinary women, so I had someone in the photography department [come into] the parole department, and had the photographer take some pictures of me, and put it in cars with Lana Turner. [*Laughter*] These big long cars, you know: they'd get a picture out of a magazine, and they could transpose these persons. I had four or five snapshots, showing "proof positive" that I'd been a big operator on the street!

When this top layer of the onion was peeled away, with all its bragging and blatant lies, there was instead a terrifying maelstrom of swirling fears and dreads. This was not so much phony as it was over-exorbitant and excessive — a frightened child's nightmare instead of a mature adult's rational assessment.

But there was another layer to the onion even below that, and here Nick was a man of quite extraordinary braveness and unbelievable toughness and courage. Any alcoholic who survives long enough to make it into A.A. will invariably be like that in reality, down deep. Bravest, toughest people in the world. Survivors. But the phony surface bragging and swaggering and showing off keeps them from acting like truly brave people most of the time.

There is a profound truth to the concluding three lines of the St. Francis Prayer, which the A.A. *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* suggests as a model for the kind of regular prayer and meditation which will improve our conscious contact with God. The first part of the prayer goes this way, we remember:

Lord, make me a channel of thy peace, that where there is hatred I may bring love, that where there is wrong I may bring the spirit of forgiveness, that where there is discord I may bring harmony, that where there is error I may bring truth, that where there is doubt I may bring faith, that where there is despair I may bring hope, that where there are shadows I may bring light, that where there is sorrow I may bring joy. Lord, grant that I may seek rather to comfort than to be comforted, to understand than to be understood, to love than to be loved⁹⁸

And then the prayer concludes with these all-important three lines: *“For it is by self-forgetting that one finds. It is by forgiving that one is forgiven. It is by dying that one awakens to eternal life.”*

So I got busy talking to the guys, the guys who got Dear John letters from their wife. You quit trying to explain it away, or all of that “no good broad” stuff. You just let them know you were there. You knew she had things to do, and things he had to do, and the things had suddenly changed purpose. And you just let him know you was around, and tried to pass the time with him, and kept around, so they could handle it.

The guys who got paroled, you start writing letters to people in A.A. and others, trying to get 'em jobs and sponsors.

You tried to never lie to each other, tried *never* to lie to each other. And over a period of time, you became companions.

The original eight guys in that group — in the first meeting there was maybe eighteen, and then we dwindled to eight, and we got stuck there, because we became “a Salvation Army unit without the drum”! [*Laughter*] If you’re in prison, you’re not very anonymous, you know that. You better have reason for being where you are, and they always hold the A.A. meetings during the baseball game, and they’d say, “Bob — nineteen-two-forty-six — visit,” and he got up and walked to the deputy’s stand, and the runner took him out to his visit.

And they’d say, “Kowalski — twenty-one-one-oh-six — *drunk meeting*.” [*Laughter*] I’ve got to get up in front of these guys, and walk around here while they’re yelling all kinds of comments at me: “Hey baby, we’ll get you a drum for Christmas!” You know, “Salvation Army unit!” and “Sing songs in chapel!” [*Laughter*]

So we were stuck together because there’s not much to laugh about in prison, and then we got involved with each other. And of the original eight guys, I can account for five today. And one of the others died sober too. We lost track of [two of] them, they may be perfectly sober and beautiful.

At this point, Nick in his lead returned to his earlier theme once again: that of the recovering alcoholic in A.A. as a little boy or little girl, stuck in an adult body, learning how to grow up.

One of these eight guys, I got to tell you about. We begin to share in the prison, and first guys who went out of our little group, no different than yours, *had* to make it. *There was proof positive* that this program worked for “the convict.”

Here's "a convict" who's also an alcoholic. This poor guy's name was Blackie Williams, and everybody's telling him, "Hey baby, you go out and you make it!" And the guys outside are saying, "Come on baby, we'll help you!" And they got him a job, got him a room, and got him a hotel bed. They brought in a woman for a night — they wanted to make sure he was happy! *[Laughter]*

Got him a watch, and got him an alarm clock Got drunker than hell! *[Laughter]*

He was my kind of thief I was the kind of thief that Blackie Williams was — went where my thirst took me. And I done what it demanded, to get the next drink.

And Blackie was the guy who carried a little piece of steel when he was drinking, and he'd come up behind you when you were going down the street, with all them packages in your hands, and you had your purse hanging here. Nip your purse — you didn't know it was gone until you got in your car, and you just had the strap, and he had the money and was gone.

So he didn't get much time. He had a one-to-ten to begin with, which is grand larceny in Indiana, and then he'd go out and he'd steal a purse or two, and get drunk, and they'd send him back for a parole violation, and they'd give him thirty, sixty, or ninety days.

And he'd be back in, and he'd come back into A.A., and he sat through the meetings. The fellas would say, "Didn't they help you?" He'd say, "Yeah, they helped me." "Well, how come you didn't make it?" "I dunno uh slipped, you know." He'd go through, so he'd pull thirty days, he'd go back out. Then he'd come back.

Third time he come back, the fellas said, "You know, this guy here" Some of the sentences here I love, because we hear them too out here on the streets, no different. The guys held a meeting, and they said, "You know, this guy may be an alcoholic, but he's got OTHER

PROBLEMS.” [Laughter] “He’s got OTHER PROBLEMS. *Can’t stay sober.*” [Even longer laughter]

“Now,” they said, “you know, he’s spoiling *our* reputation.” [Laughter] So they voted him out of A.A. Now you got to be pretty low on the social ladder when they vote you out of A.A.! [Laughter]

The warden come up, and he said, “How come, you know, Blackie can’t come to meetings anymore?” “Cause we’ve analyzed his case. He’s got OTHER PROBLEMS.” [Laughter] The warden had his package [of prison records]. He says, “He’s got a hundred and eighty-eight arrests for drunk he’s the most alcoholic alcoholic *here!!!*” Said, “He’s president, he can vote *you* out!” [Laughter]

So Blackie come back, and he sat through the meetings, and he’s a southern guy, and he didn’t have much to say, and he went back and forth, and then he went out. Six times in eight years.

Well, the second thing they done after they voted him out was one thing, those tragic things that sometimes we’re guilty of, when people don’t fit our purposes: we dummied up on him. You know, ignore him and he’ll go away. Well, he didn’t go away. Every time you turned around, he’d be sitting there. [Laughter]

So on the eighth time he was going out — they have a rigid rule that if you was going out on parole, they had to ask you where you was going, and you know, wish you well, and say a prayer with you, and ask if you had anything to say — they said, “Blackie, have you got anything? You haven’t got anything to say, have you?”

[Blackie replied very slowly in his deep southern accent] “Yeah. Yeah.” [Laughter]

He come up, and he said, “I want to tell you fellas that I know I’m not the most popular man in this room. But,” he said, “I think I owe you something — something in my

experience.” He said, “Most of you here I know. We started in boys’ school when we were this high. We went from boys’ school to reformatory, and now we’re big shots, we’re in the penitentiary.

“Most of us, me included, never learned to live outside of a bottle, or outside of the bar. Never! Never learned to live! I never learned to walk in the free world without support. Booze supports me outside. When they lock me up in a penitentiary, I don’t have to drink. Because I can make it behind bars — I don’t have any responsibility, and nobody gives a damn . . .

“But in the eyes of a few people [from the A.A. groups outside] who’ve been coming in here and talking to us, I have seen a quality — *a quietness of mind* — that I can see. It’s something I hunger for very much.

“And when I first started coming back up here, when you guys didn’t want me any more, I had to tell God that I’d sell my soul for that kind of quiet.

“I talked to my God, and I found out something. In his eyes, I am not yet one day old. I am not yet one day old. I’m kinda,” he said, “for all this tragedy, like this little bitty boy about two years old, and his mother’s trying to teach him to walk. I’m just like that — in God’s eyes.

“And some days, when the little kid dirties his diapers too often, and he’s mean and dirty and he’s messy and he don’t walk and he don’t do anything right . . .”

. . . some days it takes all the love anyone’s got, just to stand to have this little kid around at all. But all he’s doing is trying his best — the best he knows how — to grow up.

There is a Greek word which appears frequently in the New Testament. The adjectival form is *teleios*, and the noun formed from it is *teleiôsis*. In the King James Version they were misleadingly translated as “perfect” and as “perfection” respectively. This state is

held out in the New Testament, over and over, as the proper goal of the true spiritual life (as in Matthew 5:48 for example). Now we would all be in real trouble if we had to be literally *perfect* in the modern English sense of that word. With its always unfailingly sure grasp of spiritual truth, the A.A. Big Book says that if we look at this particular issue, the proper goal is to live so as to achieve perpetual “spiritual *progress* rather than spiritual perfection.”⁹⁹

The ancient Greek word *teleios*, however, did not ever mean “perfect” in the inhuman, neurotically perfectionistic sense. The people who produced the King James Version in 1611 got the word wrong, under the influence of the medieval Latin Vulgate, which had translated it as *perfectus* in passages like Matthew 5:48. In the original Greek, *teleios* could mean one of two things:

(1) Being essentially all in one piece, not being maimed. A sheep or a goat could not be sacrificed at Solomon’s temple unless it was *teleios*, that is, it was not acceptable if it had one leg missing, or an ear ripped off, or an eye gouged out. As a psychological metaphor this means that the goal of the spiritual life is to take a fragmented soul, at war with itself and torn by inner torment, and re-integrate it and make it whole again. As a higher spiritual metaphor, it means taking those who are spiritually blind and deaf and lame, and showing them how to live in the conscious knowledge of God’s presence, and see his glory all around them in the things that he has made, and hear his guidance and leading as we proceed about our daily work.

(2) Even more importantly, **the word *teleios* means adult or mature or grown-up, as opposed to being an infant, a child, a baby.** It can be applied to animals and plants as well as to human beings. A puppy becomes *teleios* when it grows up into a mature dog. The *telos* (maturational goal) of an acorn, as Aristotle said, was to become an oak tree.

In 1 Corinthians 13, the great New Testament hymn on love which was read so devotedly by early A.A. people, the apostle Paul (if you look carefully at the original Greek) plays continuously on both meanings of the word. Even in English translation, it is easy to see how he moves in a single phrase from *teleios* as learning to be adult, and finally putting away childish things, to *teleios* as taking the partial and fragmented and making it whole again.

So what Nick was trying to tell his audience was not just a facile pop psychology observation on the effects of early childhood trauma. Quite the contrary. Achieving true adulthood IS the central goal of the entire spiritual life. *All* of us are wounded children down deep, and not just the alcoholics and Al-Anons. And *none* of us will attain our full, mature humanity until we learn how to grow up. And *no one* can do that full growing up without first throwing themselves as little children onto the care of the divine Parent — the Father and Mother of us all — and joining one of those little bands which, at various points throughout history, have formed the true Family of the Healing Spirit.

Nick told Blackie's story to remind us of something very important. When I am still new to the program, and I stumble into my first twelve step meetings, I am not a bad person, not an evil person. I'm just a little child who, if left unsupervised, can really mess things up, and even do terrible harm to myself — and to other people too. That's if I'm left without someone to watch out for me.

And God tells us that if we will let him — if we will stop pretending that we are never, ever frightened, that *we* never cry, that the mess we've made is always someone else's fault — God tells us that if we will let him, he will watch out for us, out in that big, frightening world, and provide us with another person who will help him watch over us.

But God cannot do this until I honestly admit to him, to you, and to myself — like Blackie finally forced himself to do — the little child who I actually am. Then, even if I stumble, God and you people in the program will pick me back up, and keep teaching me how to walk, patiently and lovingly. We alcoholics, as Nick says, simply are not good people without God's help, and without each other.

For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will be known fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love. *1 Corinthians 13:9-13 (NRSV)*

Part Six

Bill H. and Jimmy M.: Winning Inclusion for Black Alcoholics

Chapter 17

Jimmy's Bar

One of the greatest barriers to establishing a truly inclusive A.A. movement in the St. Joseph River valley in the 1940's was the color bar, which proved to be a much more difficult wall to cross than the wall surrounding the Michigan City Prison. But in 1948, Jimmy Miller and Bill Hoover became the first two black people to join the South Bend A.A. group, and the process of trying to break through the manifold fears and taboos of racial discrimination began to take place.¹⁰⁰

Jimmy Miller was a strong and impressive woman. For many years, she owned and ran a popular tavern, called Jimmy's Bar, open twenty hours a day, from six a.m. one morning to two a.m. the next morning. Her place catered to the factory workers at the Studebaker plant, who came from all three shifts, both at lunch breaks and after work. It was a decent, honest place. If a worker drank too much on payday, pockets stuffed with money, Jimmy personally saw to it that he got home safely, and with the money for his family still intact.

Jimmy later married Bill Hoover, who had come into A.A. at the same time she did, and was with him till the end of his life (he died in 1986). She herself passed away two years ago,¹⁰¹ so in this second edition of the book we are giving her full name. Bill was an industrious and dependable man who worked at the Studebaker

factory till it went out in 1963, then at Kaiser Jeep (now AM General) till he retired.

Bill Hoover was — along with Brownie and Goshen Bill — one of the three legendary early black leaders in A.A. in the St. Joe river valley area, whose name and personality, and strength and ability to guide others into the path to sobriety, is still remembered all these years later by white and black folk alike.

Jimmy was almost 73 when she talked about her own early experiences in March of 1993 with G.C. (who edited this volume) and Raymond L., came into the program in 1974 and is a much-loved A.A. figure himself. It was one of those marvelous early spring days in northern Indiana, with blue sky overhead, and sunshine bringing out all the colors. The lawns were all freshly green now as the grass was coming back to life again, out of its winter slumber, and buds and new little leaves covered the trees that shaded all the houses and lined every street. There was the scent of rich earth still damp from the melted snow, and new vegetation. The earliest flowers were now out everywhere: this was the season of waxy white northern magnolia and sun-bright yellow forsythia, royal purple redbud and lemon yellow daffodils.

Jimmy was still a woman of commanding presence, tall, thin, elegant, beautiful and poised. Her house was perfectly kept and immaculately spotless inside, but it was also the kind of place where you were not afraid to sit down in the chairs and relax. The conversation was interrupted a time or two by people coming in to seek her advice and counsel even while the interview was going on. For many of her neighbors, Jimmy was not the pioneer of black A.A., but simply the local woman of wisdom whom you sought out when you needed help.

Much of the material which follows came from a tape of that conversation.

Jimmy was born in Wayne, Arkansas, she said, in 1920, but her parents left that area when she was only three months old, and ended up settling in South Bend, where she started school and spent all the rest of her life. She still had relatives back in Arkansas, and remembers one trip she made back there in 1956 or 57. That was only a year or two before Governor Orval Faubus of Arkansas heightened racial tensions even further in that state by defying the Supreme Court's desegregation order, closing all the public schools in Little Rock and attempting to reopen them as "private" schools, so they could remain racially segregated. She still remembered vividly the way black folks were treated by some of the white people in Arkansas in those days, and the way a simple attempt to take a pleasant family outing subjected you to hostility and humiliation on every side.

JIMMY: Oh, I remember it, I was dying to see Arkansas, so we'd go to Little Rock. I said, "Bill, we got to go to Arkansas, I want to see grandpaw." So we pulled in this service station, my oldest boy, Bill, and myself. So they was gonna fill up the gas, so the lady come out and told the boy [who worked for her], she said, "We're out of gas." And I said could I please use your restroom, and she said, "I lost the key to the doors."

So the boy said, "Well, this is the third colored person you've did this way today," [and then he asked us], "Could I ride with y'all? Where are you headed?" We told him Little Rock — he looked to be about twenty-four or twenty-five — he said, "I can't work for her no more."

He didn't get his pay, he didn't get nothing. So my husband asked him if he had any money. He said no, [but it didn't matter to him], 'cause he had folk. So I gave him twenty dollars, my husband gave him twenty dollars, my

son gave him twenty dollars. He had some people in Little Rock, and he took and thanked us.

But it was not just in Arkansas that black people had to confront racism. Back in the 1940's and 50's and 60's, blacks who had lived in both north and south insist that racism was in fact equally bad in both areas. In the south, some of these older black people say, it was in certain ways actually easier to handle, because if you encountered the kind of white people who would mistreat you simply because you were black, they would be totally open and aboveboard about it, and you could be on your guard. You never had to guess what would happen, they said, or what was actually going on. But in the north, you would often overhear white people talking when they did not realize you were within earshot — people whom you had assumed were going to treat you fairly and honorably, based on what they had said to your face — and hear them saying things about black people that were just as contemptuous and hostile as anything you had ever heard from the mouth of the worst southern racist.

On the other hand, in those days, the jobs were up north. When places in South Bend like the Studebaker plant began hiring black people for some of the better factory jobs (on lathes and auto assembly lines and the like) — jobs which paid far better wages than the menial employment that was all that was usually available down south — then whether or not they liked the northern ice and snow and the unfamiliar northern accents, some of the most hardworking and skilled (or at least aggressive and adventurous) black folk in states like Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi started emigrating up to South Bend in large numbers. Whether in good ways or bad ways, they were people who were willing to fight for what they wanted.

But to return to Jimmy's story. She told us that she was employed at a dry cleaners in South Bend, a young woman in her late twenties, when she began to realize she had a serious drinking problem. She had begun working there around 1945, when she was 25, and stayed at that job for fourteen years. She was the classic binge drinker, a hardworking, self-controlled, apparently totally successful person, who stayed totally abstinent for the weeks and months which stretched between the insane drinking bouts.

JIMMY: I was a periodic drinker. Very much so. When I went out, I stuck to my 7-Up, my Coke. I drank at home. I was a loner. If I had a week's vacation from a job, I stayed drunk that whole week. I mean drunk! — go into D.T.'s, had to go to the doctor. We had an alcoholic doctor I found out about this doctor , and I'd go get a shot, and I'm all right. But I . . . that was my pattern.

Maybe I would go a year without a drink, because I knew better, because then I would be drunk anywhere from one week to two weeks. But I would make sure it was during my vacation — never lost a job, never got into financial trouble, no kind of way. But then I knew I had this time to stay drunk.

RAYMOND: It's cunning, it's baffling, and it's powerful.

JIMMY: But I knew I'd get drunk, because I know there was something wrong. The reason I didn't drink when I'd get out, go out: *I knew better*. I was going to get drunk! I knew that I would be clear drunk for at least a week, so I had to *plan* these things.

Many alcoholics of this periodic type go through that kind of binge/control cycle over and over for years: in the periods between drinking episodes, they drive themselves unmercifully to do "perfect" jobs at everything handed to them, *never* making a mistake,

never being left vulnerable to anyone who would attack them. They are often super-achievers, who take on — and successfully accomplish — projects that would cause most people to give up in defeat. Jimmy showed her enormous drive and talent in the business world after she was older, and kept her tavern open and busy twenty hours a day. Other alcoholics of this type become skilled technicians and mechanics, super-efficient legal secretaries, scientists and engineers, teachers and educators, and ranking noncoms and senior officers in the military forces.

As their alcoholism progresses however, they begin spending more and more time between drinking bouts *planning* the next bout, and thinking about what they are going to do the next time they have a chance to get at the bottle, and how they are going to do it. Jimmy M. was one of these, and made no bones about it — she *planned* her drunks.

Finally those who are alcoholics of this sort find themselves making themselves get through the day without alcohol by sheer willpower alone, driving themselves by brute force until the next opportunity to let go and sink into the blessed relief of the bottle, where they can dive down once more into fantasy and the oblivion of feeling. And as they begin to *live only* for the next drinking bout, to *live only* for the next available chance to let go — eventually there is nothing left in their lives *worth living for* but the drinking — even, paradoxically, after they realize that the alcohol is killing them, and that they will soon be dead.

Some periodic alcoholics, when they go on their binges, adopt an aggressive, deliberately outrageous and antagonistic stance. They go into bars with an arrogant “in your face” pose that says to everyone around, “I don’t give a damn about you or anyone else.” This is because they are so frightened, down deep, of people and the world — too afraid of being smashed, of being beaten up (physically or

psychologically), of being humiliated — so that they must act at all times in such a way that they *never leave themselves vulnerable* to the world.

But a surprising number do more like Jimmy — both male and female, black and white — huddling off some place by themselves, totally alone in their bedrooms, in the basement, in the garage — feeling that they *cannot* go on any further, wanting “to dig a hole and pull it in on top of myself,” totally exhausted from always trying to “get it right,” to “not say the wrong thing,” to “not do the wrong thing” — driven past their physical and psychological limits by the continual frantic attempt to *never leave themselves vulnerable* to the world.

As Raymond said, “It’s cunning, it’s baffling, and it’s powerful.” Only about fifteen per cent seem to be open enough to the pull of God’s grace to realize not only that they are being implacably pulled deeper and deeper into a living hell that will necessarily culminate in a horrible kind of death, but also to realize that they will have to ask for and accept help. Fortunately, Jimmy — who was a very intelligent and self-perceptive young woman, with great spiritual openness — finally began to realize, not only that she was on a path leading at its end to total self-destruction, but that no matter what she did, she could not get off that path by any power of her own.

And I used to tell my mother, that I knew better. She said, “Oh honey, you don’t need no help. You just drink sometimes.” So she would go and get, like, get the neighbor to go get me two or three pints of whiskey, and I’m quite young, maybe seventeen, sixteen, and when I started drinking she would hand me a pint. I’d go on up to my room. She’d check on me, or she’d bring me soup to eat. And I said, “Mama, I’ve *got* to be an alcoholic.” And she said, “Naw, my baby go’n stop one day.”

But she was

RAYMOND: . . . Enabling.

JIMMY: She never No, I think she did the best thing she could do.

Many alcoholics discover to their surprise, once they get into recovery, that there are people in their immediate environment — co-workers, friends, and sometimes even the closest family members — *who do not want them to recover*. Some may try to “push their buttons,” doing things that they intuitively know will make them furiously angry, or throw them into despondency or fear. Others may play the role of *tempters* and enticers. Yet others will attempt to continue to play the role of *enablers* — though usually a little more covertly than Jimmy’s mother, who actually physically brought her the liquor and put the bottle in her hand, while saying, “You aren’t an alcoholic, you just drink a lot sometimes.”

You do not need to be a profound psychologist to see what Jimmy’s mother was doing, and doing very blatantly and openly. And yet, part of recovery is ultimately making some sort of peace, within oneself, with one’s own family — accurately recognizing and *accepting* who they actually were and what they actually did, but without falling into the destructive traps any longer, and *taking responsibility for oneself*, without fear or resentment, anger or anxiety. And that can only be done by eventually developing real compassion for them, even in their destructiveness. Recovery means *getting totally out of the blame/shame cycle*.

And so Jimmy said simply, “I think she did the best thing she could do.” By that she meant, the best thing her mother knew how to do, given her own background; for essentially no alcoholic comes out of a family that does not have troubled people — people who were victims of their own backgrounds — going back for three or four generations at least. And Jimmy also knew that her present

sobriety and serenity, and her ability (by and through God's grace) to be extraordinarily helpful to other people around her, was part of a life story that extended back into her early youth. And she now realized that, in fact, everything that happened back then was also necessary to have happened, in order to get her to the blessed existence she could enjoy now. So she could accept her past now, and look back on her mother with compassion.

With some alcoholics who make it into recovery, the truth of the hopelessness of their condition gradually seeps into consciousness slowly, over a period of time. With many others — like Jimmy — there is “the one last drunk I had” that brings them crashing to their knees, with the sudden realization that they are staring their own doom squarely in the face. These people can frequently be heard to say fervently at A.A. meetings, “I pray that I may never forget my last drunk,” and this is a true plea to God from the very depths of the soul.

One way or the other, a practicing alcoholic has *to hit bottom* before real help will be sought and utilized. The delusion of self-sufficiency, the fantasy dream of “figuring out how to save myself by myself,” has to be smashed into little pieces before the alcoholic ego will ever be willing to turn to God for help on the only terms on which God will offer help — namely, in some fashion which God knows will actually *work* (!!!), regardless of the alcoholic's self-diagnosis of “the kind of help I need” (which is always, at this stage, misguided and just plain wrong).

In Jimmy's case, her last drunk produced a toxic reaction that left her almost too ill to function for a full week afterwards:

JIMMY: When I drank the whole fifth of vodka, that was my last drink. I decided to go to drink me a fifth of vodka, it was just coming out [on the market in this

country]. So I drunk this fifth, I was working at the cleaners.

I blundered at work that morning, the temperature was about 115 in there. I worked for a solid week, without anything on my stomach but a drink of water. I'd get off from work, I'd make it as far as getting on the floor and I would stretch out. It almost killed me.

I didn't have no more afterwards. But like Ray Moore say [he was an Irishman, who became Jimmy and Bill's sponsor when they came into A.A.], he was surprised by me being a *periodic* drinker [who was still able to control my drinking to a certain extent but nevertheless] to *know* that I was an alcoholic.

And you know, then I went to send and get all this [Alcoholics Anonymous] literature. I was ecstatic at something.

Then I couldn't get into A.A.

Her last drunk had finally frightened her into *asking for help* — the hardest thing for any real alcoholic to do. Unlike most people who came into A.A. in those early years, she was not yet drinking compulsively every day, but she nevertheless had already recognized that she was an alcoholic — Ray Moore was greatly surprised at her degree of self-awareness — and she now saw with clarity that her life was on the path to total destruction. She had sent off to the New York A.A. headquarters for all sorts of literature on the A.A. program. She had realized that she was in fact an alcoholic, and that no human power could save her — but that somehow, some way, the A.A. people had discovered the path to some higher power that could and would redeem even the totally doomed.

Like a person lost in a dark cave, who suddenly sees the faintest pinhole of light off in the farthest distance, the twenty-eight-year-old Jimmy suddenly realized that she did not have to die. When first

encountering A.A., no suffering alcoholic can in fact explain why or how it is that they first intuitively recognize this as the road to life (many continue to fight against the program intellectually for many weeks and months after they have subconsciously already made the fundamental surrender, although Jimmy was bright enough not to try to fight the program that way). But at some deep, inner, intuitive, primordial level, the sunlight of the saving spirit is frequently *recognized immediately* deep in the muddled alcoholic's heart as the path, and the only path, that will lead out of the dark cavern of death.

Hope returns, often for the first time in years, so that no matter how angry they get during the first few weeks and months, or how frustrated they sometimes get in the early days, the alcoholic becomes willing to do anything and make any sacrifice necessary to get the A.A. program. As Raymond frequently tells newcomers, "You must want it with a burning desire." New hope is what gives us that burning desire.

Filled with this new joy, Jimmy had made a phone call to the South Bend A.A. number, and with the initial blunt rejection of her plea, every ounce of new-found hope seemed to be instantly dashed. It was 1948, and she was told simply that A.A. was for white people only.

Unknown to her, however, a young black man named Bill Hoover also called the South Bend A.A. group for help about the same time, so that a small few of the white A.A.'s began to say to themselves, "We can't turn them away like that, this is a spiritual program that teaches loves, tolerance, and compassion, and their request is putting us on the line. Are we in fact willing *to put principles before personalities?*" Jimmy Miller and Bill Hoover calling the A.A. phone number at roughly the same time made a big difference.

JIMMY: I had known Bill since '36 or '37. He and one of my brothers was strong alcoholics, so they was running buddies. They used to just say, "Mama, I'm going to sleep on the porch" (in them days you slept on the porch) and him and Bill would drink all night long. You know, I had known Bill for years, never thinking that we would ever marry.

RAYMOND: Talking about [your brother] Luxedie?

JIMMY: No, my brother Jesse. He was a "sophisticated drunk."

Nevertheless, although she had known Bill since she was in her mid-teens, neither had talked to the other about their drinking, or knew that the other was going to call the local A.A. people.

JIMMY: Bill and I had called in three days apart . . . they didn't have any set-up for colored people (that's what we were called) . . . [first Bill phoned them for help, and then] I called in, and they also told *me* they didn't have any set-up for "colored people."

And at the time that Bill called in, Ray Moore was there, and he heard this remark — they didn't have *anything* for colored people — so he said, "That's all right, I'll take it." So they tried to discourage him, but anyway, he made the call on Bill.

Three days later I called in, so he brought Bill over to my house, and he said, well, he would sponsor us. Only they told him — they didn't have any set-up for colored whatsoever — we couldn't come to the open meetings or the closed meetings, so Ray had brought two of his friends with him.

G.C.: He was an Irishman?

JIMMY: Uh-huh. Dunbar [came with him], and the other one was Ken Merrill. So in the meantime, they decided we could meet from house to house, so we met at

my house, Bill's house, [and at the homes of] Ken Merrill and Dunbar.

Just as Ken Merrill, along with Harry Stevens, had had the courage to break through the prejudice against convicts, so Ken (this time accompanied by Dunbar¹⁰² and Ray Moore), showed the courage to break through the color bar when this call for help came.

Bill Hoover, and Raymond I. (whom he later sponsored), were convinced that it was not simply "coincidence," but the power of God at work, that made these two particular people — Jimmy and Bill — call into A.A. at the same time. And Bill Hoover was convinced that it was the power of God at work that made Ray Moore, an otherwise perfectly ordinary Irishman who had a job at Bendix, insist on making the twelfth step call on these two black people in spite of the stiff opposition from within the A.A. group itself.

JIMMY: When Ray Moore called on me, he was really surprised that I had the original Alcoholic Anonymous book [the 1939 edition].¹⁰³ I was determined. He say two or more [gathered together and I will be with you],¹⁰⁴ but it's just a coincidence the way Bill and I called in.

JIMMY: My husband [Bill Hoover] used to tell me, used to tell me that he had a slip. I said, not really. 'Cause after Ray Moore called on him that evening, he drank the next day, and never had a drink since. So you really — I couldn't even *call* that a slip, could you?

He called on him that day, he didn't know enough about the program — bad handled — so he drank that *night*, never no more!

Said he was just determined. We really went through a lot

I said, well you couldn't really call that a slip, because the man just come over and talked to you, you didn't know anything about the program.

But I came in thinking I knew quite a bit — which I did, 'cause I had read the Big Book. I read any and everything! Like my *Grapevines* [the A.A. magazines which were piled up on the end table next to the couch on which she was sitting]. I run through 'em, and then I put 'em right here, and I read 'em over.

Getting someone in the South Bend A.A. group to make a twelfth-step call was only the first of many barriers that would have to be surmounted. Ray Moore — who has been dead for many years now, Jimmy said — continued to come through for her and Bill, and served as their sponsor during those earliest years, hearing their fifth steps, and advising and counseling and supporting them and fighting for them every step of the way.

But when Jimmy and Bill came into A.A., it was still 1948, and the initial terms on which help was offered them by the South Bend A.A. group were incredibly humiliating and demeaning, in often unbelievably petty ways. The closed meetings were still normally house meetings in those days, and when Jimmy and Bill went to one of the few white homes where they would be admitted at all, they were promptly sent back to the kitchen like household menials, and could hear only as much of the people speaking as would travel back to that distant part of the house.

JIMMY: So when Bill [and I] would walk it, they would invite us into the kitchen. The women took time to give us some *broken* cups! And they decided to give us broken cups, so we just took it.

Ray told us, no matter what, be calm about it, so we sit in the kitchen, where we could hear from the family room, living room, whatever.

So then, we still couldn't go to an open meeting. So we just kept meeting, and then, one or two more blacks called, and we met that way, and then Ray got real worried, and Bill's wife [at that time] called her cousin in Chicago: Earl Redmond. So Ray had a hard time getting permission for him to speak at an open meeting . . .

We still wasn't allowed to go to an open meeting, but we went anyway, so when he finished talking — now this is a good six, seven months later — they opened up, and said we could come to an open meeting.

We could come to the group, and Ray told us don't be talking, just listen, and learn, and that's the way. And after we got about five more blacks . . . that's the way the group got started.

But we were treated real coldly at the open meetings, and finally — like several of the speakers, we tried to shake their hands, and they would just turn and walk off — [but] after Earl Redmond come down about three times, then they started shaking hands.

Hey Raymond, what's the other gentleman, Bill's other cousin in Chicago?

RAYMOND: Bill Williams.

JIMMY: Bill Williams — he come down, and after he made a talk it really opened up for us.

RAYMOND: Fourth black man to make A.A. in Chicago.

JIMMY: And I'm telling you! But we held on.

Bill Williams (Bill the tailor) was still alive at the time the first edition of this book was written, and was invited to speak to the big annual regional conference in South Bend not long afterwards. Submarine Bill, a good Irish Catholic, whispered in awe to G.C. at

one point, “you’d have to travel to an awful lot of churches to hear as much real spiritual teaching as he gave in five minutes.”

When the little black A.A. group in South Bend was in its early stages, Bill Williams rode the South Shore train from Chicago to South Bend every weekend for a long period of time, to help them in any way that he could. Frank N., Raymond I., and G.C. had a chance to spend an afternoon with him several years ago at Frank’s home on Lake Papakeetchie near Syracuse, Indiana, and Bill Williams explained that his message to the white A.A.’s during those early years was simple. He would say to them, “If my wife and I are going on the South Shore train from here to Chicago, and there are only two empty seats left, and they are right by us, you and your wife are going to sit there. Because you want to go to Chicago too. You don’t like it, but you want to go to Chicago too.”

And Earl Redmond from Chicago also helped support Jimmy and Bill Hoover and their little South Bend group. Jimmy had mentioned him earlier, and Raymond now asked her for more details:

RAYMOND: Do you remember being at the talk, that Earl Redmond made, to help you all get in?

JIMMY: Yes I do. He said, you know, this was basically formed: no race, creed, religion, or *anything*. And then if you read it out the Big Book: it’s all if you had the desire to stop drinking, that’s all that’s required.

Jimmy was referring to the phrase from the preamble which is usually read at the beginning of A.A. meetings — “The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking” — which is the official, formal A.A. statement of purpose. But any black person in South Bend old enough to remember the world before Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., will not be surprised at the South Bend group’s

initial unwillingness to accept that principle fully, and will tell you that the humiliating treatment given to Jimmy and Bill when they first joined A.A. was simply typical of the period, and a daily part of every black person's life. The true miracle here is that, in 1948, *many years before* the major white church denominations in the United States would allow black people to attend their services, even though the white A.A. people may have dragged their feet at first, they finally started to come around to actually living their own spiritual principles.

So we have to give the white A.A. people in South Bend a mixed grade on this issue — it is difficult to explain to young black people today, but in spite of the rough treatment which the white people in South Bend A.A. gave Jimmy and Bill Hoover at first, they finally learned how to behave better toward black people than most whites of that period (late 1940's and early 1950's).

Unfortunately, even today in 2004, one can still hear a few white people in A.A. in this area of the country privately making derogatory and disparaging remarks about black people as a group, and at times one can still see white people showing a kind of noticeable standoffishness toward black people who come into one of their meetings. But it is also still true that it is better within A.A. than it is in our local society as a whole. In the St. Joseph river valley region, black people frequently sponsor white newcomers, and vice versa. Everyone goes out for pie and coffee after the meeting together, and everyone goes to the A.A. picnics and banquets together. Predominantly white groups bring in black speakers to talk at their open meetings (and vice versa) without ever even thinking about who is white and who is black. So just as in the late 1940's and early 1950's, we once again have to give A.A. a mixed grade: not as good as it ought to be, but nevertheless much better than society as a whole.

I do not want this book to be a hopelessly dated work. If A.A. is still around a hundred years from now, the nature of society will have changed. It is the nature of human history that old problems are solved only to have new ones appear. And A.A. has now spread all over the globe, into places where black vs. white issues have never been present at all, but in which there are other kinds of divisions, based on religion, language, tribe, social class, or something else of that sort. Can you the reader identify what the equivalent issues are in your world?

So what can we learn from listening to Jimmy Miller's story that can be relevant in all times and places? It is a story above all of real courage and persistence. Most alcoholics complaining and carrying on about "how difficult it is for me in my unique situation to do what has to be done to get sober and stay sober," need to look at what Jimmy faced in order to put things in better proportion. Yes, it may be necessary for me to struggle against incredible difficulties in order to get sober. Yes, it may be necessary for me to make sacrifices and do things that are painful. It may be necessary for me to go to meetings with people whom I do not like — people who make me really angry. It may even be true that other people are treating me in ways that are totally unjust and prejudiced and unfair — and that I can *prove* it to you. It doesn't matter.

The advice from the good old timers is always that we have to rise above the pain. Brooklyn Bob told every newcomer the same thing: "Meetings, meetings, meetings. An A.A. meeting is not the best place for you to be, it is the only place for you to be. Go to meetings if you have to crawl to them. And there were times when I was almost doing that."

And we have to meet these problems with our heads held high. Larry W. told newcomers to remember at all times the little sentence in the Big Book on page 83, at the beginning of the Twelve

Promises: “As God’s people we stand on our feet; we don’t crawl before anyone.” Stand tall and remember that the person who wins is the person who survives. And above all, listen to the four wise black people who appear in the story we are now telling: Jimmy Miller, Bill Hoover, Bill Williams, and Raymond I. This is exactly what they would have told you. This is the wisdom of black folk. But it is also the wisdom of the real winners everywhere and at all times and all places. And then eventually raise yourself to the greatest spiritual heights of all, and do what those people did, and do good and show love to some of those very people who misused and abused you. That is the real atonement, the sign of the real healing, the entry into the ranks of those who are honored within the inner circle around the divine throne.

But to return to Jimmy’s story. At one point, Raymond asked her what she remembered of some of the details of that open meeting where Earl Redmond, the first black speaker the South Bend A.A. group had ever had, came over from Chicago.

RAYMOND: Well ’d Ken Merrill play the piano or something — didn’t he play the piano for you all?

JIMMY: Yeah.

RAYMOND: And . . . I mean when Earl Redmond and them came in?

JIMMY: Yes. But Ken

RAYMOND: And I think Earl Redmond made a statement like Bill [Hoover] used to tell me, said when Earl came down he made such a powerful talk. He said the same whiskey that’ll make a white man drunk, will make a black man drunk.

JIMMY: That’s right, he explained all of that. It was a talk you just — it kept everybody spellbound. And it opened the doors for us.

In a clever piece of psychology, Ken M. opened the meeting by sitting down and displaying his talent on the piano, playing pieces that the white people present would be familiar with, calming them down, distracting them from their uneasiness, and also making it clear that the white leader of the South Bend area movement was totally nonchalant and at ease in what for most people present was a threateningly novel situation. The black people understood immediately what he was doing, and were blessing him in their hearts when they saw how well it was working.

Earl Redmond did his job too. Soon everyone in the room found themselves swept into the power and sincerity of his lead. And the white people discovered that, once you stopped making external comparisons and started listening to the message of the heart, black alcoholics suffered and felt exactly the same things as white alcoholics, and were beset by the same alcoholic “screwy thinking” and ability to take a bad situation and make it even worse (!!!), but could also use the twelve steps to live in and through God’s power to arrive at the same sobriety and serenity that some of the white people were beginning to achieve.

G.C. asked Jimmy what she remembered of Ken Merrill as a person, and it is interesting to note that he made so little fuss about his position in society — in spite of the fact that he was the president of a large and successful factory — that Jimmy never even knew exactly what he did for a living. It was very apparent to her from the beginning, however — Ken could not possibly hide this — that whatever he did, he was a very well educated and financially successful man.

G.C.: What was Ken Merrill like? What’d he look like?

JIMMY: He was some kind of a business executive, but what I don’t know He was very distinguished looking, and tall, and thin, and *very* educated. He was rather well to

do, 'cause I notice they had a cook and a maid. So I presume that they — you know — that he was pretty wealthy. And nice as he could be. And he opened his house freely to give us classes. And we had a class every Saturday morning from nine to ten, clear until we finished all the classes, one every Saturday. And Helen, his wife, was real nice too.

G.C.: How did they set up the classes?

JIMMY: Well, what we went through with the classes was just the twelve steps, explaining them thoroughly And [Ken Merrill] had a way of explaining stuff simple so anyone could understand it. He was nice as he could be.

Ken's daughter Martha P. laughed when she read the description of her father as "thin," but she said that he prided himself on wearing well-cut clothes and carried himself well, which may help explain the impression he left with Jimmy. Pat Wilkie — a member of the South Bend A.A. group who came from Scotland, and had been in the R.A.F. during World War II — said he reminded her of a retired British army colonel, both in the way he dressed and in his bearing. Nick Kowalski said he sometimes wore what the British call a "smoking jacket" when he was at home in the evening, something one would see in the United States only among the top of the upper class.

Both Ken's daughter Martha P. and his son D. Merrill were acutely embarrassed by the A.A. old timers' characterization of their family as extremely wealthy, and in their reminiscences of those years, minimized it as best they could. A cook was hired to come in only on major social occasions, they said, and the maid was only part-time help in taking care of the house. The children's protests are in themselves a tribute to the way Ken brought them up. If they had a little more than some, in the way of wealth and prestige, they

were not to put on airs or think of themselves as “better” than other people or “different” from other people.

But — the children’s protests to the contrary — the Merrill standard of living included trips to Europe on ocean liners, a large and extremely beautiful house, membership in gentlemen’s clubs, and sending the children to exclusive (and extremely expensive) east coast colleges. Nevertheless the important thing (which his children clearly picked up on perfectly) was that although these things might be fun and enjoyable, his children were expected to relate to all human beings with care and personal concern and on a basis of total human equality. Ken never forgot his own childhood and youth, nor the fact that those who had the truly superior qualities of soul in the South Bend A.A. movement, and could be absolutely counted on for *true* friendship, could not be identified on materialistic grounds.

The materialistic side of life can never be allowed to stand in the way of life in the spiritual realm, which is the true life, the only thing that is ultimately fully real. Ken successfully taught his children, that if you try to make yourself feel important by being snobbish and arrogant over material things or worldly prestige, you can never become a *real* person and a *truly worthwhile* person yourself. So when Jimmy Miller’s first words about Ken were that, in her own evaluation of him, he was one of the nicest and finest men she had ever met, I am sure that Ken would have recognized that as the finest tribute anyone could ever have made to him.

Jimmy also noted with frank admiration that Ken “had a way of explaining stuff simple so anyone could understand it” when he taught the beginners classes. After the South Bend group set up a regular five class series, with Ken taking the fifth of these classes by himself, Nick Kowalski noted that “many came from other towns,” even from far away, to sit in on this fifth class. Ken knew how to relate to newcomers to the program and put things at the basic

human level, as one human being simply talking openly and honestly to another, regardless of their previous backgrounds — whether they were rich or poor, educated or school dropouts, male or female, black or white, Protestant or Catholic or what have you.

But to return to the story of the black A.A. group in South Bend: The leads given by the two Chicago black A.A.'s, Earl Redmond and Bill Williams, had basically opened things up and made Bill and Jimmy's situation a little better. But the demeaning and prejudicial treatment otherwise continued in pretty much the same way for two solid years, with no other black people coming into A.A.

In 1950 however, "Brownie" (Harold Brown) came in, an assertive and highly verbal black man who had been a nightclub M.C. and a professional gambler, along with Cedric, R. J. Newhouse, Lester Smith, and Ezell Agnew. It was now no longer just two lone people trying to survive by themselves; a solid working core of black A.A.'s could now be formed — in spite of the fact that the white people were still making blacks sit back in the kitchen even at that point, and still picking out old cups with chips or cracks to hand them when they offered them coffee.

Even twenty years later, those broken cups stood out in Brownie's mind as symbolic of all the petty harassment black people were forced to undergo as they tried to participate in the A.A. meetings:

When I come on the A.A. program, my people wasn't welcome. They was meeting in the homes at that time. I had to drink coffee out of a broken cup because they refused to give me a decent cup!

Yes, I've sat in some of'em's homes, where they put their finger in their nose at me, then they buck at me. In other words, want me to get out of there.

But I wasn't particular about being with them. What I wanted is what you had. I was trying to get sober. All I wanted to do was to learn it. They couldn't run me away. The rest of 'em were behind me pushing, saying "Brown, push on!" and they kept pushing me, and I kept going. It's to say, oh, look-it! It wasn't easy for me to make the A.A. program.

But I come here [into this hostile situation], a thought come to me: if they open the door, I get it myself. And I begin to study this A.A. program. And when I mean study it, I *know* it. I don't need you to tell me about it. I knows everything, in the steps and everything, what it says.

And they told me that this was a spiritually program. Well now, if this is a spiritually program, ain't got no business being prejudiced. My God tells me, "I have no respect for persons." Alcohol ain't prejudiced. It don't give a damn who it tear down.

So Brownie hung in there, and Jimmy and Bill continued to hang in, and they worked the program the way it was supposed to be worked. It takes an alcoholic many years to get as sick as they are when they first come into A.A., and recovery also is a process, that like any healing process (from a blister on your hand to a broken bone) takes time. It takes several years usually of concentrating all your energies on the healing before you are truly ready to start building anything big and positive and new.

So during the first six years of her sobriety, Jimmy said that she continued working at the dry cleaning establishment, putting in hours and hours of hot and exhausting labor, and saving up her money. Finally, when she was around thirty-four years old and had been sober for six years, she started her own business.

And an interesting business it was — living proof, in the flesh, that A.A.'s are not prohibitionists! She was a good business woman,

with marvelous business sense, and opened up a tavern, called “Jimmy’s Bar,” almost next door to the Studebaker plant in 1954. They stayed open twenty hours a day to take care of factory workers coming off of different shifts, who wanted to relax over a drink before going home, as well as those who came in during lunch breaks.

During the many years she ran this business, it never seemed to threaten her own sobriety at all. She did not care if other people drank — she was the one who had the problem with it. She also had the excellent business intuition to sell the bar in 1963, *before* the announcement on December 9th of that year, that the Studebaker plant was closing permanently and forever (a dark day in South Bend’s history).

The bar is no longer there today — the structure was torn down in the process of constructing the new minor league baseball stadium and its surrounding grounds, when the city of South Bend began the process of renewing what had turned into a rundown area surrounding the abandoned, derelict Studebaker buildings after the plant was closed.

JIMMY: I worked at the cleaners for fourteen years. Then I opened up a tavern and ran that for nine years And then, after Studebaker [started going] out, I was looking up to sell my liquor license and everything, and get out. So the guy that bought the liquor license doesn’t — in two months, he had to close. ’Cause he lost all that Studebaker trade. I used to have to call in extra waitresses at noon

G.C.: Is the building still there?

JIMMY: No, it’s gone now.

G.C.: Where was it?

JIMMY: On South Street, right across from the Union Station. Jimmy’s Bar.

G.C.: That was a good location!

JIMMY: Oh yes!

G.C.: What hours did you run?

JIMMY: What hours? From six in the morning until two the next morning.

G.C.: And you had people coming in there all the time, because of the factory shifts?

JIMMY: Yeah, and then they trusted me. If they got drunk, I don't care if they had they paycheck, I would lock they wallets up. I talk 'em out of it, and if I felt they's too drunk to drive, I'd get a friend to drive 'em home, and Bill would trail 'em, and bring the person back.

So they trusted me. 'Cause that was always a big tick to me. 'Cause I don't care if they had five or six hundred dollars, they got they money the next day . . .

G.C.: Did you bring anybody into A.A. from the people in that situation?

JIMMY: One person! Pasco Flemings. He stayed in for about three or four years, then he get to drinking.

So this extraordinary woman actually made her living, for many of the years that she was in A.A., owning and operating a very successful tavern, shrewdly located in one of the best spots in town for an honest factory worker looking for a safe and decent place to eat lunch or relax for an hour or so after his shift was over.

Ken Merrill, Harry Stevens, Nick Kowalski, Jimmy Miller and Bill Hoover — what an incredibly diverse group of people! And yet, by working the twelve steps faithfully, and by turning their lives and will over to the care and leading of God, and allowing the power of God to work freely in their lives, what extraordinary people they became!

Chapter 18

The Interracial Group

So after two years of slogging through the prejudice and discrimination fairly much on their own, Bill and Jimmy finally saw more black people coming into A.A. to join them.¹⁰⁵ It would have been around 1950 when they finally obtaining this working core of dedicated black men and women participating in A.A. and Al-Anon functions. Jimmy M. and Raymond I. were able to reconstruct the following list of some of the best known early black members in the order they came in, the men becoming part of A.A. and their wives joining Al-Anon: first came Cedric and his wife¹⁰⁶ and then Harold Brown (“Brownie”) and his wife Evelyn. (Brownie died on November 23, 1983, with thirty-three years sobriety, so this would put us back to about 1950.) Then came R. J. Newhouse and his wife Grace, Lester Smith and his wife Amelia, and Ezell Agnew and his wife Eleanor.

With some of the early black alcoholics, the initial A.A. experience got them going to church, and after they became involved enough in the religious activities there, they began using the church’s spiritual program to stay sober instead of going to A.A. meetings. Although this occurred sometimes with white alcoholics too, it seemed to have been more frequent back at that period with black alcoholics, perhaps partly because of the white prejudice of that time. The black churches were havens of safety from the pervading

external racism. The black churches also understood the primordial difference between God and the demonic: alcoholics would be regularly reminded there in forceful terms of the fundamental choice they had to make.

By my own rough estimate, in north central Indiana, out of every six hundred alcoholics who got sober and stayed sober, two or three of them did it by going to a conservative Protestant evangelical church and throwing themselves totally into the life of that congregation. Doing this instead of going to A.A. meetings could work for a small percentage of people. But for at least 595 out of that six hundred, Alcoholics Anonymous was the only thing that worked.¹⁰⁷

Raymond asked Jimmy about Luxedie, one of her hard-drinking brothers who had gone the church route instead of A.A., and she assured him that, even these many years later, he was still staying sober and leading the good life. And both Jimmy and Raymond respected his choice:

RAYMOND: How's Luxedie now?

JIMMY: Doing real good, still preaching. Here with his daughter. He *was* staying at the St. Joe.

RAYMOND: Well, he came into the fellowship too. I know he made the statement to me, "I shall always be grateful to Alcoholics Anonymous because it showed me my God." But then he choosed to go and preach spiritual.

JIMMY: And he went to very few A.A. meetings, but you know he hadn't had a drink since.

RAYMOND: Found God, said he's found his God.

JIMMY: Yeah.

Raymond also mentioned another person who had chosen that route, a black man he and Jimmy both knew named Mitch C., who had come into A.A. sometime between 1953 and 1958 roughly, had

had Brownie as his sponsor, but then had eventually started going to church instead of A.A. to stay sober:

RAYMOND: Well, we got another guy, Mitch C. Mitch got about thirty-five, almost forty years, used to be with Brownie. He's in church now, but he's still sober. Going to this church right here — Mitchell C., worked out at Healthwin — you'd know him. He retired from Healthwin Hospital. He's still sober, but he don't come to the tables no more.

But Jimmy and Bill were committed to the A.A. way. They and some of the other black A.A.'s finally decided that it was necessary to have at least one A.A. group which met regularly in South Bend, where it would be clear to any white people who wanted to attend, that there would definitely be black people at that meeting, and not only that, but black people speaking freely and openly, and taking a leadership role whenever appropriate. There were still too many white meetings where some of the leaders were trying to discourage black people from attending their group regularly, "for fear that some of the white alcoholics would then stay away." It was a peculiar sort of excuse they gave for their behavior. They were claiming that it was these other people who were being prejudiced and discriminatory, not them. That did not sound very logical if you were black — those who were your *real* friends would defend you at all times and would not allow someone else to tell them they could not be friends with you — but there was nothing that black A.A.'s could do about it.

JIMMY: And they were always afraid, wouldn't nobody come to a group, because if we went to one of their group meetings, after it opened up [then the white people would stop coming]. It was *theirs* you bet! So then we

decided on the name, and Earl Ward decided “Interracial,” which would give you a hint that there would be colored people there, and then the group just started going.

The name of the group was chosen very carefully, to make it clear that the black people were not interested in creating a black-only meeting. That would be just as bad as a white-only meeting, just a creation of a reverse kind of racism and prejudice in mirror image fashion. The black leaders in St. Joseph river valley A.A. all worked with white newcomers as well as black. Bill Hoover for example played a major role in getting Brooklyn Bob sober (this was Bob Firth, a good Irish Catholic who became one of the good old-timers himself).

And Brownie in particular sponsored many white people, including Red K., who spread the St. Joe valley style of A.A. up into southern Michigan and over into the Chicago Area, and even as far away as Florida and the New York City area. Goshen Bill sponsored many people, and all of them seem to have been white (simply because the area right around where he lived had almost no black population back then, or he certainly would have sponsored black people too).

Bob P., a white man who had lived in the south, was very prejudiced when he first came into the program, according to some of the old timers. This was simply the way Bob had been brought up, and I know that he had never thought about the moral problems of this attitude up to that point, because he is a very good man — if you are brought up in a culture that never questions certain practices, you unfortunately tend to follow them unthinkingly yourself. Bob remembers Goshen Bill walking up to him when he first arrived at Life House (the A.A. halfway house) in Elkhart and pointing one of his long, bony fingers at him, and saying, “Boy, I’m your sponsor.” And he got Bob sober, and Bob was eventually elected as the A.A.

Delegate to New York from Northern Indiana Area 22 and was held in respect all over the northern half of the state. Goshen Bill was long dead by then, but whenever Bob talked about him, his voice would get choked up with emotion, and you could still see the undying love in his eyes for that old man who saved his life.

Jimmy remembered that the Interracial Group held its first meeting at Bill Hoover's house, at 1342 East Howard Street; the second meeting was held at her house, at 1405 West Washington Street. In this way, a small but staunch group of black alcoholics began to develop cohesiveness as they supported one another in recovery.

Later on, Jimmy and Bill Hoover got married. After that point, the two of them lived and breathed and talked the A.A. program from morning to evening, starting off at the breakfast table every day with meditation and prayer, and quiet discussion of the issues each of them was currently struggling with:

JIMMY: Well, my husband and I had a little A.A. meeting *every* morning before we went to work. He had the *Grapevine* and Thought for the Day and we'd set the kitchen table and have a . . . we talked A.A. all the time.

You know, once in a while I bumped into Bill [and we'd have a real disagreement, but] not too often.

The *Grapevine* is the A.A. periodical, with articles by recovering alcoholics. By the "Thought for the Day," Jimmy meant the widely-used A.A. meditational book entitled *Twenty-Four Hours a Day*, first published in 1948, the year she came into A.A. (For more details, see "The Books the Good Old-Timers Read," in the appendix to the second volume of this work, *The St. Louis Gambler & the Railroad Man*.)

Twenty-Four Hours a Day was written by a businessman named Richmond Walker, who had joined A.A. in Boston in May 1942, when he was 49 years old. He also had a home in Daytona Beach, Florida, and was a devoted member of the A.A. group there as well. Rich had originally written these meditations on cards, which he carried around in his pocket for his own personal use. Other members of the A.A. group in Daytona Beach eventually persuaded him to put them into a book, which he at first printed on his own and distributed to other A.A. members out of his own basement.¹⁰⁸ This was a book that strongly emphasized the ability of the human spirit to pierce through the walls of the confining box of space and time in which we live our everyday lives, and come into direct, living contact with the divine Spirit.

So Jimmy and Bill started their day when they got up every morning with spiritual meditation, stressing the importance of maintaining a deep God-consciousness throughout the day. Jimmy's son was brought up from babyhood with that spiritual life going on around him at all times:

JIMMY: My 38-year-old son, the one that lives here, he said he can't picture me ever taking a drink.

I say, "Yeah, I quit before you was born."

He say, "Yeah, but why do you read all those books and stuff?"

I say, "Because, you know, this pertains to me."

He says, "It's no problem with me, but I just wondered." And he said, "Mother dear, I can't picture you ever taking a drink."

He knows the twelve steps by heart, 'cause, you know I didn't have a baby sitter at the time, so we carried [him to the meetings with us]. You know, he was old enough to. He was brought up in A.A.! So that they gave me permission to bring him to closed meeting.

G.C.: Oh, so he was there from the time he was a little baby.

JIMMY: He sing “Way book” up one side and down the other!

As we have already noted, there was still hostility towards black people among some of the white A.A.’s of the St. Joseph river valley, and there were white A.A. meetings which openly told black visitors that they did not want them attending. And it is also important to remember that many black people can still to this day have such a profound fear of white people, that they have difficulty making themselves go into a predominantly white setting. There are totally realistic grounds for some of these fears: In the American south there were still black people being lynched by white mobs until a generation ago. In most large American cities in the north (Chicago and Boston and so on), there are white neighborhoods where even today, a black person entering their enclave is in serious danger of being literally beaten to death, and can at the very least count on having insults yelled out.

So Jimmy and Bill participated in the formation of something called the Interracial Club House, in a building the black group rented on Ardmore Trail. Some of Jimmy’s warmest and most pleasant memories of her early days in A.A. come from that club house:

JIMMY: We got this place out on Ardmore Trail. We was leasing this club, and it was a branch off of downtown. We had a *good* group going! And every Saturday night, and Friday night, was social hour. So we had bingo games, we had dances. Oh, we had a good time!

RAYMOND: What street? Where was it at, what neighborhood?

JIMMY: It's an empty building right off of Ardmore Trail, sits back on the left hand side. It was a nice brick building.

Anyway, we were getting our money together to buy it, so some slicker come in from Mississippi, and he wire-worked hisself into the group, and he tore it up! He and his wife borrowed from everybody they could, he conned people out of stuff, and people just got sick of it.

He started taking the meetings over. You know, we had open meetings and closed meetings: Thursday night was closed meeting, and we had our open meeting on Sunday.

And he just, before you knew it — everybody just — he was a con artist. And then he went on back to Mississippi, owing people *thousands* of dollars.

G.C.: What'd they call the place, now?

JIMMY: It was just . . . "Interracial Club House," which a bunch broke off from downtown. 'Cause at one time, it was getting pretty crowded down that way. If you didn't get there early, you didn't get no seat.

Red Knaak's mother-in-law paid the first six months' rent, she was so glad that Red had got sober!¹⁰⁹ O.K., [next] she's going to make the down payment, [so] you can just buy the building. Then we'd all got together to make our donations heavier to pay her off.

And this [slicker from Mississippi] — I can't even think of his name now — he just broke it up.

Red Knaak's mother-in-law was so glad, and I guess she was pretty rich, his mother-in-law was . . .

And we was having a ball. A.A. dances — we have a live band, we have security. And see, this was a big night for us. You danced, you had punch, coffee, doughnuts. And you could bring your friends. And my daughter-in-law, Frankie, she couldn't wait — she'd be dressed to kill, "We're going to the dance!"

. . . And on Saturday, when we had the bingo games, it was a lot of fun. And we also made a lot of money, because the A.A. members would bring they friends. And Lucky was the turner — he could not wait to get to turn the balls!

Jimmy still remembered vividly how Ruby (one of the old timers who was still living in 1993 at the time of this conversation) came in to her first A.A. meeting there at the Ardmore club house. When people first come into A.A., they do not love themselves at all. They do not even *know* themselves at all, and what they think they know they cannot stand. As Bill C. (the retired submarine commander who goes to the Elkhart meetings) often puts it, speaking about his own experience when he first came into the program: "When I came to A.A., I met a stranger, and that stranger was me. And I came to love that stranger. I met people who loved me when I could not love myself, and they taught me how to love."

An enormous number of people in recovery, when reminiscing about the first A.A. meeting they ever attended, surprisingly enough make exactly the same statement: I could not get over the love in that room. It hit me almost from the start. It was the most amazing thing that I, at that time, had ever seen or felt.

JIMMY: Hey, you know, Ruby just blundered in, on Ardmore Trail — drunk as a skunk — one night at the closed meeting, and everybody just put their arms around Ruby.

RAYMOND: Made a lot of meetings with her.

JIMMY: She was a sincere woman.

RAYMOND: She was 80 something in 1980, wasn't she?

JIMMY: Yes. She blundered in drunk, said "I need help, I can't make it by myself."

We stopped the meeting there, we went and hugged her, made her welcome. Got her some coffee, she couldn't hold it, so someone held her coffee for her.

And she said she just felt so *welcome*. Till she just come on back, and kept coming. And she said that was the happiest day of her life there, 'cause she didn't know people like that was in the world.

RAYMOND: Love lifted me.

JIMMY: See, 'cause she'd been everything from skid row to everything else.

RAYMOND: Park benches to Park Avenue.

JIMMY: That's what she said. Yeah, now she was *happy* in her sobriety.

RAYMOND: I've learned from her.

JIMMY: She was a happy person.

This little story about Ruby that Jimmy told also highlights another one of the most important parts of A.A. spirituality: learning how to laugh again, and laugh heartily and without restraint; learning how to feel joy and pleasure again, and see beauty all around you; and learning how to be genuinely happy. The “acceptance” of which the Serenity Prayer speaks is not a grim, stern-faced, fatalistic resignation to what is viewed as a fundamentally hostile and implacable universe. It involves learning to laugh at yourself, and learning how not to take everything so seriously. It means learning to take your quite real human limitations seriously. Above all, it means the full knowledge that *as long as I have God nothing else really matters*. As long as I keep my spiritual eye on God, I can “wear the world like a loose garment,” and remain fundamentally “happy, joyous, and free” down deep in my heart.

That says a lot about Ruby, but a lot about Jimmy too. She admired Ruby most of all because, she said, “she was a happy

person.” Jimmy knew what was important. And you cannot have that kind of true, deep happiness without God — you cannot have it at all.

G.C. had a list of names of early A.A. people in South Bend and Elkhart and the surrounding area which he had put together from various sources,¹¹⁰ and asked Jimmy about some of the names. Jimmy had especially warm memories of two of these people, Russ G. and Ed Pike:

G.C.: Russ G.?

JIMMY: Oh yes! He stuck with us from the very beginning. He and his wife were sweet as they could be. He was along on Ray Moore’s, Ken Merrill’s [time]. He’s dead now Russ lived in Michigan — Niles [in Michigan] Yeah, I know he lived in Niles.

RAYMOND: What about Ed Pike?

JIMMY: Ed Pike was a wonderful man. He was with us too from the beginning — you know, he supported us Ed Pike from Elkhart.

RAYMOND: And that was my man!

JIMMY: Wonderful person! He had as much sobriety like as Bill Hoover and Brownie.

In the midst of so much hostility from some of the white alcoholics, people like Russ and Ed Pike — who had both wholeheartedly supported the black A.A.’s and fought for them — were remembered ever after by the early black A.A.’s with undying love and gratitude.

Ed Pike was a railroad conductor, who had spent all his life working (and drinking) with the black Pullman porters, and so he knew that a man is a man is a man. We are all children of God, who do evil in exactly the same ways, and who learn to love and be

decent people in exactly the same ways. Ed Pike knew that, and lived his life on that basis.

The one white person in A.A., however, with whom Bill Hoover was closer than any other, was Agnes Kearns, a colorful character better known in the program as “Big Book Agnes.” When the two of them were together, it must have been quite a pair!

Jimmy M. says that Agnes came into A.A. in South Bend before she and Bill Hoover did in 1948, but since Agnes’s name does not show up on Ken M.’s list of the very first twenty members (which ran down to around 1945), she must have come in at some time between 1946 and 1947 roughly. She had had a wild and adventurous past, and was an incredibly blunt, outspoken woman, infamous for her forthright speech. She left an indelible impression on anyone who ever saw and heard her in action. Pat Wilkie, who supplied us with so much good information about early South Bend A.A. just before her death, summed up Agnes in the simple phrase, “a wild, wild, sarcastic woman.” When Jimmy M. was asked if the name “Agnes” on G.C.’s list of early A.A. members referred to the woman called “Big Book Agnes,” Jimmy just started laughing and saying, “Yes sir! Yes, yes!”

Agnes, who was white, nevertheless set a personal example, Jimmy M. said, for “some of the white people . . . that don’t *associate* with” black people. Agnes and Bill were extremely close friends, and used to meet regularly to talk and chat. “On his way to work,” Jimmy said, Bill “used to stop at the bus station and have coffee out there [with Agnes] every day.” This was the old Greyhound Bus station in South Bend, which was located in those days on Main Street, just before you got to the Studebaker factory complex if you were heading south from downtown. The station had a place for their bus travelers where a person could buy coffee and sit

down and drink it, which made it a handy place for Bill to meet someone on his way to the factory in the morning.

Although the social mores of the time strictly relegated all black people to the servant class — people who waited on white people and fetched things for them, not vice versa, in the northern United States as well as in the south — Agnes refused to obey these rules. In fact, Agnes never really worried about shocking people with anything! But it came from a passion for the A.A. way of life, and, down deep, a warm heart and a real care about others. If you were black and needed coffee or whatever, and Agnes was there, “she’d be waiting on you,” Jimmy said. “She said she didn’t care what nobody said. She didn’t *believe* in black and white. It’s ‘we’re *all* God’s children.’”

Skipping down through time twenty or so years, Raymond I. (who later ran the old Pinhook group) came into A.A. in South Bend in June of 1974, using Brownie as his sponsor for the first year. But he admired Bill Hoover and Jimmy from a distance, so to speak. By then Jimmy would have been 54 years old. A year later, Raymond had finally built up his nerve enough to ask Bill to sponsor him.

RAYMOND: Well see, you may not know it, but when I approached Bill, it was because I seen you and him come out to old Area Hall. Y’all would come up there on Sunday, and you’d be clean, you’d be dressed nice, and that was an attraction for me. And the spot I was in then, I was somewhat dissatisfied — looking — when I seen that. This is why I came to Bill and asked him to sponsor me, and y’all used to come up on a Sundays.

JIMMY: To the open meeting.

RAYMOND: A program of attraction, and not promotion. That was attraction there, to me, to see you and him coming up on a Sundays. Then I caught him, and I

asked him, would he sponsor me. That was my reason, one of my reasons, for asking him. I seen you and him coming up there.

JIMMY: And he was glad to, wasn't he?

RAYMOND: Put his arms around me, put his arms around me.

Again we see that simple but all-important message. When we first came into the A.A. program, the people who were already there *loved us when we could not love ourselves*. They put their arms around us and hugged us. They genuinely cared what happened to us. They answered their telephones when we called them up swearing and cursing at three o'clock in the morning, or filled with the blind panic of unnamable dreads, and calmed us down. They saw the real person shining out underneath, the lovable and charming child of God — the mirror-bright *imago dei*, the holy icon of God — when we could not see it ourselves because of all the trash and rubbish we had heaped up over it.

At about the same time that Raymond asked Bill Hoover to be his sponsor, in 1975, Bill became involved in an attempt to revive some version of the old Interracial Group. The great black anti-segregation leader Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., had been murdered in 1968, removing him as the focal point for all the substantive changes that were needed in American race relations, and unfortunately, even though the civil rights movement of the 1960's, in which he had played such a major role, had changed the world for black Americans in many fundamental ways, there was still so much more that remained to be done. By the mid-1970's significant forward motion seemed to be ceasing. White resistance to any further changes seemed to have hardened into immobility. Blacks who had joyfully entered white-dominated organizations all too often found that there were people who still did not truly accept them, so that

black people sometimes began pulling back into little clusters of their own people when they were thrown into predominantly white groups — the black kids all sitting at their own lunch table in the high school cafeteria and that sort of thing — because it was the only way they saw to be comfortable and hold a normal conversation when they wanted to relax.

Bill Hoover was sensitive to this need for black alcoholics who were coming into the program to be able to talk openly, and without feeling fear and apprehension and a sense of being intimidated. So he formed a new South Bend A.A. Interracial Group which met initially at a mental health affairs office situated in a converted private dwelling on Colfax Avenue (about three houses west of Williams Street on the north side), and later moved its weekly meeting to the YWCA on 802 N. Lafayette Boulevard, where the last listing of its Thursday night group meeting in the Michiana Central Service Office's meeting lists was in 1990.

Now it should be said that the two other major black leaders at that time, Brownie and especially Goshen Bill, were opposed to Bill Hoover's starting the Interracial Group again. People can remember them shouting angrily at one another over the issue. Brownie believed that black people should march into any meeting they wanted to, regardless of whether the white people there were friendly or not. Goshen Bill said that he had gotten drunk with black people, Native Americans, Hispanics, and everyone else he had ever met, and if they could all get drunk together without any difficulty, they could certainly get sober together, and he made it clear that he was not going to put up with any racist nonsense from anybody, white, black or whatever! This split between the three men was in fact part of a difference of opinion that could be found outside the A.A. program too, among black people all over the United States at that time. But Bill Hoover started the group anyway, and it is this new-

generation format of the Interracial Group, active from 1975 to 1990, which Raymond remembers so well:

RAYMOND: [Bill Hoover] was getting ready to start a group. When Tony B. came to Bill from CAP — they wanted to start a group, and they came to Bill, and asked him would he help them start this group. This is how the Interracial came back up again, and Bill — it must have been in '75 or '76 — what year was it, when Bill started the Interracial Group again, at the church? '75 I think — I was with Brownie for about a year. Then I went with Bill, I say '75 — I say '75 — so I had been around for a while, but I hadn't been practicing any steps, I'd just been going to discussion meetings, closed meetings . . .

Nelson would have the particulars of how that group died off [around 1990], the Interracial Group. It [first met at a location on Colfax Ave.]¹¹¹ It was there, then Bill [Hoover] passed, and it stayed there for a while [longer], and then it left there, and went over to the [YWCA] . . .

[But] I'm talking about when it was still opening in '75. Bill started [that group up again]. Tony B. helped Bill (Tony Bassolini, he's dead now), a guy by the name of Chet, guy by the name of Garden, then you got Lee (Lee's still living). Twelve of 'em got together — Lester [was also involved] — and started that group back in '75. Bill died in '86, and when Bill died, a year or two later, the group moved over to the [YWCA].

The last person I seen chairing that meeting was Nelson — Nelson, that's the volunteer fireman — and then what happened, I don't know for sure, but for some reason it discontinued [around 1990], and I have heard announcements that the group has discontinued. Nelson would have the answer on why or how it came about.

Fundamentally, by 1990, there was no longer any reason for the existence of something called an “interracial group” in South Bend, Indiana. There were about a hundred groups meeting every week in South Bend, some large, some small. At some of these you still rarely, if ever, saw a lone black face, but there were also meetings which black people regularly attended, and a few that were forty to sixty per cent black. By 1990, leaders from the first generation of blacks, like Brownie in South Bend and Goshen Bill in the Elkhart-Kosciusko county area, were spoken of with awe and admiration by all the second and third generation A.A. people who had significant sobriety, black and white folks alike.

Raymond I. had already by 1990 begun to gain much the same kind of universal love and respect that had been won years earlier by his two sponsors, Brownie and Bill Hoover. Rob G., a black man in his fifties from Niles, Michigan (right across the state line from South Bend), was also already turning into one of the most successful sponsors in the area, with some of his greatest achievements lying in the area of working with young white men. And we could give a list of many other black people in the region who went around giving their leads before white groups and black groups alike — people who were respected by all simply because they worked such good programs. Things like this made something called an interracial group — such a necessary device in the 1950’s, and again in the 1970’s and early 1980’s — an extraneous relic of the past by 1990.

The period in which Bill Hoover actively sponsored Raymond was a relatively short period of time at the end of Bill’s life on this earth, about eight years in all, but he was able to leave Raymond as one of his legacies to carry on after his death. Somewhere around 1983 or 84, Bill started to show the symptoms of Alzheimer’s

disease, and his mind started wandering more and more. He finally died in 1986.

Bill's old buddy, Big Book Agnes, started to develop Alzheimer's at the same time, and the two of them helped keep one another going there at the end, as they both started changing into mischievous, fun-loving children together:

JIMMY: You know, [Agnes] come to see Bill, she had Alzheimer's and Bill had it at the same time, but you know, she'd get somebody to bring her over here. And one day I felt *so* sorry for her — it was hot in the summer, and she had a winter coat and a cap and her gloves. She brought a bunch of [A.A.] tapes, and her and Bill'd sit on the floor, and all the tapes was playing.

RAYMOND: Making you live your life over again, huh? [*Laughing*]

JIMMY: Like one day — I don't know how Bill drove her to Robertson's [department store] — he showed me the bill when I got home from work, and he had got her five hundred and ninety-five dollars worth of crystal on our charge.

So then, the next time she come over, I say, "Agnes, what did you do with your crystal?"

She said, "I wrapped 'em. I bought me a bunch of washcloths and I wrapped 'em in washcloths, and put 'em back in the boxes, and put 'em in the closet." She said, "Bill gave me a present."

You know, I paid that five hundred and ninety-five dollars . . . Her and Bill was buddy-buddies.

RAYMOND: Oh, that must have been about '83, maybe '84. She got real low, and they took her to Healthwin Hospital, and she ended up dying there at Healthwin.

JIMMY: Yeah. Just before she got completely down, that's when. I don't know how her or Bill made it, because I thought I had the car keys hid. When Bill died, we found

six sets of car keys! — throughout the house, stuck and hidden here, stuck in old coat pockets, Bill had keys. When Bill died, I sold that car.

RAYMOND: And you'd just got it — you hadn't had it that long.

JIMMY: Yeah. But I worked with this boy, and he gave me a deal. 'Cause he got a new car. So see, I had paid him cash for the car. About nine hundred and something dollars.

RAYMOND: A good buy.

JIMMY: A good buy. 'Cause he started working with me, before he graduated from high school, part-time, and he just stayed on with me. And he's still at the nursing home [where he got a job after his graduation] — he's a maintenance man. He calls me at least once a week. Sweet young man.

RAYMOND: You helped a lot of people, didn't you?

JIMMY: Well, all I did was try. Just live what I'd preached.

RAYMOND: Yeah, yeah, right. *Practice* what I preach.

The A.A. program is an action program — the spirit of the epistle of James, with its admonition that “faith without works is dead” — but in these actions we have to act with the right kind of attitudes and expectations. Some of Jimmy's last pieces of good counsel to G.C. and Raymond talked about this. First, you must not do things to help other people in order to get praise or recognition for yourself. Moreover, you will not always succeed instantly in everything you try, and with some things you try to do, you will fail. The important thing here, however, is to have the courage to at least TRY. *Above all though, actually LIVE what you preach.*

Jimmy was 66 herself when Bill died. She did not feel too much like going out to A.A. meetings after that, with Bill no longer

standing beside her. But she still read the *Grapevine* regularly to keep up, and she still served as sponsor to two younger people, so she could continue to have contact with other recovering alcoholics.

JIMMY: Well, see, I've set right here and sponsored two young men, and I don't even go to a meeting.

RAYMOND: But spiritually, you will live on. Because when I pass, and I'm gone, those same people will say, "Hey, he helped me," or either, "Jimmy helped me." So this is one way I think you live on spiritually, I believe.

JIMMY: Now you know, like they're professional people — one boy is 37, the other one's 42 — I call 'em young men, because I'll be 73 this year. And anyway, through Bill, that's how they contacted me.

And I say, "Sure, I'm an alcoholic. I'll always be an alcoholic."

"Can you help us? Could you sponsor us?"

RAYMOND [grinning]: [If you tell me you'll sponsor me] I'll run by here in a minute!

JIMMY: One's wife, the other one's girlfriend, know [that I am the one who is their sponsor], and the women are the happiest persons in the world. Say, "Don't you think you'd better go over and see Jimmy?" when they get irritable.

And one boy, he go and say, "You know, I think I've been irritable with my girlfriend . . . so I think I'd better come over and talk with you."

And I say, "This is helping *me!*" . . .

I guess in some way I'm still carrying the message. Or they wouldn't come to me for me to sponsor 'em.

RAYMOND: It started out in houses. That's how it started.

JIMMY: And I say, as long as you stay sober, that's all that matters.

From the lips of a very wise woman indeed, those words are — for any recovering alcoholic, no matter what happens in his or her life — some of the wisest words that ever passed human lips: “*And I say, as long as you stay sober, that’s all that matters.*”

Chapter 19

Meetings and Steps in Early A.A.

Since Jimmy Miller came into the South Bend program in 1948, only five years after the city's first A.A. group had been started by Ken M. and Soo C., she was asked how the closed discussion meetings were conducted in those days.¹¹² In fact, when she joined the fellowship, it was only nine years after the Big Book was published, so A.A. was still in its very early period, when they had house meetings, with the group gathering in one of the members' homes each week. The Big Book gave them the basic outline of the twelve steps, so they had that basic structure to work from, but the *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* book, which went into so much more detail on each of the steps, did not come out until 1953.

JIMMY: O.K., you know, from one meeting you knew who was going to chair the meeting the next time. And you either had a subject that you would throw out for discussion, or either someone had a problem, and you just took it from there. It went all the way around the table.

G.C.: Just going around the circle in order.

RAYMOND: The closed meetings, you was averaging how many people at that time?

JIMMY: Oh, I'll say about eighteen, nineteen.

RAYMOND: Small groups.

JIMMY: Uh huh.

RAYMOND: We're getting thirty and forty now.

JIMMY: But see, when they'd get that big they would split, 'cause they felt that was too many.

RAYMOND: I've been told a class is about twenty-two people. Twenty to twenty-two people. When you get over that, it's too large — that's what I've been told.

JIMMY: Yes. And then that way, like when we first started off, Ray [Moore] explained, we'd come in for a meeting, it lasts not over an hour and fifteen minutes. Because alcoholics are strange, they get bored, you don't want them to lose their train of thought, you don't want them start whispering. And down through the years, that worked for us. Not *over* an hour and fifteen minutes. That was explained to the group when we set out. I don't care if it was forty around the table. Ray Moore *pounded* this into our heads, so the groups — I guess he got it from the other groups he was going to.

Martha P. says that she suspects that her father, Ken Merrill, may have been behind this hour and fifteen minute rule. He would have learned this as a wise piece of practical strategy from sales meetings and business conferences, of course, but Martha said that her father also *personally* became very, very impatient and annoyed if meetings of any sort dragged on too long!¹¹³

We got so good, we was meeting from 8 to 9, we was out of there by 9:15. But in the summer months, we started out closed meeting at 7, so you're out of there by 8:15. So you know what you was going to say, and then, you know, a lot of people pass, around the table, want to just listen. And then, they explained to you, not over five minutes per person, and you could make it shorter. Now this was

drummed into our heads. See, alcoholics automatically get fidgety, get nervous.

RAYMOND: I'm that way now!

JIMMY: You want to give them something to think about. Now this includes your coffee, your doughnuts, everything. 'Cause we had our coffee and doughnuts, in them days, while we was having a meeting. And see, that saved time, of the lingering. 'Cause when people get done this meeting, and you close, they want to be gone. See, a lot of people don't want to stay.

Now, if there was, say, three or four in a group wanted to go some place and continue, they would go to a coffee shop, which they had enough of, or to a small restaurant — maybe four or five [people] — and then they could eat and talk. But that meeting [itself] was over, and you were out of there.

So back in those days, just as it still is today, “the meeting after the meeting” could be just as important as the formal discussion meeting that had preceded it. When alcoholics first come into A.A., they invariably believe, down somewhere deep in their hearts, that anyone who truly knew them would reject them and abandon them instantly. They are hag-ridden by an overwhelming feeling of shame and guilt to their very core. Their first tentative attempts to talk at discussion meetings about what they genuinely feel and think and have done, are filled with enormous fear. When someone else in the group invites the newcomer to go have coffee and a slice of pie after the regular meeting is over — just to chat most often about things that are ordinary, everyday conversational topics — the newcomer slowly starts to realize, “I am not rejected and abandoned at all, at least *by these people*, when I start revealing who I really am and what I have really done, including even my most humiliating mistakes and failures.”

And it is not just newcomers: all of us pull strength from the simple reassurance of having some fundamentally good and decent fellow human beings who *want* to share a cup of coffee, a hamburger, or a dish of ice cream with us. It is not just “they loved me when I could not love myself,” but “I have the courage to plunge out into the unknown of a potentially hostile outside world, because I know that *back there I have friends who love me.*”

Jimmy was also asked about the format of what were called open meetings. These centered around a talk by a recovering alcoholic to a much larger group, where non-alcoholics such as spouses and friends were also allowed to attend, along with anyone else who simply wanted to learn more about the A.A. program.

JIMMY: The open meetings started off by reading what you call the Preamble, always started with the reading, yeah, and closed with the Lord’s Prayer . . .

G.C.: The person would give the lead, and then would people ask questions, or talk, or discuss, or anything after?

RAYMOND: The open meetings, did people ask questions after? Like that doctor from Chicago, he would talk for half an hour, then he would field, he would take [questions and comments].

JIMMY: No, no, no, they would just talk. The speaker would read the Preamble, and then he would tell his story.

WHAT KIND OF A.A. MEETINGS COULD AN INTERESTED PERSON ATTEND?

Open meetings: Going to three or four open meetings can be a good way for a non-alcoholic — someone who is nevertheless interested in how the A.A. program works — to find out more about it in a way that is far more informative than simply reading books

about A.A. The truly important parts of the program can only be transmitted at the feeling level, by actual human contact with people who are in the program and practicing its principles. It does not ever translate with full effectiveness into bare words on a printed page.

Closed meetings: You do not have to be a self-acknowledged alcoholic to attend your first few closed A.A. discussion meetings, as long as you (or people who know you well) are *worried* about your drinking pattern. You are never required to talk at a meeting (ever), or to say that you are an alcoholic, or even to give your name. No one will ask for your phone number or address, or pursue you later in an attempt to “convert you.” There are no fees or dues; what we were freely given we must freely give away if we ourselves are to remain sober. *If you think that there is a real possibility that you “may be getting into trouble with your drinking”* and simply have a sincere desire to explore that possibility, and see if you can learn anything from the A.A. program that will help you, you are welcome to attend at least a few meetings in order to make that decision. Past that point, as it says in the A.A. Preamble, “attendance at closed meetings is limited to persons who have a desire to stop drinking.” The Preamble then goes on to say in addition that “We ask that when discussing our problems, we confine ourselves to those problems as they relate to alcoholism.”

Jimmy was also asked what she saw as the major problem people had back in those days, when they started thinking about going to their first A.A. meeting. Was it apprehension that all that talk about “God” and “the spiritual life” meant they were putting themselves into the hands of some sort of Holy Roller religious cult? Was it the mistaken belief that they would walk into a room filled with unshaven, foul-smelling old men wearing dirty trench coats with

wine bottles in paper sacks sticking out of their pockets? (!!!) Was it fear that “someone might see me walking into that building and *find out* what my problem is?” Was it the belief that I have *special problems* that they would not understand? (I stutter badly perhaps, or I have a block where I simply cannot talk in the presence of a group of people, or I’m gay, or I have been diagnosed as a bipolar manic-depressive, or I was the victim of childhood sexual abuse, or I have a graduate degree and am much more intelligent and educated and knowledgeable¹¹⁴ than these people will be). All of these are nonsensical worries which can nevertheless actually beset people who know nothing yet at first-hand about the way the program functions.

G.C.: What was the biggest problem that you think people had to deal with, coming into A.A. back in that period? When people would come in, and they’d have hesitation or doubts or . . . what was it that they were apprehensive about?

JIMMY: Well, I find the biggest problem — it took them quite a while to determine if they *were* an alcoholic.

G.C.: O.K., making a first step?

JIMMY: Yes.

G.C.: So that’s not any different then [than it is now]?

JIMMY: No.

G.C.: So, they’d have to go back out and have some more unhappy experiences?

JIMMY: Oh yeah. Yes.

The first step in the A.A. twelve-step program of recovery is a simple one: “We admitted we were powerless over alcohol — that our lives had become unmanageable.” But it is this, in fact, which is

the hardest step of all for real alcoholics to take. It is a peculiar disease that *convinces you that you do not have the disease*. All the classic diagnostic symptoms are denied by the sufferer, explained away, minimized, or conveniently forgotten.

Non-alcoholics are nearly always fairly realistically aware of how much they are drinking in any given situation, and how it is actually affecting them. That particular judgment area in the brain does not seem to be gravely affected by a moderate amount of alcohol temporarily in their blood stream. Potential alcoholics, on the contrary, seem often to have a different sensitivity or type of response to ethanol in the blood supplying that portion of their brains: it may be something involving the receptors or the neurotransmitters within the brain cells themselves, although it is also possible that it is a purely psychological phenomenon. What happens though, is that this judgment center in the brain very quickly starts supplying them with false and distorted beliefs. Grossly illogical rationalizations and intellectualizations start to be produced, where that part of the brain “explains away” all the external evidence that would indicate that the mind is seriously impaired, and simultaneously with this, something within the brain seems to trigger an overwhelming desire, not to quit drinking (“I’ve had enough, I’m going home now”), but for even deeper intoxication.

Since alcoholism is a three-fold disease, involving the psyche and the spirit as well as the body, the person’s *psychology* will be distorted by all the classical *denial phenomena* which psychotherapists are so used to encountering in their patients’ confused thought processes when they first come into therapy. And likewise there will also inevitably be, at the *spiritual* level, a sense of alienation from God (perhaps expressed in the form, not of religious or theological statements, but of universalized negativistic statements about “what life is like” or “what the world is like”).

This part of the alcoholic problem can only be healed by some sort of spiritual discipline which will reassimilate a sense of *at-one-ment* (atonement) with the higher spiritual realm. The spiritual part of the disease also produces a peculiar kind of *denial*, expressed in the form of beliefs such as “God has never done anything good for me” or “there’s nothing in my life worth living for.”

So these three levels of distorted thinking and denial — alcohol-muddled brain cells computing totally illogical judgments about reality because their biochemical and electrical circuitry has been impaired, psychological denial, and falsely-universalized negative beliefs about God (or life, or the world, or “the way things are”) — make the first step in the program the most difficult barrier for the sick alcoholic to cross.

And even after alcoholics finally begin to realize the kind of destructive and unbreakable hold which alcohol has on them, no consistent long-term sobriety can emerge until the next two steps are taken:

2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn our wills and our lives over to the care of God *as we understood Him*.

These crucial steps are put right after the initial admission, because — of the three levels in the disease, the physiological, the psychological, and the spiritual — it is the last one, the spiritual dimension, which holds the key to the healing process. Alcoholics must seriously ask God *to perform a miracle* (in the most literal sense — an intrusion of *supernatural* power down into the natural realm to change the natural course of cause and effect and consequence). And strange as it may seem, the consistent A.A. experience — seen thousands upon thousands of times for people of

all conceivable kinds and sorts — is that all the alcoholic needs to do is *to ask*, and to be *willing to accept* what God will so freely give.

It has been made clear countless times that we do not need to follow any traditional set of religious doctrines about God, whether Christian, Jewish, Islamic, Hindu, Native American, or what have you, and we do not even have to use the word “God” to refer to the ruling, guiding principle of life and the universe. It is sufficient for us to cry out, to whatever good spiritual force there is in the universe, to start returning us to some semblance of sanity, and then for us to start turning things over to this power of simple, elemental goodness and decency and compassion and sanity.

Carrying out the first three steps honestly puts us squarely into the ongoing process of the program.

The next two steps are daunting and frightening to enter into, although the enormous healing that will immediately be realized upon thoroughly completing them, will take an enormous load off the alcoholic’s back:

4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.

The most effective A.A. sponsors currently at work in the St. Joseph river valley region, seem usually to believe that an alcoholic needs to be in the program, and staying continuously sober, for at least a year before tackling the fourth step seriously. The residential alcohol and drug treatment facilities in this region, both commercial and charitable, regularly ask their patients to write out a fourth step after just a few weeks in the treatment center, but no enormous amount of healing usually occurs at this point.¹¹⁵ When brain cells have been regularly soaked for years in a blood stream loaded with

excessive alcohol, it takes several months at least “for the fog to lift,” as A.A. people put it. And newcomers must usually put out a series of tentative feelers, in the form of partial self-revelations, before they become truly convinced that God will not reject them and totally abandon them or beat them to death when they start talking honestly about what they really feel and really did and the real motivations that made them do it — and they need to learn that their fellow alxies in Alcoholics Anonymous will not reject or abandon them either.

If we were thrown out of the A.A. program for being liars, frauds, thieves, or con artists; for having some physical feature that we used to consider extremely unattractive and were greatly embarrassed by; for being unbelievably petty soreheads, money-mad materialists, egotistical prima donnas, sexual perverts or totally promiscuous ally cats; or even for being guilty of raping, maiming, and murdering other human beings — there would be no one left in the A.A. meetings at all. All we would have is empty rooms!

But it takes some months of constantly hearing other recovering alcoholics talking totally openly about themselves, and trying a few tentative admissions ourselves in order to “test the water” and see if a crocodile snaps off one of our toes, before most of us typical drunks will be willing to genuinely make the plunge and start writing down, on paper, (1) the things that we internally feel the greatest resentment about, and (2) the things we are most inwardly afraid of, and (3) what the underlying character traits are which make us overreact so strongly each time these particular kind of issues arise in our everyday lives.

There will always be a pattern to our resentments and fears, and usually a very simple one. Whenever something like X happens, I start acting like a crazy person in the form of Y, and Z normally happens as a consequence. And so I am left with a long term

festering resentment, overpowering self-pity, and even more paralyzing fear (or the kind of blind panic that makes me lash out in an insane rage) the next time something like X happens.

Jimmy said that she and Bill Hoover did their fifth step with their sponsor, Ray Moore. Raymond I. said that he in turn did his fifth step with Bill. So Raymond must have waited over a year to do his fourth and fifth steps, because we remember that he said that he had first come into A.A. in June of 1974, and initially had Brownie as his sponsor, but shifted to Bill as his sponsor about a year later, that is, some time in 1975.

G.C.: How did people normally do the fifth step in those days? Did they normally go and talk to their sponsor, or did they . . . how would they handle that?

RAYMOND: The fifth step I would admit to myself, God, and another human being, so I would go get a priest, or I would go get someone. And all these things I had wrote down in the fourth step, I would go over. Like when Bill [when he became my sponsor in 1975] took me back there in that back room, that little office he got back there? He told me I had to tell somebody my whole story.

JIMMY: Yes, but we mostly did it, in them days — they suggested a priest, not a friend, because people felt more confident going to a priest, or their pastor, or just a regular counselor to get all this off their mind.

G.C.: What did you do? Who did you go to?

JIMMY: My sponsor. Bill [also] went to his sponsor.

G.C.: What'd you do, Raymond?

RAYMOND: Bill took me right back here. Off the kitchen, there's a little office they got, and he took me in there. But he carried me through the first five steps. And it took a couple of days, and he carried me through the first five steps, and then he told me, see, well take this immediate fourth and fifth step. I liked heroin, and I still

hung with thieves, and I hung out with prostitutes — I was a product of the street. These was the immediate things I had to try to get away from, to come into this way of life.

This is one of the most important reasons why a newcomer to A.A. needs to get a sponsor. In A.A. lingo the person whom you use to listen to your innermost thoughts and feelings is called a “sponsor” and the person seeking direction and comforting is called a “pigeon” (a phrase that goes back to Dr. Bob and the colorful slang terms he liked to use). In other spiritual disciplines down through history this person is called your spiritual advisor, or your confessor, or your guru, or your starets, but no program of higher spiritual development has ever tried to function without this sponsor/pigeon relationship firmly in place. We need a sponsor or spiritual director because the human mind’s facility for self-delusion is enormous, and we also need someone external to corroborate our own truthful inner intuitions and knowledge, particularly when what we ourselves intuit or know runs counter to what we were told as children, or are still being told by many people around us.

In present-day A.A., there are some people who stick around the program (sometimes for years), actually staying away from booze totally, though with some difficulty — but trying to fend off the God language with intellectual cavils, or being too afraid to do a real fourth and fifth step, or both. In the terminology of the old timers, these people are “dry” but not truly “sober.” They lack the deep serenity and peace of mind and inner joyfulness that comes from plunging all the way into the program. They are infinitely better off than they were while they were still actively tossing down the liquor. But as Bill C., the retired submarine commander, puts it, “If you’re going to travel, why not go first class instead of tourist class?”

Chapter 20

He Knew It Was a God

The old timers say that when newcomers finally discover a God of their own understanding, you can “see it in their eyes.”¹¹⁶

Until that point, with some of them, the eyes seem to show a suppressed anger all the time. They look like they would snap your head off if you said boo to them.

With others, the eyes remain totally hooded and shielded somehow, even when they are looking straight at you. There is a barrier of some sort blocking you from seeing the real human being inside: a false façade of brave and glib bravado and bonhomie, or perpetual pseudo-self-control, or the maintenance of some sort of non-revealing, closed-off reticence about their real thoughts and feelings. You look at the eyes, and you see a phony; you listen to them talk, and you hear men and women who are always putting on an act, to try to impress you or “make you like them.”

Others keep their eyes downcast, never raising them higher than your belt buckle.

And then they finally discover within themselves, a consciousness of a higher power whom they can understand in their own terms, and the eyes totally change. You can see it by just looking at their faces.

The problem is that nowadays there are many alcoholics in this part of Indiana who come to one A.A. meeting, hear the word God

mentioned a few times, and walk away determined never to come to one of *those* meetings again. Fortunately, after the disease has beaten them down even further — for it is a progressive, killer disease that only gets worse and worse over the long haul if you do not come into a workable recovery program — some of these alkies come back, and start working the program seriously, and explaining to the rest of the group eventually — usually laughing at themselves by that time — why it was that they walked out the first time around. This is more of a modern phenomenon however: Jimmy Miller said that this did not represent the same kind of problem in South Bend in the 1940's and 50's, half a century ago.

G.C.: How did they handle the spiritual aspect of it back in those days? Was that a problem, with the people coming in, and getting really frightened about having to be in a spiritual program?

JIMMY: It was no problem. It turned our lives over. We called it God, not a Higher Power, in those days — and there was no problem. What seemed to happen, you probably, you know — if you was religious to first, it seems that the group would go back and get back within the church or something — but that wasn't brought into the meetings. So it was no problem. Now it's a Higher Power, and the Man Upstairs, but in *those* days it was *God!*

There are cultural and social — and hence racial — aspects to this issue. In the St. Joseph River basin nowadays, it is far more apt to be white people who are convinced that “they are too smart to believe in God,” and who use intellectual rationalizations to convince themselves that they are atheists, and that belief in God is superstitious self-delusion on the part of uneducated people who know nothing of modern science. It would be “hypocritical” to act like there was a God, they say, when “I know that this is ignorant

nonsense” — these are alcoholics, of course, whose whole lives are a tissue of lies, partial truths designed to mislead, attempts to con and manipulate everyone around them by surreptitious means into carrying out their wishes, solemn promises to other people never carried out, and so on and so forth — but God forbid that they should ever do anything hypocritical!

Given the way that the black churches still continue to play such an important role in providing leadership and community solidarity to the black communities of the United States, it is not surprising that black alcoholics do not very often come into the A.A. program saying that they are atheists. What they *will* say (voices filled with scorn and contempt) is that “they have no use for those church people.” The hostility towards the things of the spirit is just as great, it is just that it is apt to take a different verbal and conceptual expression.

When Bill Hoover came into A.A. and made his peace with the things of the spirit, he also started going regularly to church on Sunday mornings. But he never stopped going to the A.A. meetings and helping people there too. One of the most successful black people in South Bend A.A. nowadays, in terms of sponsoring and teaching other people, is Raymond I. Unlike Bill, Raymond has never felt any urge to start going to church: the A.A. meetings themselves are his church. So we see two ways of handling the church issue, both of which seem to work.

Nevertheless, the one thing that seems to remain true is that at least ninety-eight to ninety-nine percent of alcoholics, when they first come into A.A., are quite hostile at the practical level to anything that sounds too much like organized religion. This is so whether they are black or white, male or female, tall or short, thin or fat, right-handed or left-handed. Bill Hoover was no exception to that:

JIMMY: Bill, he said [that before he came into A.A.] he never went to Sunday School in his life; he went to church not *over* six times in his life. So he started going to church with me. You know, he joined the church, got baptized, and was faithful till he could not go any more.

He said, he *knew* it was a God. He *had* to know it after he came into A.A. *That he got sober* — he couldn't do it on his own.

The Big Book couldn't do it. The *wind* couldn't do it! His wife couldn't do it. So it had to be God that stopped it. And he said, it had to be God in the plan, now that's the way he seen it. For our calls to be three days apart.

RAYMOND: Coincidence? or *spiritual*.

JIMMY: And Ray Moore: They said, "No, that's a colored man, you don't make the call." He said, "But I'm *making it*."

RAYMOND: The first black to come into Alcoholics Anonymous in South Bend, Indiana.

JIMMY: Yeah.

RAYMOND: Bill Hoover.

JIMMY: Yeah. And I was the second.

RAYMOND: First Lady.

JIMMY: First Lady Well, look how long it was just the two of us, period.

RAYMOND: I don't know — how long?

JIMMY: Maybe . . . two years.

The syntax and idioms of black English, among old timers — like some of the white English dialects spoken in the United States in parts of the south, such as the Appalachian mountain region, when I was a child — often preserve, unchanged, turns of phrase and ways of fitting words together that go back to England and Ireland and Scotland in the 1600's and 1700's and even earlier — sometimes not only Shakespearian but even Chaucerian usages.

So Jimmy's way of describing Bill Hoover's faith was to say, "he *knew* it was a God." Translated into current standard American or British English, that meant something like "he *knew* there was a God" (that is, this was to him proof that God truly did exist) or "he *knew* that it was God" (meaning it had to have been God who performed that feat, because no human power could have accomplished it).

A.A. people will talk frequently about the need for faith. The first genuine prayer that alcoholics make on the road to recovery is always some sort of shout for help out into the spiritual darkness, although in their heart of hearts they either doubt that there is anybody there to hear them, or are convinced pretty much that whoever is there will just ignore them. The willingness to cry out from the bottom of my soul and bare my total helplessness and vulnerability — even though I believe at best, "that even if there is any God out there he might or might not help someone like me" — is an act of faith. It is a faith that there is at least some chance that God will not squash me like a bug for daring to appeal to him this way, or it is a faith in the strange spirit that I as a newcomer see at work in the A.A. meetings I go to, and can feel, and almost touch, which I can sense is imbued with love and compassion and the desire to help.

Every time recovering alcoholics practice the true spiritual life by realizing that X or Y or Z has overwhelmed them, and that they can see no earthly way that they can cope by themselves with what has been dropped on them, but then decide to deal with the issue by simply turning the whole matter over to God, they have performed an act of faith. "Let go and let God" is being willing to live by faith.

Faith in the sense of being willing to give God a chance is an essential part of the A.A. way of life. But one will rarely if ever hear a recovering alcoholic who has been in the program any great length

of time talking about “having to have faith that there IS a God.” That is, the simple, basic belief in God’s existence, and belief that he has a *supernatural* and miraculous power, is not so much an article of faith in A.A. as it is a piece of acquired knowledge, which we are expected to learn from our own personal, direct experience. It is not an intellectual or theoretical belief, but practical knowledge learned from experimenting and seeing at first hand what actually happens.

That is one reason why the A.A. program is an *action program*, why “faith without works is dead,” and why A.A. cannot be learned from reading words off the page of a book, or by carrying on intellectual discussions, or rationalistically exploring “proofs for the existence of God.”

The miracle of the transformation of the human spirit and the return to freedom

The normal scientific natural laws of psychology and physiology are totally violated by the A.A. experience. Every recovering alcoholic walking around with sobriety and serenity is a living witness that something *supernatural* in the literal sense of the word happens in A.A.

In popular, everyday current English, that word “supernatural” is apt to refer most of the time to belief in ghosts and goblins and fairies, and witches and sorcerers who can wave magic wands, and the rest of the claptrap that we see when little children dress up in their Halloween costumes. But literally, a *supernatural* event is one in which the scientifically determined laws of *nature* — in which whenever A happens, B happens next, and C follows as an unavoidable and inescapable consequence — has its sequence broken. The chain of events is suddenly snapped in the middle, and

something new (and scientifically inexplicable) starts up, initiating a quite different chain of subsequent events instead.

God has the ability to act in ways which are *supernatural* in this sense. And all genuine acts of human free will are also *supernatural* in this sense. In A.A., God saves us from the doom which Fate has laid out for us by returning our freedom. He breaks the natural causal chain of events in such a way that we are empowered to break this chain also. But like all real freedom, it means the freedom also for us to turn around and go back towards death at any point when we choose to do so, which is why, no matter how many years people have been in A.A., they are still left free to go back out and start drinking again. God will put no insurmountable barriers in their way, because living with true sobriety and serenity is *living in freedom*, not trading one inescapable servitude for another.

“He *knew* it was a God”: this is not *mere belief*, but *secure knowledge*. It is not an intellectual proof worked out up at “the tops of our minds,” but the kind of gut knowledge learned in daily, practical experience as we attempt to walk the path of the spirit. And it is what we *do with* that knowledge which will — one day at a time — either continue to keep us on the road of life, or turn us back once again down the road of death.

Not “coincidence” but the power of the Anonymous God

Bill Hoover (and Raymond too) also stressed something else which they insisted was knowledge of some sort, not mere pious fantasy. Too many things in fact happen in the life of recovery for them all to be mere coincidence. After enough time in the program, we realize that this has to be in fact the spiritual power of God working anonymously. Raymond made it clear that only a fool

would try to argue this with a skeptic who had never actually tried living the spiritual life, and who just wanted to argue abstract theories as a kind of essentially empty intellectual game. At the level of the laws of nature and the rules normally governing the natural realm, these events appear to be simply the product of perfectly natural events combining in chance and accidental ways.

Within the realm of the spirit, however, most people who have been in A.A. for a while find that there are entirely too many of these apparent coincidences in their lives to make real sense. They seem to be coincidences at the surface level, but they either push you into the place where God will be able to save you, or enable you to learn precisely what you need to know at that point in order to promote further healing, or block you from carelessly putting yourself into a situation of overwhelming temptation by some spur of the moment thoughtlessness. They are not just “chance” because *they mean something*.

Can a clever person still take all these meaningful occurrences and explain them all away as a mixture of pure chance and selective thinking? Of course, which is why there is no point in arguing about it with anyone who wants to think that way. But A.A. people find that when they live their daily lives as though these were not mere coincidences, but God leading and guiding them, their lives go a thousand times more smoothly, and their spiritual growth continually leads them into ever new heights of the spiritual realm. And when they ignore them, and brush them aside as mere coincidences, at best their lives become stale and nonproductive, and at worst they fall back into their old way of life, when they saw the world around them as nothing but a blind piece of machinery, and then they begin once again destroying everything they set their hands on.

On page 449 of the Big Book there is the simple statement: “Nothing, absolutely nothing happens in God’s world by mistake.”

When Submarine Bill's pigeons call him in an uproar, crying and screaming, he tells them to go re-read that page, and especially to meditate on the meaning of that one central sentence. And the pigeons fuss and fume and rage some more, and then go and re-read that page, and at first it sometimes even makes them even angrier, or even more distraught. But then something happens, and they suddenly strangely start cooling down, and find that they can start thinking straight again, and figure out something sane and rational to do next.

**The power of God to raise up
servants of his grace to strengths totally
beyond their human powers**

It struck Jimmy and Bill strongly. There was Ray Moore, who had to be a white racist to some degree, simply because of his age and social background. And there was all the rest of the only support group he had, telling him not to make the twelfth-step call on the "colored people." There was this white Irishman, Jimmy related, and "they said, 'No, that's a colored man, you don't make the call,' [and instead] he said, 'But I'm *making it*.'"

It should also be noted, that for black men and women back in 1948, putting your life in the hands of a group of white people was even more frightening. If anyone was going to get badly hurt before this was over, it was Jimmy and Bill who were taking the really enormous risk. Were they going to have to hear these people referring to them contemptuously and humiliatingly as "niggers" and other racial insults? Black people in this part of Indiana are still on occasion hearing that word shouted at them on the streets by total strangers even today, over fifty years later — I still remember a young black woman coming to an A.A. meeting in Elkhart in tears

after it happened to her twice in one day. And in the United States in the early twentieth century, it was white mobs which lynched helpless black people, not vice versa. Ray Moore was a truly brave man, but Jimmy and Bill displayed an even more extraordinary courage.

Over and over again, A.A. people see both themselves and others in the program being raised to heights of bravery and courage far beyond their natural powers, and doing things they never even thought imaginable. Bill Hoover had seen it with his own eyes. No one was asking him to make an act of blind faith on this score. “He KNEW it was a God.” Only some incomparably great divine power could bring such a diverse group of people together, at so precisely the right moment, and inspire them with a goodness and compassion far surpassing their inherited prejudices and preconceptions.

Coming into the A.A. way of life requires everyone to relearn how to live from scratch, by totally new rules and assumptions:

RAYMOND: Bill [Hoover] told *me* that I was like a baby. And I got resentments. “What you mean, a baby?”

He say, “I mean to this spiritual way of life. You are a baby.” Spiritually, I was just like a baby in the arms. I’d never practiced spirituality.

The beginning of it was him carrying me through these first five steps, kind of clean house, and I told him as much as I could then. Then the fourth step, they had a pamphlet around here, like, we call it the seven cardinal sins: envy, anger, jealousy, fear. And he told me to look at these type of thing, and he showed me — with my jealousy, with my anger, with my fear — that fear was behind all these things. Whenever I got angry, or whenever I got jealousy, if I really took a look at it for what it was worth, I’d have seen that fear was the cause of this.

G.C.: I thought I had only two or three things I had any fear of, when I started doing my fourth step. I thought I had lots of things I was resentful about, but only two or three things I was afraid of. By the time I got to the end of the fourth step, I learned better!

RAYMOND: Like it say in that Big Book, fear should be considered a *thief*. The things I lose, or the things I won't try because of fear — I won't admit it to you, but inwardly, I don't have the confidence to go ahead and DO. *Fear*. So I don't even try.

The *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* says that all the other deadly sins are either rooted in the character defect of Pride, or steeped in Pride and made worse by Pride. And then it goes on to speak of an even deeper truth: it says that lying down below all the other character defects that destroy our lives — down below resentment and pride and all the rest — is almost always some dreadful Fear.¹¹⁷ Until we set our enslaving fears to rest we can never live in true freedom.

People like Bill Hoover and Jimmy Miller and Brownie taught us to rise above our fear so that we could find a life worth living. They not only gave us this newfound courage to live, but they gave it as a gift of grace which they bestowed upon us freely. Our life is their life breathed into our nostrils when we lay drowned, cast up for dead upon the shore, and in some sense our lives will always be their life from that point on, and will not be just our own lives anymore:

RAYMOND: I knew [Brownie] the man, and when a person pass on, I don't feel like another person can step into their shoes — that personality, that charismatic [quality], that individual. Yet I could say those he sponsored — same thing with Bill — I am *an extension* of my sponsors, I

believe. I am an extension of Bill Hoover, and I am an extension of Harold Brown.

And I feel, if I had it to say, the sponsee can carry the spirit of the sponsor, more so than the person who just knew him, I believe. And I believe the person — the people these individuals sponsored — carries their spirit.

I feel this way with Bill, I feel this way with Brownie. What they taught me, I'm using today. So spiritually, they live on. They passed on to me what was so freely given to them.

In the Sermon on the Mount, it's wrote, by you living this way of life, you will help people you don't even know. By him living that way of life, he helped you, and he's gone on, yet technically, spiritually, he still lives.

This is why I want the fellowship so bad.

The people whose stories we are telling in these two volumes are unforgettable characters. Once you have heard their stories, you can never forget them. Their particular stories were chosen because some people are more transparent to the divine power than others. In a special kind of way, we can hear God speak to us through them, as though God were right here in the room with us in human form, and see God's love at work in what God did for them that so transformed their lives, and in the way they in turn act towards us and everyone else around them.

The power of the spirit which saves us is always embodied in the lives of specific individuals with distinctive personalities all their own. "We have this treasure in earthen vessels," of course, for at the fundamental level, as all people of the spirit know, "the extraordinary power is from God and not from us."¹¹⁸ But we cannot access this healing power in abstraction from these earthen vessels: it is always the divine spirit as we sensed it working in and through the all-so-human spirit of Ken M., or Nick Kowalski, or

Jimmy M., or Raymond I., or whoever served as the channel of God's grace to us.

So in the process, of necessity, we take into our own being not only God but them too. This little book is trying to put you the reader into contact with the God who saves poor alcoholics from their doom, but the only way to do that is to tell you stories about people. "The spiritual life is not a theory. *We have to live it.*"¹¹⁹ This passage from the Big Book is one that Brooklyn Bob quoted to us all the time, because he said that realizing this and becoming willing to really and truly act on it, was what turned his own life around and saved his soul from destruction. And we who are still on earth can only teach you about this spiritual way of life by telling you how we and our teachers before us have tried to live it.

This book will have succeeded if you stop and think some day, before acting, "I remember what Nick K. said about this," and then do something different — and much better — than what you otherwise would have done. This book will have succeeded if someone comes to you some day in despair, and you find yourself automatically saying words to them which you suddenly realize came from Ken M. or Jimmy M., and the other person's face lights up, and you realize that you actually helped them — and then feel very humble, because you also know it was not any wisdom of your own devising which you passed along, that you were but an earthly channel (and a pretty crude and unpolished earthly channel indeed) for a divine healing power of infinite and eternal Majesty and Might.

There are so many of us in the St. Joseph river valley who will say that Ken and Nick and Jimmy and the rest of those good old-timers live in us, and that they taught us everything we know, and that we use what they taught us every day. And we will also tell you that it allowed us to miraculously stop drinking ourselves to destruction, and taught us how to live in a way where we can often

come to the end of the day and say, like Nick, “the day has been satisfied.”

Please come join us. It is no longer necessary for you to live in rage, anger, self-pity, guilt, and despair. That is what this whole book has been about. Learn what it means to say with gratitude at the end of the day, “the day has been satisfied.” That’s a really good feeling, and it is something you the reader can have too.

NOTES

¹CHAPTER 1: The Big Book, as it is called within the A.A. movement, first came out in 1939. References in this work are to its third edition: *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 3rd ed. (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1976).

²*Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1953).

³*'Pass It On': The Story of Bill Wilson and How the A.A. Message Reached the World* (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1984). *Dr. Bob and the Good Oldtimers: A Biography, with Recollections of Early A.A. in the Midwest* (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1980). Mary C. Darrah, *Sister Ignatia: Angel of Alcoholics Anonymous* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1992).

⁴CHAPTER 2: For example, Kenneth G. Merrill, "The Hobby of a Traveling Man," *Atlantic Monthly* (April 1927), "You Won't Get the Next Boat Home," *Collier's* (January 30, 1926), "Canterbury Pilgrims, New Style," *Atlantic Monthly* (April 1928), "The Cross," *Scribners'* (December 1926), "Adeste Fideles," *Scribners'* (December 1928), "Warmth," *Scribners'* (December 1929), "Sally," *Scribners'* (August 1931), and "It's a Happy Factory," *Collier's* (December 25, 1953), in addition to articles such as "These Found a Way," *Religion and Health* (May 1953), "My Opinion Isn't Worth Much," *Kiwanis Magazine* (June 1956), "Away with Deadpans!" *Kiwanis Magazine* (September 1955), and "I'm Getting Ready — Now!" *Senior Citizen* (April 1955), plus articles in publications like *Industrial Merchandising* and *Printer's Ink*.

⁵Kenneth G. Merrill, "Poor Daddy!" *American Mercury* (1954).

⁶CHAPTER 3: The vagueness on the dating in this paragraph is deliberate. The biographical sketch of Ken M. by Peter C. Merrill puts him at Calumet High School for only two years, from 1907–1909. This would have made him not quite *eighteen* in May of 1909 when he was expelled. In the account Ken himself wrote in 1954, he said that these events happened "forty-five years ago," that is, in 1909, but he also said

there that he was expelled two months before his *seventeenth* birthday (which would have been May of 1908 instead), and that this was at the end of his junior year, during his *third* year of school. And later on in his memoir, Ken said the year was 1908.

⁷CHAPTER 4: All the excerpts in this chapter were taken from Kenneth G. Merrill, “The Hobby of a Traveling Man,” *Atlantic Monthly* (April 1927).

⁸*‘Pass It On’ The Story of Bill Wilson and How the A.A. Message Reached the World* (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1984), p. 60.

⁹*Alcoholics Anonymous*, 3rd ed. (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1976), p. 10.

¹⁰CHAPTER 5: All the excerpts in this chapter come from Kenneth G. Merrill, “Chips from a Third Mate’s Log,” *The Outlook* (July 18, 1928).

¹¹We see this happening at one point in Bill Wilson’s story. When Ebby was sitting at Bill’s kitchen table and talking to him about the new spiritual approach to life which he had found, Bill found himself drifting back into memory, and recalling the experience (at the feeling level) of the New England church services of his childhood and the experience (again at the feeling level) of standing within the holy silence of Winchester Cathedral when he was a young officer. See *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 3rd ed. (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1976), p. 10.

¹²CHAPTER 6: Kenneth G. Merrill, “The Hobby of a Traveling Man,” *Atlantic Monthly* (April 1927), purported to describe his life when he was twenty-five, but these two paragraphs were far more a depiction of his current feelings and home life there in 1927, ten years later.

¹³Conversation with D. Merrill (Ken’s son).

¹⁴Conversation with Martha P. (Ken’s daughter), October 29, 1993.

¹⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁶My good friend, the A.A. archivist Frank N., who now lives in Syracuse, Indiana, was brought up as a child in the rough-and-tumble Chapin Street area of South Bend (where his father owned a bar) in the 1930's and 40's. He tells me that Eddie Slake's favorite weekend avocation before he came into A.A. was to get drunk and get in a fight in one or another of the bars in that part of town. The police would arrive, hit him vigorously with their billy clubs until they had subdued him, and then drag him off and lock him up in jail overnight until he had sobered up. The cops all knew Eddie, he knew all of them too, and in spite of the extreme violence it was almost like a game.

¹⁷Conversations and correspondence with D. Merrill.

¹⁸The material in the preceding paragraphs is from a conversation with Martha P., October 29, 1993.

¹⁹Kenneth G. Merrill, "It's a Happy Factory," *Collier's* (December 25, 1953).

²⁰*Ibid.*

²¹CHAPTER 7: All the excerpts in this chapter, other than the one indicated in the following note, are taken from Kenneth G. Merrill, "It's a Happy Factory," *Collier's* (December 25, 1953).

²²Kenneth G. Merrill, "A Garden Gets an Order," *Salesman's Digest* (January 1954).

²³CHAPTER 8: As related by Ken's daughter Martha P. in a conversation on October 29, 1993.

²⁴All the long quoted excerpts in Chapter 8 are taken from Kenneth G. Merrill, "Drunks Are a Mess," *Bar-Less* (1965).

²⁵CHAPTER 9: All the excerpts in this chapter are from the tape recording of the lead given by Nick Kowalski at Ann Arbor, Michigan, on February 26, 1976.

²⁶The Roman Catholics of Jesuit spiritual background who became associated with A.A. very early on, made sure that Bill W. was familiar with St. Augustine's ideas, and Bill may even have read some of Augustine's writings at that time, because he had an extraordinary grasp

on the basic Augustinian spiritual principles. The *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius Loyola, the Spanish saint who founded the Jesuits, taught spiritual meditation at the level of feeling and visual imagery, not intellectualization. These meditations were deliberately designed to arouse incredibly strong emotions, and represented a strongly Augustinian spirituality of *eupatheia*, not *apatheia*. Sister Ignatia received her training in spirituality, when she originally entered the convent as a young nun, through a discipline strongly based on Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises*. She also used that book as one of her two basic guides for teaching spirituality to the alcoholics who came through her A.A.-linked treatment program in Akron. In the *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, Bill W.'s repeated statements that pride (thinking that I am God) was the root of all other sin, was the classical Augustinian interpretation of human sinfulness.

²⁷The A.A. emphasis upon achieving a healthy *balance* between the different emotions and instinctual drives was that of Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics*. When Aristotle said "seek the golden mean," he meant that there is no set of legalistic rules which we can follow mechanically in trying to decide how to act morally and wisely in specific situations. Instead, we can only say that good action lies in the middle ground between the extremes of too little and too much: courage for example avoids cowardice on the one hand (too little), but foolhardiness on the other (too much). See *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1953), "Step Four," pp. 42-54. Also see Ralph Pfau (Father John Doe), *The Golden Book of Passion* (Indianapolis, Indiana: SMT Guild, 1960), espec. pp. 5-9: feelings or emotions are what traditional Catholic ethics called "the passions." These are not sinful in themselves, but are the major *sources* from which sin can come if we handle them improperly. As Ralph explained it, "*anger* overemphasizes *my rights*; *covetousness* overemphasizes *my things*; *lust* overemphasizes *my satisfaction*; *gluttony* overemphasizes *my body*; *envy* overemphasizes *my welfare and success*; and *sloth* overemphasizes *my comfort*" (p. 8).

²⁸The A.A. movement initially grew out of the Oxford Group, which was led by an American Lutheran pastor of pietist leanings named Frank

Buchman. Pietism was a movement which had started within seventeenth and eighteenth century German Lutheranism as a rebellion against the dogmatic rigidity and intellectualism of Lutheran scholasticism and its insistence upon “orthodoxy” and following all the doctrines in the elaborate Lutheran creedal documents of that period such as the Augsburg Confession and the Book of Concord.

²⁹In 1935 the old catholic-leaning Methodist Episcopal Church South began publishing *The Upper Room* in Nashville, Tennessee, where they had their central church headquarters, right next door to Vanderbilt University (which was originally a Methodist institution and the bright shining star of the southern Methodists’ intellectual firmament). *The Upper Room* taught early A.A. people a classical Protestant liberal variety of the sort of feeling-based spirituality which one saw in John Wesley and the Moravians in the early eighteenth century and Friedrich Schleiermacher (who came from a German Lutheran pietist background) at the end of that century. See Schleiermacher’s enormously influential work, *Speeches on Religion to the Cultured Among Its Despisers*, which he published in 1799: real spirituality was not a matter of doctrines and dogmas but was based on achieving conscious contact with the realm of the infinite through *Anschauung* (intuition) and *Gefühl* (feeling).

³⁰CHAPTER 10: All the excerpts in this chapter are again taken from the tape recording of the lead given by Nick Kowalski at Ann Arbor, Michigan on February 26, 1976.

³¹CHAPTER 11: Also from the tape recording of the lead Nick Kowalski gave at Ann Arbor, Michigan, on February 26, 1976.

³²*South Bend Tribune* (February 24, 1940).

³³*South Bend Tribune* (February 25, 1940).

³⁴*South Bend Tribune* (February 27, 1940).

³⁵Nick K., “Yesterday & Today,” *Bar-less* 10:12 (September-October 1955) 25–39, the transcript of a lead which Nick gave at the Indiana State Prison on September 25, 1955, two years after his release from that institution. He said in his introductory statement that he went behind bars for the murder in 1940 and was incarcerated until 1953. In all,

Nick's friends said, he spent fourteen years locked up, two in South Bend prior to the trial, and twelve at Michigan City.

³⁶Nick K., Ann Arbor, February 26, 1976.

³⁷Nick Kowalski, tape recording of a lead which he gave at a conference held June 6–8, 1986.

³⁸Richmond Walker's *Twenty-Four Hours a Day* (Center City MN: Hazelden, 1975 [orig. pub. 1948]), was the second most important book in early St. Joseph river valley A.A. Rich repeatedly made reference to this problem, as in his reading for March 24: "We live in a box of space and time, which we have manufactured by our own minds and on that depends all our so-called knowledge of the universe." We cannot know God, whose realm lies outside this box, by the kind of knowledge which is based on sense experience. But we can know God through intuition and feeling (April 27): "We feel that He is beside us. We feel His presence. Contact with God is not made by the senses God has to span the physical and the spiritual with the gift to us of spiritual vision We are inside a box of space and time, but we know there must be something outside of that box, limitless space, eternity of time, and God." See Glenn F. Chesnut, *The Higher Power of the Twelve-Step Program: For Believers & Non-Believers*, Hindsfoot Foundation Series on Spirituality and Theology (San Jose: iUniverse/Authors Choice Press, 2001), pp. 118-120 and 224-226 nn. 4 and 5.

³⁹Nick K., Ann Arbor, February 26, 1976.

⁴⁰CHAPTER 12: Carbon copies of various letters which Ken M. wrote, together with copies of the typescripts from which he gave his annual A.A. radio broadcasts, were graciously supplied by his daughter Martha P. and son D. Merrill, and are cited from in this chapter.

⁴¹This information came from Pat Wilkie, in a telephone conversation with G.C. several months before she died. She was a very observant and perceptive woman, with an extremely good memory, who could speak very frankly and bluntly, and she knew a lot of things about various of the A.A. old timers that were not general knowledge. She was a Scotswoman, who served in the R.A.F. during World War II, then came to the United States. She was very active in A.A. in South Bend, and

eventually married an ex-convict named Tony Wilkie, who after getting sober in A.A. had become one of the local leaders in working with convicts and ex-cons who needed the program. Pat knew Ken Merrill not only through A.A. but also professionally, through her job at an advertising agency. She was apparently the only woman in the A.A. program with whom Ken felt comfortable talking on any personal level, she said, presumably because he also knew her as a business woman on a purely professional level.

But it should also be said that Ken's daughter Martha P. insists very strongly that the family certainly had *not* had her father legally committed to a sanitarium against his will by a formal court hearing, and that such a story could not possibly have been true. She also noted that her father had a regular tendency to exaggerate in order to tell a good story. Martha was not quite five years old at that time, but says that she is basing this judgment on things she was told by other members of the family later on. I have gone with Pat Wilkie's version of the story in the text, but feel that it is only fair to insert this note in order to give a fair impression of Martha's perspective on these issues.

By February 1943, Ken was definitely under severe family pressure of some sort over his drinking. In his first Christmas Eve broadcast over radio station WSBT in South Bend, as transcribed in the *South Bend Tribune* for December 24, 1944, he said, "In February, 1943, I joined that wonderful society ... known as Alcoholics Anonymous For 22 months I have been dry. For 18 months I have been rejoicing in the reawakened affections and confidence of my family." There was clearly some sort of definitive family ultimatum or severe family rupture over Ken's drinking, and it was not until June 1943 (four months after he and Soo Cates had started the South Bend A.A. group) that the threat was removed and Ken brought back within his family's good graces.

⁴²The *South Bend City Directory* for 1943 lists him as a local physician with his office in Room 319 of the Odd Fellows Building on 104 South Main Street, in the middle of downtown South Bend, not far from the courthouse. Dr. Metcalfe and his wife Evelyn, who was a nurse, resided at 1209 East Wayne Street N.

⁴³Ken M., letter to Mr. Joseph Flaugh, Insurance, Benton Harbor, Michigan, dated February 2, 1946: Soo Cates “got hold of me, and together, on February 22, 1943, we founded this Chapter.” Michiana (meaning Michigan + Indiana) is a word used in this region to refer to the part of the St. Joseph river valley which extends from north central Indiana up into southwestern Michigan.

⁴⁴Excerpt from a letter by Ken M. to W. Blake Stevenson, dated April 10, 1961.

⁴⁵Preserved in the New York archives of Alcoholics Anonymous.

⁴⁶Ken M., letter to Joseph Flaugh, February 2, 1946: “Correction! It was Joe [Soo] Cates — not I — who brought A.A. to South Bend, sometime in ’42. Months later he got hold of me, and together, on February 22, 1943, we founded this Chapter — but he was the real spark plug. As you know, he died during the summer of ’44, God bless him.” This was probably just Ken being modest. If Soo tried to start an A.A. group when he first moved from Buffalo to South Bend, he was totally unsuccessful and went back to drinking again. The problem with knowing more about Soo is that he died so soon — and left no writings or tape recordings and (as far as could be discovered) had no immediate relatives who were still alive by 1993 — so he must remain a mystery figure. It was clearly Ken however who was “the real spark plug” for the growth of South Bend A.A. during the rest of the 1940’s (and Ken, not Soo, who made the Christmas Eve radio broadcasts for the group, and so on).

⁴⁷Nick Kowalski, in his lead at Ann Arbor, Michigan, on Feb. 26, 1976, says that there were four in the South Bend A.A. group when the prison A.A. program was started in 1944. Since Harry Stevens was a key person in this prison project, he must have been one of these four people. Ken Merrill of course was one of them, and Jim McNeil was another (see note 89). The fourth person presumably would have been Soo Cates, unless he was already dead by then.

⁴⁸Transcript of Ken M.’s first Christmas message which was broadcast over radio station WSBT in South Bend in 1944, as printed in the *South Bend Tribune* for December 24, 1944.

⁴⁹Ken M., letter to Vince Fagan, dated March 18, 1946.

⁵⁰From the typescript from which Ken M. read his second Christmas message over radio station WSBT in South Bend, in 1945.

⁵¹*Ibid.*

⁵²*Ibid.*

⁵³A phrase often used by Brownie, one of the black leaders in South Bend A.A. for many years.

⁵⁴CHAPTER 13: Ken M., letter to Ed Young, Feb. 4, 1960.

⁵⁵Nick's List, a handwritten account of names of key people and events from early A.A. in South Bend compiled by Nick Kowalski, transcribed as an appendix to the second volume of this work, *The St. Louis Gambler & the Railroad Man*.

⁵⁶*Alcoholics Anonymous*, 3rd ed. (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1976), p. 63.

⁵⁷William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, the Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion at the University of Edinburgh for 1901–2, recently reprinted in the Modern Library series (New York: Modern Library, 1994).

⁵⁸Nick's List.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*

⁶⁰*Ibid.*

⁶¹*Ibid.*

⁶²*Ibid.*

⁶³*Ibid.*

⁶⁴*Ibid.*

⁶⁵Letter from Dewey S. and ten others from Mishawaka, Indiana, to the New York A.A. headquarters dated January 17, 1946, now in the New York A.A. Archives.

⁶⁶Nick's List.

⁶⁷Letter from Ken M.'s son D. M. to the editor of this volume in 1993.

⁶⁸Nick's List.

⁶⁹In the same letter from D. M. (see note 67).

⁷⁰Nick's List.

⁷¹Ibid.

⁷²*Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, pp. ix, 213–22, and 226.

⁷³Nick's List.

⁷⁴See the *Northern Indiana Archival Bulletin*, Vol. 2 (1999), No. 1, and other materials in the Northern Indiana Area 22 Archives. Indiana A.A. was originally organized in a single state-wide Area. The first eight Delegates (in order) were Robert White (Panel 1, i.e. served for two years from 1951-52), Fred Clark (Panel 3, i.e. served for two years from 1953-54), Maurice Judd (Panel 5), Harry Crates (Panel 7), O. A. Robinson (Panel 9), Wayne Gillette (Panel 11), Bill Goen (Panel 13), and Ross Stanton (Panel 15, i.e. 1965-66). In 1965 Ross got the General Service Conference in New York to give Indiana a second Area and a second Delegate. Ross, although he had been elected by the whole state, at that point became the Delegate from Northern Indiana (Area 22) only. An election was held that year (1965) to select a Delegate from Southern Indiana (Area 23) to be seated at the General Service Conference in New York in 1966. Somewhat oddly, Indiana nevertheless continued to function for twenty years with a single state organization. All the way down to 1986, the Indiana State Committee had a single chairperson, secretary, and treasurer, and a single person heading each of the subcommittees, but two delegates: one representing the northern half and one the southern half. Then in August through November of 1986, a series of separate Area 22 Assemblies in the north voted to secede from the south, and form an independent Northern Indiana State Committee (a little bit like the American Civil War in reverse). The A.A. General Service Office in New York was taken totally by surprise when the northerners wrote to them in August saying that they wanted to separate from the south — they had simply assumed that the state had already

been divided in half twenty years earlier — and their letters to the people in Indiana said (with some puzzlement) that if they had not done it yet, it was perfectly all right to do it now. Since that point, Northern Indiana Area 22 and Southern Indiana Area 23 have operated as completely separate entities at all levels (except for the group which plans the annual state convention, where north and south take care of hosting this statewide event in alternate years). Northern Indiana Area 22 includes all of the Indiana portions of the St. Joseph river valley, but also includes the major northeastern A.A. center, Fort Wayne (where the first A.A. group had been formed in December 1941), and areas to the west, north, and east of Indianapolis, where the first A.A. groups were usually formed by contact with early A.A. there (the first A.A. group in Indianapolis was founded by an Irish Catholic businessman named Doherty Sheerin on October 28, 1940).

⁷⁵Nick's List.

⁷⁶Communicated by Pat Wilkie in a long telephone conversation with the editor of this volume in late 1993, shortly before her death, when she kindly went through the list of names of early members that had been assembled at that point, and contributed her own reminiscences about them. She was a Scotswoman who served in the RAF in World War II, and came to the United States after the war. Her sobriety dated back to 1958, when she and her husband Tony Wilkie came into the program together, so many of these people were still living at that point.

⁷⁷Ibid.

⁷⁸Ibid.

⁷⁹Ibid.

⁸⁰J. T. (Jeff) R., who at that time was one of the oldest living South Bend old timers, in a lead given at Corpus Christi Catholic Church in South Bend on November 13, 1993.

⁸¹From the long telephone conversation between Pat Wilkie and the editor of this volume in late 1993 (note 76 above).

⁸²Nick's List.

⁸³Ibid.

⁸⁴Ken M., letter to Ed Young, addressed to the *Muskegon Chronicle*, Muskegon, Michigan, on February 4, 1960.

⁸⁵CHAPTERS 14-15: All of the quotations in these chapters, except when otherwise indicated, are taken from the tape recording of the lead given by Nick Kowalski at Ann Arbor, Michigan on February 26, 1976.

⁸⁶Warden Clinton T. Duffy at San Quentin (in the San Francisco area) had helped set up the first A.A. prison group in 1942. See *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age* (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1957), pp. 89-90. Before that point, 80% of their alcoholic prisoners, after being released, were soon back behind bars again. Now the statistics were reversed: 80% of the members of the A.A. prison group made it successfully on the outside after their release, and never returned to prison for any kind of crime.

⁸⁷The Apostle Paul, in 1 Corinthians 1:25.

⁸⁸From the story of Moses, Exodus 3:7-10.

⁸⁹Nick's List (given in an appendix to the second volume of this work, *The St. Louis Gambler & the Railroad Man*) says simply "The Michigan City A.A. prison group was started by Harry S. and Jim Mc. after talking with warden Dowd and a lot of work was done by these men to keep it going." The names of both Harry Stevens and Jim McNeil show up in Ken M.'s letter of February 4, 1960, in which he lists the first twenty members of the South Bend A.A. group who had achieved long term, continuing sobriety during the first two or three years (i.e. between early 1943 and early 1946).

⁹⁰From the letter Harry S. wrote resigning from that position in 1952.

⁹¹Nick mistakenly thought that the only A.A. prison group which had been formed before his group at Michigan City was the one at San Quentin in California. The one at San Quentin was well known because it was the first such prison group. But modern research shows that there had been a few additional attempts to form prison groups, which Nick did not know about, during the interval between the founding of the San Quentin group and the founding of the Michigan City group. Nick's error was understandable however, because San Quentin in California

and Michigan City in Indiana were the two most famous early programs, the ones the other prison wardens across the country looked to for models. These were the two A.A. groups which were discussed in meetings of the national prison wardens' association. See Alfred F. Dowd, "Alcoholics Anonymous as a Correctional Technique," *The Prison World*, Official Publication American Prison Association and National Jail Association, Vol. 14, No. 4 (July-August 1952), pp. 12-14 and 31. Warden Dowd made sure that everyone else in the country knew about the enormous success of the Indiana prison A.A. program.

⁹²*'Pass It On': The Story of Bill Wilson and How the A.A. Message Reached the World* (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1984), pp. 244–8.

⁹³*Alcoholics Anonymous*, 3rd ed. (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1976), p. 46.

⁹⁴Pascal, *Pensees*.

⁹⁵ Many of the spiritual writers of ancient India taught the same basic idea, as one can see from works like the great Hindu classic, the *Bhagavad-Gita*. Intelligent people in India knew that the statues and artistic representations of all the many Hindu gods and goddesses were only different "faces" of the one Higher Power, which was in reality indescribable in ordinary human words and far greater and higher than all of these symbolic images put together. But Hinduism did not possess the same intrinsic automatic horror at idol worship that was built into most Christian, Jewish, and Muslim spirituality, so the attitude of the good philosophers and theologians of India was apt to be that if the ignorant common people worshipped at the feet of idols shaped like human beings and took the myths about the gods literally, it did them no great harm.

⁹⁶The idea of alcoholism as a disease of perception (which is associated today with a talk on tape given just a few years ago by the well-known A.A. speaker Clancy in California) goes back to Sgt. Bill S., who first got sober in 1948 on Long Island (in the New York City suburbs), and later joined forces in the 1950's with the prominent psychiatrist Dr. Louis Jolyon West to develop the Lackland Model of

alcoholism treatment in San Antonio, Texas. This was one of the three basic methods devised in the early period for setting up an A.A.-linked treatment program. Sgt. Bill, who was strongly backed by Mrs. Marty Mann in New York City, was the most articulate spokesman in early A.A. for those who emphasized the psychological aspects of the program. See his book, Sgt. Bill S., *On the Military Firing Line in the Alcoholism Treatment Program*, Hindsfoot Foundation (New York: iUniverse, 2003), especially Chapter 15, “The Effects of Alcohol on Our Emotional Development,” pp. 235-253.

⁹⁷CHAPTER 16: All of the quotations in this chapter, except when otherwise indicated, are taken from the tape recording of the lead given by Nick Kowalski at Ann Arbor, Michigan, on February 26, 1976.

⁹⁸*Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1981), in the chapter on the eleventh step, p. 99.

⁹⁹*Alcoholics Anonymous*, 3rd ed. (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1976), in “How It Works,” p. 60. Bill W. and Dr. Bob well knew that their phrasing in the Big Book accurately captured what the New Testament actually teaches, as expressed classically in 2 Corinthians 3:18, “And we all, with unveiled face beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed (metamorphosed) into his image (icon), from glory to glory.” Each new insight into the glory of God and his love and grace towards me, merely opens the path into the exploration of some yet further glorious adventure, some even further wonder and beauty and goodness into which he calls me. So (as stated marvelously by C. S. Lewis at the conclusion to the last novel in his Narnia stories) the glorious adventure to which God summons us never ends.

¹⁰⁰CHAPTER 17: All excerpted material is from the tape recording made one afternoon in March 1993, when Jimmy Miller sat in her living room and reminisced with G.C. (who put this volume together) and Raymond I. (who first came into the program in June 1974, and helped jog Jimmy’s memories of various people and events from early South Bend A.A.). When Raymond first came in, he had Brownie as his

sponsor and then Bill Hoover, and was extremely close to Jimmy, whom he continued to spend time with regularly after Bill's death.

¹⁰¹Jimmy Miller was born in 1920 in Wayne, Arkansas, and died at the beginning of September 2002. Four of us — Raymond I., Frank N. from Syracuse, Indiana (he and I have worked as a team on so many of the archival and A.A. history projects of the past eight years), Brooklyn Bob Firth (who died around a year after Jimmy did), and I — were all at her funeral. One of the last things Jimmy said was, "I'm ready to go back with the Lord." At her request, one of the hymns sung at her funeral was "I sing because I'm happy, I sing because I'm free, his eye is on the sparrow, and I know he watches me." Before her death, even though she was on oxygen, she made an appearance and spoke briefly at the Michiana Annual Conference in South Bend, which brings together A.A. people from all over the St. Joseph river valley. She wore a beautiful white suit, lovely and elegant as ever, and although she had to be carried into the building, when the time came for her to speak, she struggled to her feet and strode up to the podium without help, where she received a standing ovation, as tears filled many people's eyes. Bill Williams from Chicago, who had helped her and Bill Hoover get the little black A.A. group going over half a century earlier, was also there and spoke. Bill Williams died a year or so after Jimmy, and again four of us — Raymond, Frank N. from Syracuse, Charles (one of the men Raymond sponsors), and I — drove to Chicago to pay our respects at his funeral.

¹⁰²Jimmy simply remembered that the third white man was someone named Dunbar, but no other details. This person's name remains otherwise unrecorded in the few surviving documents from that period.

¹⁰³The second edition of the Big Book did not come out until 1955, seven years after Jimmy and Bill came in.

¹⁰⁴Matthew 18:19-20 said, "If two of you shall agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them." The A.A. version of this principle was that if one can get at least two people to join together in working the A.A. program, the "spirit of

the tables” will be present, and the full power of divine grace will be able to flow freely as the Spirit of God makes its presence known within their hearts.

¹⁰⁵CHAPTER 18: All the excerpts in this chapter are from the conversation which G.C. and Raymond I. had with Jimmy Miller in her home in March 1993.

¹⁰⁶Raymond: “I didn’t know her name, I know she kind of limp when she walks, she was kind of paralyzed.”

¹⁰⁷Out of every six hundred alcoholics in the St. Joseph river valley who have gotten sober and stayed sober, there will also be two or three who simply decided one day to stop drinking, and never drank again. Frank N. tells me that his father did it that way. A stern warning is necessary here, however: people who keep trying to stop on their own over and over again a number of times without permanent success never make it this way. The few alcoholics who can stop drinking totally on their own, invariably make just that one single try and succeed the first time. There have also been repeated claims since the 1940’s that two or three per cent of alcoholics can get sober and stay sober permanently by going to a psychiatrist or psychotherapist, but in my own researches I have been unable to find anyone at all in the St. Joseph river valley for whom that worked.

¹⁰⁸Richmond Walker, *Twenty-Four Hours a Day*, first printed in 1948, and originally published and distributed by him for the Daytona Beach A.A. group under their sponsorship. The Hazelden Foundation in Minnesota took over the printing of these books at the end of 1953 when the task finally became too much for Rich to handle on his own. He had never had any association with Hazelden however, which was a brand new operation and was not even started until after he had written his book. In fact in 1953, Hazelden was nothing but a big farmhouse on a Minnesota farm (called Hazelden Farm by the farmer who originally owned it, because his wife was named Hazel) where they were trying to get a few alcoholics sober without the aid of psychiatrists or psychotherapists or hospital facilities. See the version of Richmond Walker’s book currently in print, *Twenty-Four Hours a Day* (Center City

MN: Hazelden, 1954). (The first Hazelden press run was almost certainly printed and bound by the very end of 1953, even though the copyright was not registered by them until the beginning of the next year.)

¹⁰⁹The truly good people in South Bend A.A. never paid any attention to the color of anyone's skin. Red was a white man, the founder later on of the Dignitaries Sympathy groups. These groups took the legacy of Nick Kowalski and Brownie and the spirit of St. Joe valley A.A., and spread it into south central and southeastern Michigan (Lansing and Ann Arbor), parts of the greater Chicago area (including some of the outlying suburbs like Arlington Heights), and Bloomington in the hills of southern Indiana (where the largest Indiana University campus was located). Groups were later established even further away, in places like the New York City area and Florida. Their name originated with a comment by a janitor at the building where their first group was meeting in Lansing. The janitor jokingly referred to their rag tag band of young men as "the dignitaries." No one is sure where the rest of the name came from, but they always explain to newcomers that they call themselves the Dignitaries Sympathy groups because "we aren't dignitaries and we aren't going to give you any sympathy!"

¹¹⁰An early version of the "List of Early A.A. Members from the Sources Used in Preparing These Two Volumes" which is given in an appendix at the end of volume two of this work, *The St. Louis Gambler & the Railroad Man*.

¹¹¹Raymond (who first came into the program in June 1974) says that when the Interracial Group started up again around 1975, it first met at "the church, First Presbyterian Church there on Colfax [333 W. Colfax Avenue], right next to the Morningside Hotel." Bob Firth, an Irishman from Brooklyn and New York City, who also first became associated with A.A. in South Bend in June 1974 and went to a lot of meetings with Bill Hoover and Raymond, says that Raymond's memory is basically correct here, that the Interracial Group first met in that area of town, but that it was not at the church but at the mental health affairs office situated in a converted private dwelling on Colfax Avenue about three houses west of Williams Street (on the north side). Brooklyn Bob had a

good deal of trouble with the program at first, and although he kept on going to meetings, he could not stay sober and continually flaunted his drinking and his hostility. Bill Hoover finally called him aside and had a long and stern talk with him: he was deliberately attempting to make a mockery of the program by his behavior, and if he did not start taking the program seriously, he was going to die. That little heartfelt talk, and a profound spiritual experience which Brooklyn Bob had kneeling on his knees in a grassy field, turned him around and got him sober. And what marvelous fruit that then bore! At Bob's funeral a year or so ago, a quarter of a century later, literally hundreds of A.A. people came bearing witness to how much he had helped them with his simple wisdom of the spirit, his devotion to the program, and his extraordinary love and compassion.

¹¹²CHAPTER 19: All the excerpts in this chapter are from the conversation which G.C. and Raymond I. had with Jimmy Miller in her home in March 1993.

¹¹³Ken M.'s daughter Martha P., telephone conversation with G.C., Spring 1993.

¹¹⁴ The roots of the distorted thinking patterns which lead to most forms of alcoholism are established somewhere during childhood or early adolescence. Some of the basic fears and anxieties may have arisen as early as the pre-Freudian period when I was still breast-feeding (let's face it, the bottle with the magic liquid which removes all my unhappiness and puts me into total bliss when I suck on it is a breast substitute). These patterns also may not have arisen until later on, perhaps even as late as the age of sixteen or so. But they are pre-adult issues. The "adult" part of alcoholics' minds can frequently function quite well, but since the foundations of their alcoholic obsession do not lie in their adult intellectual and rational processes, they will never be able to stop drinking by playing with big words and logic-chopping and intellectual analysis of their problems. As a basic rule of thumb, an explanation which could not be understood by a twelve-year-old child will not "speak" intelligibly to the parts of the alcoholic mind which need healing. That twelve year old part of their minds (or eight year old

or whatever) literally cannot understand the fancy intellectual explanations.

¹¹⁵When A.A. first began in the late 1930's, newcomers regularly did a sort of fourth and fifth step within a few days of coming into the program. It cannot have been more than a relatively trivial look at themselves at that stage, but it is doubtful that anyone realized this at that time. It is important to remember that when they began writing the Big Book in May 1938, even Bill W. himself had only been sober for three and a half years, and most of the membership had only been sober for a year or two. All the basic things were in place of course by the time they started writing the Big Book, but there were dimensions to the program which were only going to appear after there were people who had spent many years living and working the steps. Most of the people who came into A.A. at the beginning, but who ended up staying sober for years and years (till the ends of their lives), clearly did a much deeper kind of fourth step inventory at a later period. One can tell this by listening to the way they told the story of their lives later on, and observing how they had learned to interact so much more smoothly with other people. So the A.A. sponsors in the St. Joseph river valley who have twelve, fifteen, and twenty or more years of experience in the program, and who demonstrably are highly effective at working with newcomers, usually stick by their advice to wait at least a year after coming into the program before attempting a real fourth step inventory in great depth. Pete Abbott said that he had seen newcomers who tried to take their fourth step sooner than that, who went back out because of the intense pressure of having to look at themselves so thoroughly. G.C. (who appears in this chapter) did his fourth step after only seven months in the program, but he had a good deal of prior knowledge and training in spirituality, and was also under constant expert supervision while he was doing this: Submarine Bill was there at all times, and Larry W. (an A.A. old-timer who was one of the three best psychotherapists in the St. Joseph river valley) was keeping tabs on G.C. in the background and was ready to jump in at any point where he showed any signs of getting into any kind of psychological difficulties that could push him over the edge. We should never forget the first rule of the Hippocratic Oath, *primum*

non nocere, a principle which should be followed by all good healers: “First, do no harm.”

¹¹⁶CHAPTER 20: All the excerpts in this chapter, unless otherwise noted, are from the conversation which G.C. and Raymond I. had with Jimmy Miller at her home in March 1993.

¹¹⁷*Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1953), pp. 48-49: “Pride heads the procession” of the Seven Deadly Sins, “always spurred by conscious or unconscious fears.” See also *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 3rd ed., p. 67: fear “was an evil and corroding thread; the fabric of our existence was shot through with it.”

¹¹⁸2 Corinthians 4:7, which says in the original Greek, *echomen de ton thesauron touton en ostrakinois skeuesin, hina hē hyperbolē tēs dynamēōs ēi tou Theou kai mē ex hēmōn*. This is the conclusion to an extended passage (3:17-4:7) in the Apostle Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians, all of which is worth reading. The light has shone out of the darkness, the Apostle Paul said — “coming down from the Father of Lights” as the Apostle James put it in James 1:17 — and has entered our hearts so that we now bear within ourselves just a tiny bit of “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God.” And that holy light begins to heal and repair our minds and spirits so that the image of God within our souls starts to be restored to that original splendor in which we human beings were created at the beginning of all things. Paul himself was saved when he saw that holy image of God shining out in the words and deeds of Jesus of Nazareth. All human beings bear within themselves the image of God, but the problem is that it is all too often almost totally obscured under filth and rubbish. But any human being who accepts the divine healing and grace can restore that holy image enough to reflect (just like a little mirror) some of the rays of the Eternal and Uncreated Light. Certainly not as well as Jesus did! I am not Jesus or Napoleon (nor do I have space aliens from the planet Mongo who have taken over my brain). We are not talking about that kind of insanity. I hope that you the reader do not believe that you are Jesus either. Or Moses or Buddha, for that matter. Nevertheless, the minute my lost soul sees a single tiny ray of that divine light reflected anywhere at all on this earth,

even in the hearts of perfectly ordinary human beings like Nick Kowalski or Brownie (who were also certainly not Jesus Christ come back to earth) I am not helplessly lost any longer. I can see that there is hope, and I can start figuring out how to climb out of the bitter darkness where I laid myself down and cried out in total agony and despair.

¹¹⁹*Alcoholics Anonymous*, 3rd ed. (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1976), p. 83.