

My Name is Manuel

...and I Belong to
Alcoholics Anonymous

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Alcoholics Anonymous

A Witness to the Arrival of A.A. in
Wine-Growing Countries of Europe

Without the years-long collaboration of my daughter María Victoria, who was able to help me with her sensitivity and thoughtfulness, and without Alcoholics Anonymous in general, this book would never have been possible.

To them I am deeply grateful.

I would also like to thank Steve W. for his collaboration on this English edition as translator with editorial skills and knowledge of Alcoholics Anonymous.

Manuel

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To view online or download this book, visit www.manuel-aa.es

Introduction

Circumstances, chance, God ... or I don't know what ... wanted me to be a witness among you to certain events of great importance: the arrival of Alcoholics Anonymous in France, the formation of the first French-speaking group there, and the subsequent spread of A.A. in wine-growing regions of Europe.

I was lucky to come into contact with A.A. and accept its principles when I was just 37 years old, a young age for members at that time. Soon I began to feel that what was happening was the greatest gift I had ever received in my life. Thanks to this encounter, I have enjoyed many years of enduring serenity and happiness, and have also come to understand that my debt of gratitude to those who first welcomed me (and also to those who had arrived before, those who have arrived since, and those who have yet to arrive) is immense.

This wonderful love story began 55 years ago now¹, more than half a century! During this time I have taken notes to record events that have seemed important to me, and have saved all kinds of documents, with the idea of one day putting together what I call our "family

1. This book is being published in 2015

album." The purpose of this book is to transmit and to share all that I have received and felt — the sensations, the ambience, and the extraordinary sponsorship of those North Americans who first greeted us. In fact, I believe there is nothing more difficult than trying to describe the atmosphere, the feelings, the spirit of fellowship carried by those who encouraged us when we arrived. The goodness of those friends, their thoughtfulness and selflessness, changed me for life.

In A.A. tradition we "place principles before personalities," but I must mention the names of those who took us in with so much love: Nick H., Fuller P., "Mac" McD., and Bert G. Their sponsors were the very founders of Alcoholics Anonymous (with Bill W. being the first), inspired by the teachings of Saint Francis of Assisi, the only spiritual movement contemplated in A.A. literature.

They knew how to share with us a message of love, and help us to see the great importance that this message could have in the future, here and around the world — this world that suffers from self-destruction in so many ways. I felt a sense of responsibility. Indeed, that was what they were showing us — that we who were first to arrive were responsible for planting the roots of A.A. firmly in this old Europe entrenched in ancestral wine-growing tradition.

As an individual I need to be humble, but the fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous as a whole does not. Thus I can announce that I have benefitted from all of A.A.'s splendor and great accumulation of experience, and that I am grateful for its message of salvation and Light of Truth.

Today we are still all pioneers — 80 years of A.A. history is nothing compared to the long history of humanity. Therefore we all have a magnificent responsibility to share with those who need A.A. and its program of recovery in order to commence new lives.

This book is intended for those who are interested in gaining references. You will find a variety of texts, many written by me over the course of all these years, and some written by others, from both inside

and outside A.A. There are also several reproductions of documents as they were originally written. Some passages may seem to be, or actually are repeated — unavoidable as I have wanted to stress things that seem most important to me.

This book comprises four parts:

1. Texts related to the history of A.A.
2. The story of "Shaky Joe," a fictional character, albeit based on myself and many other members of A.A.
3. Notes and writings that I feel invite reflection.
4. Many anecdotes and curiosities from out of the blue.

As an old-timer I refuse to become a "dinosaur" on the way to extinction. I continue to attend meetings and feel greatly privileged when I have the opportunity to share my experience with someone new, or not so new. My sponsor, Fuller P., died at the age of 80, just one week after his last meeting in this world. It is my desire to follow his example and remain active in A.A. always.

Love and hugs,

Manuel

All of these writings reflect real life experiences. I speak for myself. I am the only person responsible for what I say here, and in no way mean to represent the fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous as a whole.

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1

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS OF GRATITUDE

Commemorating the 25th Anniversary of A.A. in France

Yesterday — Today — Tomorrow

A great part of our capital comes from our past. We invest it today so that tomorrow the greatest number of people will benefit from it.

We can give to others only what we have already received.

Without accumulated experience, we would be limited to our well-intentioned imagination. But the past cannot be imagined.

This brief introduction to the brochure commemorating the arrival of A.A. in France does not attempt to tell our history, but only to identify some of the circumstances that led to and permitted this significant occurrence, giving it authenticity. Time covers up small events and disguises large ones.

Most of the testimonies heard in our meetings reveal that nearly all of us have tried by countless ways and means to drink alcohol in a reasonable manner, but were never able to do so for very long.

We rejected the notion that our only solution was total and permanent abstinence. In our experience, abstinence never lasted long. We repeatedly chose "escape" through drink over the "prison" of abstinence, although our so-called escape ended up leading to quite the opposite of freedom.

Finally we decided on abstinence, realizing that it was the only possible way for an alcoholic to gain physical, emotional, and mental freedom.

Despite the success and unprecedented growth that Alcoholics Anonymous had experienced since 1935, our co-founder Bill W. was not very optimistic about A.A. gaining a foothold in France. He said that in a country where wine is not even considered alcohol, it wouldn't be easy.

Several attempts were made in 1948, but nothing got going until 1960 with the publication of *Avec les Alcooliques Anonymes* by Joseph Kessel — our dear Jef, as we called him in A.A. — and finally the miracle happened: a French-speaking A.A. group in France!

Of the 300 who sent letters to the newspaper *France-Soir*,² only two of us made it to the fellowship: François and myself.

2. The book by Joseph Kessel was first published in chapter installments in the newspaper *France-Soir*.

Letter from Nick H. to Manuel M.

(Translated from the French)

Paris, 18 August 1960

Mr. Manuel M.

Dear Sir,

Your letter regarding Alcoholics Anonymous was forwarded to us by France-Soir.

I am also an alcoholic. Nonetheless, thanks to the program of Alcoholics Anonymous I have not had a drink of alcohol — not even wine or beer — in several years. Still, I say I am an alcoholic because alcoholism is a disease for which there is no known definitive cure. If an alcoholic were cured, he would then be able to drink with impunity. But we can say only that we are able to arrest our illness. As long as I abstain from drinking alcohol, I avoid the consequences. Some years ago, before discovering and accepting the principles of A.A., my wife left me, I lost my job, and I became unemployable. I had no money and little else. Finally, in desperation, I seriously considered suicide. I am completely certain that if I drank alcohol again I would soon be in the same situation.

I am sending you copies of the few A.A. pamphlets that we have available in French. I suggest you start with the one titled 44 Questions and Answers. Then read Alcoholics Anonymous and the Medical Profession. These two brochures will give you a general idea of what A.A. is about. If you are still interested — which is what I hope — read

the book Alcoholics Anonymous. This edition was translated by the Quebec group, so it is in Canadian French. It is, so to speak, the "Bible" of A.A. And it is from this book that we get the twelve steps, which form the core of the A.A. Lastly, I suggest you read The Twelve Traditions of A.A., which will show you how our fellowship works as a whole.

Despite the fact that A.A. is now found around the world, no longer limited to North America (today there are 15,000 active members outside the United States and Canada), there are unfortunately not many members in France. As a consequence of the articles written by Mr. Kessel, we have received many letters requesting information, and it is possible that our fellowship will become established in France. However, that is not absolutely necessary for individuals to receive the help need. There are members of A.A. all around the world who stay sober without forming part of a group and without having personal contact with other members.

A small group, composed mostly of Americans, meets regularly in Paris. The meetings are naturally held in English, but many of us speak a little French. We have every reason to believe that a French-speaking group could soon be formed. If you are interested in participating, I would be happy to know. Meanwhile, if you would like to attend one of our current meetings, just let me know and I will send you the date and time of the meeting. There are French-speaking meetings in Geneva and Brussels, and I will forward your letter to them in case you would like to correspond with them. I speak very little French, and am writing you this letter with the help of a friend, but don't let that stop you from writing to me! Also, do you have a telephone number?

When you have looked over the enclosed pamphlets you will know that one of the fundamental principles of A.A. is helping oneself by helping others. If

I can be of any help to you it would make me very happy. I know your difficulties because I have had the same. And I know what you may be feeling because I have felt the same. Thanks to A.A., I have found a way to live happily without alcohol. There are about 200,000 people like me. Perhaps you will join us!

If you would like to start with the A.A. program, pay special attention to the paragraph about the "24-hour plan" on page 22 of 44 Questions and Answers. In A.A. we do not swear to never drink again, or not to drink for a month or a year; we try not to drink for 24 hours. Also, we know that it is the first glass that causes our problem, not the last. Thus, if we do not take the first drink, everything will be fine. Furthermore, for the alcoholic, there is no problem - not even a serious one - that a drink won't make worse.

Best wishes,

Nick H.

The Paris Group of
Alcoholics Anonymous

"A.A."

Apartment 311
22 Avenue de l'Opera
Paris 1^{er}

(This is the address of one of our members, and used only for post. It is not an A.A. office, and we ask that you contact us by mail before any visit or telephone call.)

It is interesting to note that despite the great number of letters that Nick, with the help of his secretary, untiringly answered day after day, only two of us, as far as we know, reached A.A. through the newspaper *France-Soir*. Together with two others who came later, we formed the first French-speaking A.A. group in France — and ironically none of the four of us was French. Our American friends of the English-speaking group told us that we were acting as catalysts for passing the A.A. message to French alcoholics.

This first group was formed in October of 1960. (That was more than 55 years ago now, and I have just recently celebrated my sobriety anniversary with the group.) By the middle of November we had reached six members, and decided to create a service committee. In 1962, Pietro B. went to Italy with the intention of starting A.A. in that country. We learned that he met with many difficulties. For professional reasons I moved to Spain in 1980. By 1985, the evolution of French-speaking A.A. in France looked like this:

1960	15 November, first French-speaking A.A. group, Quai d'Orsay
1963	Second French-speaking A.A. group, Belleville
1970	20 existing A.A. groups in France
1985	254 A.A. groups and 117 Al-Anon groups in France

A.A. IN SPAIN

The development of A.A. in Spain was quite different. The following was published in the personal experiences section of the Spanish A.A. journal *Akron* 1935, no. 163, February–March 1999. The two pieces were written by Ignasitu, of the Rentería group, and me.

The Seeds of A.A.

In 1961 we were 65 alcoholics living a philosophy of “controlling drink to control our lives.” Then we received a letter from Manuel M., and immediately thereafter, A.A. literature from New York that he had ordered: namely, the book *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*. Upon sinking our teeth into the First Step at the first meeting of the Rentería group on 8 September 1961, and seriously reflecting on the significance of the step — admission of powerlessness and that our lives had become unmanageable — desertion was almost total. Only seven of us were fortunate enough to remain. Frightened, we resolved to continue with the meeting, since what we were reading concerned us fully, and we digested it to the best of our ability, with a conviction that this was our way out of the inferno of active alcoholism.

We continued to meet in the same place, the storeroom of the Touring bar. Slowly we seven alcoholics got used to meeting according to the philosophy of Alcoholics Anonymous. We probably didn't do that very well, but instead of not drinking just for the purpose of not drinking, we began to see not drinking as a way to begin living better.

For an alcoholic, one drink is too many and a thousand drinks are not enough. We shouldn't swear off drink forever, we have never kept such promises. The crux of the matter was to TRY NOT TO DRINK FOR 24 HOURS. ALCOHOLISM IS A PROGRESSIVE AND INCURABLE DISEASE, but it can be arrested. In October, four of those who had abandoned the group returned, and fortunately continued with us.

We were excited. We had discovered that it was absolutely necessary to share our experience, and that passing this message to other alcoholics was the culminating act that gave our own recovery completion: in giving, we received. Indeed, this was suggested in the literature we had received, but it was only when we put it into practice that we found its full significance. WHEN WE TRIED TO CARRY THE A.A. MESSAGE TO OTHERS (Step 12), WE ALWAYS CAME AWAY REJUVENATED AND CONVINCED THAT THIS

WAS THE BEST WAY FOR US TO FURTHER OUR OWN RECOVERY. And it was our own alcoholism and human defects and limitations that made us able to talk to other alcoholics without condescension, since we considered ourselves equals.

With the collaboration of Dr. Martín Santos, director of the provincial mental hospital of Gipuzkoa, we had weekly contact with as many alcoholics we wanted. Thanks to our visits to the Santa Águeda de Mondragón Sanitarium, many alcoholics spread the message of A.A. to start a number of groups in Gipuzkoa and Biscay, namely in Bilbao, Durango, and Baracaldo. In 1964 we started a group in San Sebastián.

It was also in 1964 that I relapsed, and was drinking for three months. A.A. as a whole had no relapse. In 1962, the New York office suggested I contact Ignacio from Barcelona, Rafael from the Canaries, and Juan Valls from Málaga, and that's what I did. I contacted Ignacio through Benito A., Rafael directly in Mondragón, and Juan in Málaga. I also sent a letter to an American A.A. in the military in Badajoz, at an address given to me by the New York office. This contact never responded.

I was in recovery. Many were in recovery thanks to Bill and Bob and the suffering we'd experienced in the hell we'd been living, and from which we wanted relief. And that's what we were getting.

Ignacio
Area 3

Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow

A great part of our capital comes from our past. We invest it today so that tomorrow the greatest number of people will benefit from it. We can give to others only what we have already received.

Without accumulated experience, we would be limited to our well-intentioned imagination. But the past cannot be imagined. It is because of all this, and because I have been a witness to the birth and growth of A.A. in Spain, that I want to contribute my story. Time covers up small events and disguises large ones.

In mid 1961, the committee of the first A.A. group in France, Quai d'Orsay, received a letter from Ignacio of the Rentería group. The letter was in Spanish, so of course it was given to me, as I was the only one of our group of eight or ten A.A.'s who spoke the language.

I remember as if it were yesterday. I worked in La Guitare, a nightclub that put on flamenco and South American folk shows. At that time I was one year sober. The letter from Ignacio was asking for help. It must have been 2 or 3 a.m. when I got home and started to write an answer. My wife told me to go to bed, but I felt a conviction that defied all else. I told her I would stay up until I'd finished answering a letter that had been sent by a fellow countryman of mine. "You know what, Francesca?" I said. "One day there will be thousands of A.A.'s in Spain ... and here, too!" During that dawning of our fellowship, such hope coupled with premonition helped us to dream and believe in what we had begun — the establishment of A.A. in Europe.

I adapted the letter that Nick H. had sent me the year before.³ It was marvelous. We have always thought that this letter had something special about it, like the book published by Joseph Kessel or the article by Jack Alexander in the *Saturday Evening Post* in the United States. We made sure that the Rentería group received A.A. literature in Spanish from the New York office. IGNACIO TELEPHONED ME AND ASKED WHAT WAS REQUIRED TO BE MEMBER OF A.A. I ANSWERED, ONLY A DESIRE TO STOP DRINKING.

It was then, in mid 1961, that a group with direction and a regular schedule began to function in Spain following the principles of our fellowship. The history of A.A. in Spain had really begun. Other recovery experiences had unfortunately been isolated individuals or short-lived groups.

In 1962, from Barcelona, Emilio R. wrote to Paris asking for literature for the Notariado group. Jean Jacques, a member of the Quai d'Orsay group, traveled to Barcelona and delivered it personally. We knew that the Rentería group was in contact with Rafael C. in Las Palmas (Canary Islands), and with Juan V. in Málaga, to help with setting up stable groups.

THE MORE OUR TREES GROW, FILLING IN WITH BRANCHES, THE MORE INTERESTED WE BECOME IN LEARNING ABOUT OUR ROOTS, and whether the sap that nourished them was authentic and true to the principles of our fellowship.

Manuel M. of Paris
Zaragoza, January 1999

3. See the letter reproduced on page 15 of this book.

IN MEMORY OF IGNASITU

Barcelona, 12 May 2013

With the passing of Ignacio A. (our dear Ignasitu) of the Rentería group, we have lost one of the witnesses to the arrival of A.A. in Spain, and its establishment in the Basque Country.

On 8 September 1961, the Rentería group had its first meeting inspired by the principles of our program.⁴ Ignacio's happy and communicative character and keen intelligence, allowed him to transmit our message despite the atmosphere of general distrust and other difficulties of that time. More than half a century of regular meeting attendance made him a model of the A.A. life for all of us.

Once in a while, Ignacio and I went to conferences or anniversary meetings together, and I would like to tell you about the last thing we did before the debilitation of his illness prevented him from doing more. It was the 47th anniversary of A.A. in France, in 2007, celebrated in Pau on 10–11 November at the Beaumont Palace. I asked him to say a few words, with the idea that I would do my best to translate. Without saying a word, Ignacio took out a pair of castanets and proceeded to perform a true recital in front of the more than 400 people present. It was a *paso doble* — street music, spirited and jaunty. When he finished he asked me to tell everyone in French that the language of the heart can also be expressed musically with the same force and love.

Only the people we forget really die. Ignasitu, I will carry you with me for as long as I live, in my thoughts and in my heart.

Manuel of Paris
The Harmony group

4. See the article "The Seeds of A.A." reproduced in this book on page 19.

ANECDOTES ABOUT MY LIFE IN A.A.

Ignasitu in Perlora

During a meeting in Perlora (Asturias, Spain) some 20 years ago, we decided to liven things up with some entertainment by having people get up on stage and sing songs, tell jokes, perform tricks, and so on.

One member who had been sober for many years — Ignasitu — stepped up onto the stage and asked for a drumroll. While the drums were sounding throughout the room, he laid out two canes on the floor in front of him, separated by about 30 centimeters. With his feet together, he jumped across this short distance. Then he asked for silence and said, "I needed 20 years of sobriety to perform this feat for you ... without first taking even a single drink of alcohol."

Manuel of Paris
The Harmony group

Frenzy

I was invited to participate in a meeting celebrating the anniversary of A.A. in a region where groups had proliferated quickly. My train arrived a little late. To save time, the person who took me from the station to the theater where the event was being held let me in through a side door that led directly to the stage where I was to chair the meeting. On stage I found myself with about a dozen other people, the men in formal suits, the women in long gowns. I was quite surprised, as I had not been told that formal dress was required for this occasion. I stepped forward to greet them, shook their hands, kissed the ladies on the cheeks, and wished them all a happy 24 hours of sobriety.

However, my greetings were met with nothing but surprised expressions and silence. How odd!

2

GAMES OF CHANCE

Articles by Joseph Kessel published in the French newspaper *France-Soir* in 1960 were then compiled and republished as a book, *Avec les Alcooliques Anonymes*. The book was later translated into English and published in the United States as *The Road Back: A Report on Alcoholics Anonymous*⁵. Following is an excerpt of chapter ten, "Games of Chance":

The knowledge that one has touched rock bottom; the admission of utter defeat; the fear, horror, and instinctive recoil from one's own nakedness and the empty gulf yawning ahead; the panic-stricken appeal to Alcoholics Anonymous; the immediate help given by the whole association; the extraordinary confidence one alcoholic feels in another, because they talk together as sick men, accomplices, or equals; the power of example (and thence of hope) that the reformed alcoholic gives his miserable brother; the simple and precise rules of behavior he is taught; the unwearying, intelligent, brotherly care lavished on each newcomer by the whole group; the necessity of being ever on guard against some insidious return of the disease — none of this psychological technique is difficult to understand, and one can easily follow step by step the road that leads from complete degradation to the reconquest of oneself.

However, the route that has been planned by Alcoholics Anonymous in the course of twenty-five years of unrivaled experience does not end here. It goes further. But now it encroaches upon a region that can only be entered if one has a certain predisposition or aptitude which many people lack, I among them.

It is, in fact, a question of faith. It is a question of believing in a Power superior to mankind and alone able to safeguard the alcoholic's future.

5. Published by Knopf, New York 1962. (Translation of the original book *Avec les Alcooliques Anonymes*, published by Librairie Gallimard, Paris 1960.)

For, according to the doctrine of Alcoholics Anonymous, human help, however generous, understanding, and devoted, is not enough. It can, of course, awaken the alcoholic's desire to be delivered from his addiction, and the courage he needs; it can show the way, support his first steps, and give him back his sobriety. But the disease is so virulent and has so profoundly affected his organs, nerves, and brain that the threat is only suspended, never finally eliminated. It will be there, crouching on the watch, all his life.

The passage of time and the force of habit diminish and weaken the effect of human help. Also, the reformed alcoholic begins to forget his past struggles; he has gained confidence, found a job, and returned to his old place in society. He has come out of his cocoon. He will have to deal with the usual problems, emotional shocks, grief, wounds to self-esteem, financial difficulties, or troubles in love. If he finds the test too harsh and cruel, he will immediately think of the old remedy. It is poisonous, but effective.

If he is alone with this physical temptation, the obsession he has in the very marrow of his bones, he will give in to it some time or another. Fatally.

And it's impossible that there should be another member of Alcoholics Anonymous always at his side, day and night. Even the best and most watchful nurses leave their patients sometimes, if only for a moment. That moment can be deadly. "One glass, only one, just one." And the alcoholic is hurtled back into hell after years of abstinence.

There is only one guardianship which never sleeps, day and night, which protects him from himself to the end of his days; for it comes from no human source — it is derived from a Superior, a Divine, Power.

The practical and psychological methods taught by Alcoholics Anonymous are merely preparations, accessory rules of conduct. True safety is to be found elsewhere. It depends on recognition of a Superior Power, on feeling His presence within one and submitting to His sovereign will.

Of course, the founders and pioneers of Alcoholics Anonymous were not led to this spiritual conclusion by means of argument, deduction, or proof. The opposite was the case. Bill W. was saved from limbo, snatched from the jaws of death, by a moment of revelation. Everything has come from that. Yet when Bill W. tried to share his marvelous discovery with other alcoholics, he failed absolutely and in the most lamentable fashion. He realized then that he must reverse the process, start with trivial earthly human matters and only pass later on to the awareness of divinity. Time and a remarkable success have shown the accuracy of his calculations.

Everything possible has been done, it's true, to make the approach as simple and easy as possible, to win over minds averse to dogma, formality of thought, and the traditional and conventional discipline of established religion.

"Appeal to a Superior Power, however you may conceive of it," say Alcoholics Anonymous. "Jehovah or Allah, Jesus or Buddha, you may choose whichever you like and think of God however you please. The only thing that matters is that you should believe in a Force outside yourself to which you can appeal for help.

"You cannot do without superhuman help. To safeguard your sobriety you must reform your whole character. You must lay aside envy, pride, unsociability, hypersensitivity, and anxiety. Your alcoholism isn't an isolated and independent disease. It is bound up with all these character traits. You are destroying yourself with drink so as to exalt or benumb, satisfy or forget them. While they exist, you will always be in danger.

"You cannot achieve this inner change by yourself. Therefore, you must realize your innate need of a Superior Power, *of whatever kind*, so long as you can put your trust in It.

"And if, even under these conditions, your mind rejects the idea of divinity, then you must take our free confraternity as your Superior Power. It is certainly wiser than you, reckoning by experience, number of members, and the sum total of their suffering. And when you are overcome by weakness, indecision, or exhaustion, call on the group spirit, with its collective strength, to support and guide your failing courage."

This is the gist of the *Credo* of Alcoholics Anonymous. It is expressed in a splendid slogan:

May God give me enough serenity of mind to
accept things which cannot be changed,
Enough courage to change things which are in my
power to change,
And wisdom enough to recognize the difference
between the two.

Next come "The Twelve Steps," a list of the spiritual stages that an alcoholic must pass through, one by one, if he wants to ensure his physical and mental regeneration. The first consists of realizing his own inability to dominate

his craving and govern his own life. The second, of believing that a Superior Power can save him. The third, of deciding to put his will and life in God's hands, "however he may conceive of Him."

Thus, mounting one step after another (an inventory of his misdeeds and faults; prayers to God — again "however he may conceive of Him" — to chastise him; confession of his sins; meditation, to strengthen his contact with divinity), the alcoholic arrives at the twelfth and last stage, where he is told:

"Having reached the top of the twelve steps, and having arrived at a state of spiritual awakening, we must pass on this message to other alcoholics, and apply these principles to everything we do."

It must be thoroughly understood that these precepts do not represent an essential catechism; they are not in any sense a list of commandments. Whenever they appear in one of the publications of Alcoholics Anonymous, they are referred to as "The Twelve Suggested Steps."

I repeat, there is nothing obligatory, nothing rigid about this extraordinarily tolerant association: no subscription, no entry blanks, no expulsion, not even religious belief. A perfect example of this can be found in a book published by Alcoholics Anonymous under the title: *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*.

One of the groups had welcomed a new member called Eddie A., a commercial traveler. He soon proved himself one of the best of their recruits. Happy and proud of his conversion to abstinence and his return to health, he put all his energy, powers of persuasion, persistence, and the personal magnetism that had made him a successful salesman of automobile varnish, into helping other alcoholics in their struggle upward from the depths. In fact, no one could have carried out the instructions of the twelfth step — to help one's neighbor — with more zeal and detachment.

But there was one thing lacking. Eddie A. was an unbeliever. Absolutely, obstinately, and aggressively. The notion of help from a Superior Power seemed to him not only inadmissible but detrimental to the spirit animating Alcoholics Anonymous.

"We would get along far better without this absurd idea about God," he used to say every week to fellow members of his group.

Now, these people were deeply religious, so much so that, since their purpose in life was to rescue as many alcoholics as possible, they went so far

as to hope that Eddie A. would be punished for his blasphemies by a serious relapse.

But Eddie A. remained maddeningly sober. Then his turn came to address the open meeting.

The other members looked forward to his speech with alarm. They guessed what would happen, and they were right. Eddie A. paid striking homage to Alcoholics Anonymous and eloquently described the joy he had derived from carrying out the twelfth step, but he added vehemently:

"But I can't take all this pious stuff. It's just mush for the feeble-minded. This group doesn't need that sort of thing. To hell with it all!"

The audience rose to its feet, horrified and furious.

"Get out! Get out!" they shouted as one man.

The veteran members took Eddie A. to one side and said to him:

"You have no right to talk that way here. You must either stop saying that sort of thing or quit."

"Is that so?" asked Eddie sarcastically.

He went to a bookcase and took out several printed leaflets. They were copies of the preface of the first book published by the association, containing its fundamental principles: *Alcoholics Anonymous*.

Eddie turned the pages for a moment and then read aloud:

"The only necessary condition for membership of A.A. is an honest desire to stop drinking."

Eddie waved the paper he was holding.

"Well, boys," he demanded, "when you wrote these words, did you mean them or not?"

The "old timers" exchanged glances in silence. They were beaten. Eddie remained a member of their group.

This happened in 1938, when the association was only three years old and was still feeling its way and looking for guiding principles. Afterwards,

there was a considerable advance towards tolerance. Today such a question couldn't arise.

I have more than once heard agnostics or indomitable atheists defend their views freely and calmly in private meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous, when personal problems were under discussion.

Yet the truth is that such cases are rare. Belief in a Superior Power — however conceived of — is to be found in most members of Alcoholics Anonymous. And is it really surprising? A paralyzed man who has been carried into the grotto of Lourdes on a stretcher and walks out seems to radiate faith, even if he had been full of doubt or incredulity when he arrived. And every member of Alcoholics Anonymous who remembers the days of his downfall and sees himself restored to life likewise feels he has been to some degree the object of a miracle.

And then ... and then ... there are strange clashes between a man and his destiny, when some unforeseen and unforeseeable event changes the orientation of his whole life. Some think of it as a game of chance; others, as a sign of Providence. Isn't this last interpretation likely to be the one chosen by the dying man who touches the hand of a healer or the drowning sailor who sees a sail coming to his rescue just when he is exhausted and giving up hope?

Because of the very nature of his personal tragedy, the vicissitudes of his downfall, and his struggle to arise from it, because of the obscure forces (favorable or disastrous) that have rolled him ceaselessly back and forth in their ebb and flow, nearly every member of Alcoholics Anonymous has been faced at some time with one of these critical "chances," these decisive "coincidences."

3

DOCTOR OF THE DRUNKEN BOAT

Excerpt from the book by Dr. Raymond-Michel Haas⁶

Philip of ... wasn't going to any group, but, just for himself, he liked to consult with one of my "pillars": Manuel. He was one-of-a-kind when it came to accompanying a "newcomer," who, hour by hour was afraid of succumbing to the temptation to drink. He is the St. Bernard for those who are suffering. He's a Spaniard who expects nothing from life except always giving something to others. He's an old-timer. He was one of the founding members, who, eighteen years ago gave rise to all of the groups in France. He does whatever it takes to be at the Quai d'Orsay group from noon to 2 p.m. answering phone calls. If the person on the other end of the line is in danger of drinking, Manuel immediately invites him to lunch.

These "momentary friends" leave him, sometimes giving no further signs of life.

Every once in a while, on occasion of the "Great Circus,"⁷ he takes the opportunity to renew the lost contact ...

Copyright © Dr. Raymond-Michel Haas, *Médecin du bateau ivre*,
Éditions Grasset 1976

6. Dr. Raymond-Michel Haas was one of the first "alcoholologists," first to open a treatment center for alcoholics in France — in Paris, at the Hospital Saint Cloud — and was a great friend of our fellowship. The name of the center, Le Bateau Ivre (The Drunken Boat), was the same as the title of a poem by Rimbaud.

7. "The Great Circus" was the name of the group at Hospital Saint Cloud.

4

THE DEVELOPMENT OF A.A. IN FRANCE

Report from the French Observer at the General
Service Conference in New York, 1963

Nick Hall

Three years ago, such A.A. as there was in France was of the American export variety. There were a number of groups in various parts of the country, most of which were located in installations of the U.S. Armed Forces. These and a small American group in Paris, while in France, were in no sense French.

The following outline of the development in France during the past three years of the beginnings of a truly indigenous A.A. has been compiled from the memory of the writer. It surely contains errors of detail, although it is hoped not of substance.

In Paris, for some ten or more years, there had existed a group, prior to 1960, which met in a room made available by the American Church on the Quai d'Orsay. Earlier it had met for some time on the second floor of a café almost next door to the famed Harry's New York Bar. This group had its ups and downs. The number of active members, who were almost all American, varied considerably.

In the Paris group, among some members at least, there was an awareness of the need for the establishment in France of A.A. on an indigenous basis. To most members, there clearly seemed to be a place for A.A. in France. Alcoholism there is widespread. How widespread is a matter of opinion; and is also perhaps a question of definition. In the opinion of the writer, the problem of alcoholism in France is confused by

a failure there to distinguish between heavy drinkers and alcoholics. However true this may be, there are plenty of alcoholics. From time to time one would join the English-speaking group in Paris. The problem was to get enough at any one time who could and would promote a French-speaking group; thus opening the doors of A.A. to those who spoke no English. At one time several years ago, it appeared briefly that this had come about. A small French-speaking group was established. However, it never acquired more than a handful of members, and it fell apart when two of its steadiest members died. The aborted experience with this group tended to confirm those pessimists who argued that A.A. could not succeed in France. It was said that the French were not "joiners"; that social lines were too rigid to permit the inclusion in a single group of individuals of such diverse social and economic backgrounds as is normal in A.A.; and that anyhow it would be quite impossible to convince a Frenchman that he could drink no wine. Most of us in the American group in Paris disagreed with this point of view. Nevertheless, the establishment of an indigenous A.A. in France did not appear imminent in 1959, and no one really knew whether the pessimists were right or wrong.

It was in the fall of that year that the group in Paris received from the G.S.O.,⁸ news of a development that in due course was to light the spark of A.A. in France and prove the pessimists wrong. We were advised that Joseph Kessel (of whom most of us had never heard), a French journalist, was concluding a visit to the U.S.A. where he had become interested in A.A., had observed its operations closely with the cooperation of the G.S.O., and upon his return to France would write a series of articles about A.A. for France-Soir, a leading French newspaper. However, weeks and then months went by and nothing more was heard of this project. It was not until the spring of 1960 that Mr. Kessel called on Nick H., a member of the American group, to advise that the articles on A.A. would be

publicized in the near future, and that France-Soir had agreed to refer any inquiries about A.A. to the group. At that time the American group had some six or eight active members of whom three or four spoke reasonably good French. A small committee was formed, which it was agreed would handle any inquiries received through France-Soir. The G.S.O. and A.A. in Montreal arranged to send such French language literature as was available. However, weeks went by and nothing appeared in France-Soir. The summer vacation season arrived, and, as chance would have it, one by one the French-speaking members of the American group departed from Paris on prolonged vacations.

It was early in July when Nick H. learned that the first of the Kessel articles had appeared. A few days later, a bundle of some 30 letters was delivered by France-Soir to his apartment. These were all in French, of course, and needed to be answered in French. Nick's French was minimal -- clearly not up to the job. A quick check showed that those members whose French was adequate were all away from Paris. There seemed nothing to do but to try and find a competent translator-secretary. But this was easier said than done. In the meantime, more inquiries were received daily. At this point the Lord provided. Fred S., a member of the group away from Paris on business, had mentioned before his departure that perhaps some overtime arrangement could be made with his secretary. Nick got in touch with her. That evening, Nick and Odette Guth, Fred's secretary, who was of course not an alcoholic, went to work and began a collaboration that lasted through the summer -- and for Odette an association that has continued to this day. An analysis of the inquiries showed that they were in general of three types. Many simply asked for information about A.A. Many more -- the majority -- indicated that a husband, son, brother or friend was drinking to excess and asked A.A.'s help. Thirdly, there were inquiries from alcoholics in trouble and requesting help. Nick dictated replies in English to Odette who translated them into French and typed them. Soon standard replies in French were composed to inquiries of the first two types mentioned above. These could

8. "G.S.O." stands for General Service Office.

be used with slight modifications when necessary to fit the particular inquiry. This was fortunate because it soon became apparent that even working most evenings and weekends, Odette could not handle the load herself. Consequently many inquiries were handled by secretaries available on an overtime basis in Nick's office. This left Odette free to handle those letters that required individual attention. All such letters did begin however, with the words "Moi, je suis aussi alcoolique" (I too am an alcoholic). We learned later this opening had great appeal. Indeed, too much credit cannot be given Odette for the quality of her translations. This was possible only because she is one of those rare nonalcoholics who are able to grasp the spirit of A.A.

During the first days, the main problem was keeping up with the volume of inquiries received. There were several hundred in a period of some three weeks. However, after some ten days, in addition to new inquiries, replies began to come. These were far fewer in number since they were largely from that minority of original inquiries who had an alcoholic problem themselves, and were prepared to face it. By the same token, however, these letters deserved careful handling and could not be treated in a routine fashion. With each of the original replies to such people, in addition to the several pamphlets in French available, a copy of the paper-bound, abridged French edition of the Big Book, then in use in Quebec, had also been sent. There was little more that one could do at that time other than to try and help them, through correspondence. Needless to say, no one was available to call on them. No additional literature was available. There were no French-speaking meetings that they could be invited to attend. Although it was hoped that meetings could be arranged soon in the Paris area, it was quite clear that most of the inquiries outside Paris were so scattered geographically that this would not be possible in the foreseeable future. This problem had been foreseen, and arrangements had been made to forward copies of all such correspondence to French-speaking groups in Belgium and Switzerland for handling by their members. This was done.

However, for those interested alcoholics who lived in Paris and its environs, the prospects looked brighter. The formation of a French-speaking group in Paris appeared not only possible but probable. The immediate problem, once again, was language. Nick's French was not up to conducting a meeting, or explaining A.A. to newcomers. At first it was thought that it would be fall, when some of the French-speaking members of the American group would have returned to town, before it would be desirable in any case to attempt a French-speaking meeting. It soon became clear, however, that such a delay would mean the loss of many prospects with whom Nick was corresponding. It was decided to go ahead and arrange a meeting. "Mac" McD. had returned to the American group several months before after a "slip" lasting some three years. His French was good, he was sober, and he was full of enthusiasm. However, he indicated that he had not been back on the beam for long enough to make him feel comfortable in "carrying the message" at a French-speaking meeting, composed wholly of newcomers. Yet, there was no alternative, and Mac agreed to try. The first French prospects were invited to come to the Quai d'Orsay on the occasion of one of the regular meetings of the small American group. This was in the latter part of July 1960. Mac did a fine job. Yet the first few French to attend disappeared after one or two meetings. However, very soon some arrived who grasped the program firmly, became sober, remained sober, and are members of A.A. in France today. Among these were Manuel and François, who, each in his own way, as been a pillar of strength to the French group from its inception.

At one end of the room in the American Church, the English language meeting took place; at the other end, the French language meeting. Neither at the time had over a handful in attendance. And then the Lord provided once again. Mac was conducting the French meeting. Nick was leading the small American meeting. The door opened and in walked Fuller P., an old A.A. friend of Nick's. Neither had seen the other for a long time, and neither had any idea that the other was in Paris. Fuller planned to spend the winter in

Paris, spoke adequate French, and from the time of his arrival was the anchor of the French-speaking group. Without his dedicated guidance, the Paris group would surely have not progressed as well as it has. By the time Fuller departed about a year later, the group had so accepted basic A.A. as reflected in both the 12 Steps and the 12 Traditions that many groups elsewhere, established far longer, could learn much from it. Since the fall of 1960, the Paris group has continued to grow and its problems have largely been those of any group anywhere.

But other problems soon arose. Inquiries continued to flow in as a result of the France-Soir articles, although in smaller volume once the last installment was published in mid August. Among these was an inquiry from Roubaix. It appeared that a group of avowedly sober alcoholics there, who had been affiliated with a French temperance organization, wanted to transfer its allegiance to A.A. At Nick's suggestion, several members of the group came to Paris to talk things over. It was made clear that A.A. had no quarrel, and wanted none, with any other organization concerned with alcoholism. There is room for all. On the other hand, if the Roubaix people as individual alcoholics wanted to join A.A., adopt the A.A. program and establish a group in Roubaix, they would be welcome. Shortly after, a letter was received from Roubaix asking about the legal status of A.A. in France. The statement was made that it was illegal for any group to meet that had not been duly and legally constituted. It was also pointed out that the group, unless it had legal status, could not rent a post office box. The latter fact we knew as the Paris group had been unable to obtain a box for the same reason. However, the suggestion that meetings of a group not formally and legally constituted might be illegal, was disturbing.

In the meantime, Nick had been in touch with Colonel Robert Solberg, an American businessman in Paris, related by marriage to L. Ivan Underwood, one of the nonalcoholic [A.A.] trustees in the U.S. Colonel Solberg had indicated his desire to be helpful. Indeed, by September the correspondence files had been

transferred from Nick's to his office and taken over by his secretary. The Roubaix matter was brought to Colonel Solberg's attention. He arranged for Nick to talk with one of the partners of an American law firm doing business in France. It soon became clear that the people in Roubaix were wrong and that there was no question of meetings being illegal. Because even a superficial survey indicated that establishing A.A. in France on a formal basis would present some problems and because it then appeared that the only reason for so doing would be to facilitate the rental of post office boxes, it was decided to do nothing. Roubaix was so advised. However, the people there were not convinced. They finally informed Nick that if steps were not taken in Paris to establish A.A. legally in France, they proposed to take the necessary steps in Roubaix. This led to another conference between Nick and the lawyers. It appeared clear that so long as A.A. was not legally constituted in France, there would be danger of someone else taking such action and thus legally appropriating the name, perhaps without any intention of following the program. It was decided that it would be desirable to establish A.A. legally as a non-profit organization under French law; primarily to protect the names "Alcooliques Anonymes" and "A.A." in the sense of avoiding the possibility of someone else appropriating them for his own exclusive use.

Then came the problem of reconciling French law with A.A. practice and traditions. As it turned out, this was impossible. The net result is a paradoxical situation where the A.A. members in France are not legally members under the law, and where the only legal members of A.A. are a small group of nonalcoholics among whom are Colonel Solberg and Odette Guth. Part of the problem, but only part, was the question of anonymity. The names of the officers had to be published at the time of incorporation. Further, the names of members have to be a matter of public record. This explains why the true members of A.A. in France, the alcoholics, are not legally members. Special thanks are due to Monsieur Cheret, a French businessman who kindly consented to serve as the first president of A.A. Un-

der the law, three officer positions had to be filled by French citizens in order to make incorporation possible. To publicly identify himself as the president of A.A. in France, as Monsieur Cheret did, required courage and showed dedication to its objectives.

The officers and directors of the legal A.A. in France meet periodically with a few alcoholics selected by the French groups. This combined group constitutes the governing body for French A.A. to the extent that anybody "governs" in A.A. Indeed one of the principle problems at first was to persuade the legal officers of A.A. that they not only could, but should remain aloof from day-to-day affairs of the groups. This problem appears to be pretty well resolved.

In the period of nearly three years since the Kessel articles were published in France-Soir, A.A. has thrived in France. As is probably natural, most of the activity and growth as been in Paris. There, the active membership is over two hundred. Some 15 will celebrate three years of sobriety this summer and fall. About 20 more have two years behind them, and another 60, one year. Three meetings are held each week, two closed and one open -- all at the American Church. In addition there are groups in Roubaix, Rouen, Marseilles, Tourcoing, and Bordeaux. These groups combined together with a few loners total perhaps another 50-75 active members. By a conservative estimate, therefore, there are 250-300 active A.A.'s in France, with another 200-300 playing around the fringes.

So it is fair to say that A.A. is firmly established in France. True there are only a handful of members in relation to the number who need it. But a good start has been made. It is difficult to conceive of anything that could reverse the present rapid rate of growth. Much favorable publicity has been received and continues to appear. The Kessel articles appeared in book form in the fall of 1960 and it is still selling in French bookstores. There have been a number of magazine articles, among the first and most useful of which was one in the monthly Elle, the leading French magazine for young women. Perhaps this accounts for

the fact that an unusually high proportion of members in France -- considering that A.A. is so relatively new in that country -- are women. The proportion is about one-third. More recently there appeared an article in Lectures pour Tour, a leading French monthly of general circulation. There have been several television programs devoted to A.A., the most recent of which appeared last November.

In conclusion, quotes from a recent letter from Paris may be of interest:

"There are very few slips. Since we have had Al-Anon, there is wonderful cooperation from the family side, and almost all gossip and intrigue has disappeared. ... Many of those who came and vanished two years ago, or last year, have come back to admit their defeat. ... the group still clings together in spite of the disparity of its members. Until now, no one has taken the initiative to form another group here in Paris."

5

FIRST DONATION OF MY "TREASURES"

Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of A.A. in France, 1985

Dear friends. Over the past 25 years I have collected and saved "treasures," thinking that one day we might like to start a "family album" for the purpose of better understanding the miracle of the beginnings of A.A. in France. We have tried to explain this miracle in the brochure published for the 25th anniversary. Now that we have succeeded in establishing an organizational structure, I would like to entrust my treasures to the French General Service Board, as guardians of our traditions. I think that a glass display case in our meeting room would be a nice idea. What I am giving is only the beginning of our family album. We can add to it bit by bit over the years.

Checklist

1. July 1960. The articles by Joseph Kessel published in *France-Soir*, which inspired the beginning of French-speaking A.A. in France. I have been told that the collection of 21 articles is already in our archives. Frankly I am delighted, as I am a bit of a fetishist, and saved the one I found on the floor when I returned home after failing to commit suicide by jumping off the Eiffel Tower.
2. August 1960. The letter I received from Nick H. in response to my letter to *France-Soir*. This letter was later copied over and over. The first stable A.A. group in Spain really started after this letter was received there in 1961.
3. February 1961. A photo of the Quai d'Orsay office showing six of us (François, Lidi, Juan XXIII, Denis de Boulogne, Luis D., and me).

4. October 1961. Numbers 1 and 2 of *Regain*, our first printed publication. (I think it is extraordinary that we were able to publish a monthly journal only a year after getting started.)
5. June 1962. First receipt for a (very late) dollar contribution to the New York office.⁹ Since then I have become more punctual with payments.
6. December 1963. A Christmas greeting from Nick H. with the Saint Francis Prayer. This helped me to begin to understand the profound spirituality of our American friends, and of A.A.
7. October 1964. The signatures of attendees at our 4th anniversary, sent to Nick H., Fuller P., and Elisabeth. And here I take the opportunity to ask everyone to sign the list for this year, to be sent to Fuller P. as a testimony to our recognition and gratitude for all the help he has given us since then.
8. 1965. Photo of the office with Jean-Marie, who passed away in 1969. He was our first permanent office worker.
9. The first list of groups; there were three: Quai d'Orsay, Belleville, and Issy-les-Moulineaux. We later added Quinault to the list in pen.
10. A fragment of the book by Jef about the Higher Power, which had helped us so much in our work at the office (12-step work).
11. February 1966. The manuscript of Jef's book *Avec les Alcooliques Anonymes*. He wanted to give it to me, but it should be for all of us.
12. December 1967. Letter from Bill W. addressed to me for the A.A. European Committee, and a photo of one of the committee meetings in the club La Guitare.
13. 1969. Photo of the office and the secretariat during the days of the Administrative Council.
14. 1970. The book *The Family Group Programme* dedicated by Lois B. Wilson in 1957 to Jef on the occasion of his visit to New York.

9. It has been customary among A.A.'s to make a contribution to the General Service Office of their country as a way of showing gratitude. In the early years, there was no such office in France, so we gave the money to the English-speaking group, who sent it on to the G.S.O. in New York.

He referred to this book when writing his articles for *France-Soir*, and later gave it to me.

15. 1972. Photo of Jef at a meeting of the Archives group.
16. 1974. Photo of a friend in a psychiatric hospital. For many, she represented the desperation and lack of understanding of our disease. Velázquez's painting *Los Borrachos (The Drunks)* in no way depicts the pathetic truth about alcoholism.
17. 1976. A photo of François B. with me, shortly before his death.
18. 1982. A cassette tape of Michel the Basque talking about the Fourth Step, which we acquired miraculously. It is truly marvelous. I think the A.A. literature service should reproduce it and make it available in the catalog of materials.
19. 1985. The cassette tape that was recorded in Montreal for the 50th anniversary of A.A. In it we describe how A.A. arrived in France.
20. A small piece of the floor from the Quai d'Orsay office. This piece of floorboard was stepped on by so many people entering with hesitation, full of anxiety, and so many leaving full of hope, knowing they would never again be alone, and that a path full of happiness was opening before them.

Manuel M. of Paris

6

ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS IN FRANCE

Progress, Success, and Accomplishments

Publication of the brochure commemorating the twenty-fifth anniversary of the arrival of A.A. in France coincided with the fiftieth anniversary of A.A. in the world. Many important events had marked A.A. history. I think this would be a good time to remember some of them.

Although it is true that A.A. was proliferating around the world at an astonishing rate, our North American friends across the Atlantic met with resistance here in certain wine-growing regions of Europe — especially in France: wine country par excellence. In fact, more than 12 years of attempts had proved fruitless.

A.A. collided with the cultural tradition of wine, which was elevated practically to the status of religion among the “corkscrew” society. Wine has been a fundamental integral part of French life for centuries.

Our small group of A.A.'s had noticed that our Anglo-Saxon friends were showing a special and persistent interest in us. It wasn't until Nick H. sent his observer's report to the New York General Service Office in 1963 that we understood that something quite significant was occurring.

After France, and with France as a starting point, it was Spain's turn. The Rentería group in the Basque Country opened its doors, and has kept them open ever since. Next came Portugal, Italy, and later Greece. A.A. was spreading around the world. Personally I feel profound gratitude for the privilege of having been present during the birth of our fellowship in this part of the world, and witnessing a part of its history and growth.

It was somewhat innovating the way we sat in a circle at our meetings. Previously it had been more common for people attending meetings to

sit in rows facing the front of the room, where a chairperson or speaker stood behind a podium to present the topic — everyone else had their backs to the people behind them. We started sitting in a circle, and giving anyone who wanted to speak the chance to do so. It is true that this made it a bit more difficult for the chairperson to maintain order. On the other hand, it is also true that sometimes the chairperson had to be kept in order by others.

We also found it beneficial to recite the Serenity Prayer at the end of the meetings, rather than any other prayer, no matter how well known or respected it might be.

In 1965, at a conference in Wiesbaden, Germany, attended by more than a thousand A.A.'s, an A.A. European Committee was formed. All of the countries represented at the conference accepted the idea with great enthusiasm. After the New York office added its approval and support for the idea, we began meeting annually — the next year in London, the year after that in Paris. In Paris the meeting was held at the nightclub La Guitare where I was working. I got access to the facility for free and it seemed like a novel idea.

When everything seemed to be going perfectly, we received a letter from Bill W. He suggested that it might be better to organize A.A. by language regions. Indeed, the only barriers we were encountering were not borders or mountain ranges or seas, but our different languages. Bill was right. The challenge was great, but our efforts thereafter to organize by language — anglophones, francophones, hispanophones, etc. — produced good results.

Actually, I believe that our most challenging and delicate ordeal was bridging the tremendous chasms between social classes that were so deeply rooted in France. Our greatest success, thanks to growing spirituality and profound fraternal love, was to get alcoholics from all social classes to sit together at the same table and share their most intimate problems. Only our common suffering and common hope for liberation could unite us in brotherly love. In the United States, where social classes are defined mainly by economic status, this was not so significant, especially considering that most people reached A.A. in a state of economic ruin. In

France, to see the “duchess” of a high-class district of Paris sharing and chatting with a construction worker from a blue-collar neighborhood about their respective blackout drinking experiences seemed impossible.

In my opinion the four essential accomplishments made by A.A. France to facilitate success of the fellowship were the following: breaking the resistance of wine-growing regions to the need for A.A.; adapting meetings to a more open, comfortable, Mediterranean style; accepting, during our expansion, the need for organization by language regions; and eliminating social class barriers in light of the hard punches of alcoholism.

Ever since humans learned to use fermentation and later distillation to obtain alcohol, some people have developed an alcohol-dependence or illness associated with consumption of alcoholic beverages. For centuries, wines and other alcoholic drinks have been an integral part of meals and parties. But the people who cannot drink in moderation have always represented a problem with no apparent solution. They have been victims, driven to their knees, humiliated by one of the worst scourges of humankind.

It is thanks to the determined efforts of a courageous Dr. Silkworth, the inspiration and synthesizing skills of Bill W., the goodness of Dr. Bob, and the insights into the human condition and spirituality of Dr. Carl Gustav Jung that we have our effective A.A. program of recovery today. This method has permitted not that the alcoholic might drink with impunity, but rather that he acquire the necessary humility and acceptance to live happily and serenely without drinking alcohol at all. This same method has liberated millions of people from other dependencies as well, including addictions to other drugs, overeating, gambling, etc. I believe that there are currently more than 30 different fellowships for recovery from problems other than alcoholism that are based on the A.A. program and thereby achieve excellent results. The only requirement is that the members of the different groups share the same common problem.

It would seem that the Higher Power, or God as each individual chooses to understand him, could have selected brilliant academics, psychotherapists, loving mothers willing to sacrifice everything, or others — but it is the alcoholic himself that is best suited to help another alcoholic, because

he has also suffered the same tortures of the disease. The sober alcoholic can never be judgmental or look down on the newcomer.

I believe that when humanity becomes seriously endangered, it is from within humanity itself that remedies are found to save it. I do not believe it was only coincidence that Christianity arose during that decadent and nauseating period of Roman society. It seems to me that the ideas of love and forgiveness had become necessary at that time in history.

I also believe that the appearance of Alcoholics Anonymous 77 years ago — not very long compared with the history of humanity — was no coincidence, but rather a necessity. And I believe that the necessity for A.A. still exists in this world of self-destruction: global warming, environmental degradation, genocide, economic crisis, collapse of politico-social systems, and diseases that are not understood — such as alcoholism. Indeed, alcoholism is a perfect example of self-destruction. The arrival and spread of Alcoholics Anonymous has been awe inspiring, and its far-reaching importance has yet to be seen.

During the time that I have been in A.A., and consistently active in the fellowship, its influence on me has been beneficial — I would almost say miraculous — and I have been a privileged witness to this influence on others.

South Africa is an interesting model example. Even before the end of apartheid, white and black A.A.'s met together. In fact, white A.A.'s accompanied black A.A.'s to and from meetings, and black A.A.'s did the same for the whites. No one, not even the brutal apartheid regime, could stop them.

I think that being an A.A. — and really *feeling* it — is a great privilege that carries an enormous responsibility: to pass the A.A. message to the greatest number of alcoholics, and help them to live by these principles.

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THE STORY OF SHAKY JOE

This story was published in France in the magazine *Partage* between October 1986 and April 1990, and in Spain in the journal *Akron 1935* beginning in the February-March issue, 1986.

Shaky Joe represents a little of many of us when we first come to A.A., disoriented, lost, alone in the world, partly wanting to believe, but still largely refusing to. He shows us how, thanks to his A.A. sponsor, he slowly comes to understand that he has found his people — people who laugh and cry about the same things — like a lone wolf that has found a pack, or a lost sheep that has come home to its flock. The story also demonstrates the great importance of sponsorship in our fellowship.

SHAKY JOE'S FIRST MEETING

There were once a couple of drunks who had descended the tragic slopes of alcoholism to the point where they had lost everything material, as well as nearly all else of this earth.

By chance they heard of the existence of a peculiar association and decided to go find out what kind of shady business it might be. At the last moment, one of them decided to wait outside while the other went in. A couple of hours later, the one who'd gone in had this to say to his friend when he came back out of the meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous:

"Hey, I've just seen and heard the strangest things I could ever imagine in this world. Listen. As soon as I went in, two normal-looking guys came right over to me. I thought they were going to ask for identification or ask me what I was doing there, but they just wanted to know my name. I said people called me 'Red-faced Joe' or 'Shaky Joe,' depending. After a few seconds of silence, one of them said that one name would be enough

here, and that they could call me Joseph if I wanted. I liked that, because that's what my mother called me.

"The others were all sitting around a long table, and the two guys took me to a seat there. People talked, one at a time. I think they were saying something about taking 12 steps to one side and then 12 steps back. The funny thing was that they didn't move from their seats. It didn't look that difficult to me, well, maybe depending on the day. I don't think they're too well in the head, but at least they were nice enough. Then ... and here's the strange part ... they said that they weren't making any obligations, but they suggested to anyone new not to drink any alcohol for an hour. Not one glass, or even half a glass of anything with alcohol. Not even wine or beer or cider or anything. After that you should chug down 24 glasses of anything you want ... but it had to be exactly 24, not one more, not one less. And then start over, and do that every day for the rest of your life. But what hit me was that nobody drank anything at all. Really I think these folks are not well in the head.

"And there's more. After all that, they said that each one of them has a little monkey on his back. And this monkey tells them to drink. Sure, if you have to drink 24 glasses every hour, you need to have at least somebody there on your side. But what really bugged me is ... now you know I'm not doing so well myself today ... but not one of them had a monkey. Not one. They're off their rockers.

"And at the end, well maybe they're not so crazy after all, they passed around a bag of money ... I think they said it was the seventh time to-night ... and each one of them put their hand in to take some. You can imagine, when the bag got to me I was ready to reach in with both fists. But then a few of them told me with big smiles that because it was my first meeting I wasn't supposed to do it. That's the custom ... the tradition."

After explaining it all, Shaky Joe remained silent for a while. Like in a trance. Then he added, "I don't know about you, but I'm coming back tomorrow. I want a talking monkey, too. You know, sometimes I just feel so lonely."

SHAKY JOE'S SECOND MEETING

Clean-shaven and wearing the best clothes he owned, Shaky Joe walked to his second A.A. meeting. His step was still unsteady, but somehow he felt that something important was happening to him.

When he arrived he was surprised at the hearty greeting he got from his new friends. "Hi Joseph. You look nice today. We're really happy to have you with us again!"

Shaky Joe felt confused. They even remembered his name. A sensation he hadn't felt in a long time began to warm him inside. He'd had a couple of drinks to get up the courage to go to the meeting, and especially so his hands would stop trembling. "Hi, how's it going," he stammered.

The meeting started. Joe was surprised by how many smiles and friendly glances he got from people he had never seen before. He felt awkward and shy. People spoke of "the program" and "the steps" and a philosophy of life that allowed alcoholics to live happily without alcohol — in the beginning, and in case of emergency, just for 24 hours. One day at a time.

The person leading the meeting called on a woman who spoke easily, "My name is Esther and I'm an alcoholic." What? This lady, an alcoholic? She couldn't possibly know what serious drinking really is. But by the time Esther finished speaking, Joe believed differently. He saw that her experience and his were somehow practically identical. She had suffered, trembled, and cried like he had. She had pleaded and cursed and given up thousands of times. She had also been abandoned, and had not been able to understand what was happening to her for so many years. Joe felt a great respect and compassion for Esther, and he wanted to tell her that he understood. But he was too timid to say a word.

The chairperson took over and began asking each person how he was doing. One after another, everyone spoke, and Joe saw that it would soon be his turn. He wanted to leave. Or maybe he could say that he was just there to listen, to get information for a friend. The moment came. The chairperson looked at him with a big smile and said, "And how is our new friend Joseph?" The whole world seemed to come down on top of him. He, who had always been such a talker, never afraid of anything or any-

one, suddenly felt he would die of fright. But after a long silence, he began to speak. It seemed as if the words were coming from someone else:

"I'm not sure what to tell you ... but I feel good with you, like I'm not alone ... not even that loneliness you can feel with a lot of people around. You know what I mean." He felt a great bitterness melting away. "Well, my name is Shaky Joe ... I mean Joseph. And I wish my friend could see all this."

The meeting went on for a long time, and Joe didn't really understand much of it very well. But for the first time he got the feeling that he really fit in with other human beings, with that group of alcoholics. He had always been somewhere in between — between bars, between drinks (the one he'd just had, and the one he had to find next), between streets, between brawls, between worlds, or far removed from any world. Now, for the first time, he got the feeling he was all in one place. In this life puzzle where everyone has a different shape and different color, but where everyone fits together to form a whole, he felt he had his place.

When the meeting ended many people came over to Joseph and shook his hand to welcome him. The man who had greeted him the day before told him to try not to drink for just the next 24 hours. Many people had done it, including everyone in the room, and he could do it, too. He said that life was beautiful. In a few words he described how his drinking had driven him down to hell, and how, one day at a time, he had been able to climb back up. He said that if Joseph had a difficult moment, he could phone him at any time of day or night, and not to worry about bothering him. On the contrary, being of help would help him, too. He stuffed Joseph's pockets with pamphlets, and, with a firm handshake, said, "Don't worry. If I've been able to do it, you'll be able to do it, too. See you at the next meeting, and here ... here's a copy of the Serenity Prayer."

Back outside, after the last person had gone, Joe walked alone through the streets trying to comprehend everything that had happened. In fact he remembered only a few bits. Like things that Esther had said. What an amazing woman! With everything that had happened to her, she was able to stop drinking!

Joe had two fifty-cent coins in his pocket. He'd thought of putting one in the bag they'd passed around at the meeting, but he hadn't dared. It was the only money he had. He could get a couple of glasses of wine with it. Coming to a tavern he knew very well, he automatically reached to open the door. But something stopped him. He remembered Esther talking about the suffering, the struggle of her first 24 hours without a drink.

Suddenly Joe thought of his friend, who had not come with him to the meeting this time, and decided to go find him. He was excited to tell him all about what had happened. How he had spoken at the meeting in front of all those people, and how everyone had listened to him in silence. And that he had a dollar in his pocket, and that he hadn't had a drink since the meeting. And that from then on, his name was Joseph. Anyone who called him Shaky Joe now had better watch out. Even though his hands were still trembling, he no longer felt alone. And it seemed he might never feel alone again. He had found other people like him. A group he felt he belonged to, had always belonged to, and had somehow been seeking for a long time.

SHAKY JOE OR JOSEPH'S THIRD MEETING AND FIRST 24 HOURS

It was already 5 p.m., and something miraculous was happening. Since the day before, when he'd drunk a couple of glasses of wine to build up courage to go to his second A.A. meeting, mainly to stop his hands from shaking, Joseph had not drunk a single drop of alcohol. And even more extraordinary for him, he had slept better than ever that night, with no nightmares or sudden frights; he hadn't even gotten cramps in his legs. In the morning, Joseph had had a feeling that was difficult to describe. Something like being free from oppression — more psychological than physical. He'd had a cold sweat and his hands had still trembled a lot, but he'd been able to drink a cup of coffee without vomiting it back up like so many other times.

Joseph tried with determination to read the literature that Anthony had given him — Anthony was the man who'd greeted him the first day. It

was difficult to hold the pamphlets in his trembling hands, so he ended up putting them on the table so the words would stop jumping around. There was quite a lot to read, in addition to the Serenity Prayer, as they called it — that seemed like a real tongue twister. What drew his attention most was a page that gave a number of recommendations to help during the first days of abstinence. Among other things: drink lots of liquids, especially sweet beverages; avoid getting bored, by doing anything to keep busy, like shining shoes, for example; and, above all, if temptation arose, phone an A.A. friend before taking a drink of alcohol.

Joseph knew that the gripping torment — the anxiousness that he was about to die, or that his heart could stop at any moment — would be rapidly relieved by a few drinks. The awful feeling that something terrible was about to happen would surely disappear if he just took a little alcohol. But somehow he also knew that to drink would be to fall back into the most cunning and cruel trap of dependency that one could ever imagine.

Everyone at the meeting had talked about the importance of the first 24 hours. It signified the beginning of a new life without alcohol — a life in which one could find happiness. With the help of the others, he could be like the others. If he could hold out until the meeting this very night, when it was his turn to speak, he'd be able to announce that he, Joseph, had also been able to go for 24 hours without a drink. Maybe Esther would be there, and he'd be able to tell her how much her example had helped him. Little by little he had begun to understand. It wasn't 24 drinks every hour as he'd told his friend after the first meeting. He'd said that partly joking, partly scoffing, because he hadn't been able to conceive of ever spending even a single whole day without a drink.

But look at him now — at this very moment he was just a few hours away from doing just that! Spending a full day without a drink of alcohol. What force emanated from that group of people? That small group of human beings he didn't even know yet? He felt good with them. They seemed to be his people even though he didn't know them. They didn't judge him or look down on him. Whether he was trembling or not, he was going to be called Joseph, not Shaky Joe. And he was going to be an A.A. now, too. Anthony had told him that he could be an A.A. if he himself wanted to be and he himself decided to be.

Mechanically, out of habit, Joseph put his hand into his pocket. What a surprise to find the two fifty-cent coins that were still there from the day before! He'd completely forgotten that he had money. The realization sparked a sudden and terrible alteration in his mind. Anxiety made his skin crawl. He felt an automatic and irresistible urge to drink.

He could go to the tavern, where he'd find his friend Felix the Wheel — that's what everybody called him because he made his living, or rather his drinking, by stealing car wheels and selling them. His business was as clever as it was illegal. Still, Felix was a man of certain scruples and principles. He never took more than one wheel from any one car. He claimed he had never "worked" on an ambulance, or much less a police car — his specialty was luxury cars. He was one of the chief suppliers of the neighborhood junkyard. The amount of business he did depended on his thirst for drink, which was enormous, and daily.

But back to Joseph. He was in an intolerable state. On the one hand, he had a powerful compulsion to go out and have a drink, and then another, and then another, and so on into oblivion. On the other hand, he had a real desire to reach his first 24 hours of abstinence. If he could just make it without drinking anything until 8 p.m. and then go to the A.A. meeting ... three hours to go. It seemed like three years, or three centuries! Joseph remembered what Anthony had said, and what he'd read in the pamphlets. If you feel tempted to drink, phone an A.A. friend. He dashed out to the nearest phone booth. There was someone using it, and two more people were waiting. The damned guy on the phone was chatting up a storm and laughing. If only he would choke on the dentures he was wearing in that horse mouth of his!

Fortunately the other two people waiting were together, and the number they called was busy, so it was Joseph's turn. "Hello, this is Joseph. Is Anthony there? Yes, I'm the new guy."

"Hi Joseph. How are your first 24 hours going?" Anthony's voice was cheerful. "Yeah I know it isn't easy. Hey, why don't you come over to my house? We can have a cup of coffee and then go to the meeting together. Good, good, I'll be expecting you. Don't forget, if you go past a bar or tavern, cross the street if you have to. No, Joseph, I'm not making fun of

you. In the beginning it's best to take extra precautions to avoid temptation. It would be a shame if you drank now, with only a couple of hours to go, after making it this far. Come on. Hurry. And thanks for calling me."

Joseph would never forget the kindness and warmth with which he was welcomed into that happy home. Anthony's wife Mary opened the door. "You're in luck, Joseph," she said. "I've made coffee, and we've got some traditional pastries from my parents' village. You'll love them."

Mary spoke to Joseph as if she had always known him. Like one of the family. "Come into the kitchen. The children are having their afternoon snack. My husband will be with us in a moment. He just got home from work and is getting ready to go the meeting." Then lowering her voice a little, she continued, "I can imagine how you're feeling. Anthony had a very rough time, too. I'm in Al-Anon, the group for friends and family of alcoholics. I've never suffered withdrawals from alcohol, but I've seen my husband go through them, and have heard the experiences of others. I know how you must be suffering."

After a silence, Joseph replied, also in a low voice, "I was feeling awful. I wasn't sure I would even make it here. I had to stay close to the buildings to make sure I wouldn't fall. But since you opened the door and told me Anthony would be here soon, I've been feeling better. I'd even like to try one of those pastries, and I can tell you I haven't had much of an appetite."

When Anthony came into the kitchen, Joseph had already eaten the pastry and was talking cheerfully with the children. The two men then talked enthusiastically for a long time. It was incredible how much Anthony knew about alcoholism. He related countless experiences, and explained exactly what Joseph was going through, including the withdrawal symptoms he was feeling at that very moment.

It was clear that Anthony had really gone through all that suffering, and just look at him now — so content, so confident, with such a close family and happy home. Somewhere deep inside Joseph's soul there awoke a kind of longing, not very well defined, a sort of glimmer of desire to someday also have a home, a wife, and children like Anthony did.

When they got to the meeting, Joseph's first impression was that he already knew everyone there, and had somehow known them for a long time. He had never had a very good memory, but he remembered most of their names, and knew who was missing. He also noticed new faces. He was with his people, and never once felt alienated. These people had suffered, cried, laughed, and felt the same as he had. They were brothers and sisters in illness, exile, and agony, but also in hope. Of course, he had not reached their level yet, but why wouldn't he be able to? Having just completed his first 24 hours without a drink, maybe aspiring to a better life without alcohol was premature, but these people were living examples demonstrating that such a miracle was no mere pipe dream, but rather an achievable reality.

Joseph noticed that Rudolf was not there. He had been the chairperson the day before. Esther, the woman whose story had impressed him so much, wasn't there either. He asked Anthony why they weren't at the meeting today. With a warm smile, Anthony told him not to worry. Both Rudolf and Esther usually came to only two meetings a week because of their jobs.

A man who'd been at both previous meetings came over to greet him. "Hi Joseph. How's it going? It's great to see you at your third meeting in a row now!"

Joseph stammered, "You know what? I haven't had a drink in 24 hours, as of just a little while ago."

"Hey, that's wonderful!" the man exclaimed. "Even if it's difficult, just hang in there, no matter what. When I was going through what you're going through now, my sponsor told me to just accept the suffering all at once and you'll suffer less in the long run. Like the man who had to cut off his dog's tail. He felt sorry for the dog, so wanted to cut it off bit by bit. No, Joseph, it's better to cut it off all at once. Same with alcohol. Not a single drop more, one day at a time. Endure the difficulty once and for all, and start living a free man. And, Joseph, if I can be of any help, just let me know."

In the meeting they talked about many things. And not by coincidence, they all said something about their first 24 hours without a drink. Anthony was chairing, and he'd suggested that as the main topic. How well everyone remembered the first day of sobriety! And they knew how to describe the feelings. It seemed as though they were reliving their first 24 hours with all its intensity as if it had been just yesterday. But for many it had been years, and for some, many years, since that special first day when events and circumstances had coincided in a way that had entirely changed the courses of their lives.

Since the beginning of the meeting, Joseph had not remembered his thoughts about drinking. His compulsion to drink had vanished as if by magic. He had the feeling he was seeing more clearly. His hands were only barely trembling, and his anxiety and uncertainty also seemed to have left him. He felt calm.

Anthony told that the previous week he had been trying to help a newcomer go through his first 24 hours. This fellow, named Peter, had been shaking so badly he'd had to be strapped to the bed. Seeing him in such a state, Anthony had suggested a hot bath to relax him, rather than a sedative. When the idea was rejected, Anthony had explained that acute withdrawal symptoms were like toothache — that after the intense pain would come a calm. The pain would be relieved by itself. "Yeah, yeah, OK," Peter had said. "But just give me one beer. Just one." Anthony had said he would give him the beer if he really wanted it, but that it would be a shame after everything that had already happened. He would give him a beer, but with a pain in his heart. "OK, I won't drink it," Peter had responded. "But only if you drink it yourself." Anthony had been stunned by such a display of ill will. But in a moment, both men had erupted into a fit of laughter. Finally Anthony had been able to speak. "You have all the twisted, irrational, insane ideas of a tortured alcoholic. Sadistic. You want me to just throw away my five years of sobriety, you rascal!" Peter had calmed down, and answered, "I don't know if it was all that laughing, or what, but I feel better ... much better. I guess the 'toothache' is calming down. I think with your help, just being here, I'll be able to get through this." "And that was what happened," Anthony finished his story. "Tomorrow, God willing, Peter will come to his first meeting."

That night was especially important for Joseph. Not only had he completed one day sober, but also he had learned a lot about his illness — about withdrawal symptoms, mental traps, obsessions, compulsions, and countless other details about what happens to alcoholics.

When the meeting ended, they went for the proverbial coffee afterwards, and Joseph took the opportunity to ask Anthony about something he'd been thinking about the day before. "How could we help my friend Felix, so that he could come to meetings and stop drinking, too? He seems very reluctant."

Anthony replied, "Look, the fact that you want to help your friend, or other alcoholics, is a good sign. It's a wonderful reaction, when you've only been sober for one day — the reaction of a real alcoholic starting recovery. But you mustn't forget that the most important person in the world for you is *you*. Your own abstinence is more important than anyone or anything else. If you want, we can meet with him tomorrow and the three of us can talk a little. Maybe Felix will want to come to A.A. and stop drinking, but we cannot force him. That doesn't work. Believe me."

"The only requirement for A.A. membership is a desire to stop drinking," Anthony continued. "Just the desire — even if the person can't actually stop. In Alcoholics Anonymous it doesn't matter what a person has been or done, not even if he has murdered his mother or father, they say. It doesn't matter where a person is from, how much money he has, whether or not he has been to school, what color skin he has, which religion he professes, or if he professes none. The only important thing is the desire to stop drinking. I believe that the greatness of A.A. is in this openness to everyone. No one is excluded." With a laugh, he concluded by saying, "If the Devil himself appeared at a meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous and declared that he was an alcoholic and wanted to stop drinking, he would be welcome from the start. We'd call him Mephistopheles ... or Mephisto so he'd feel more comfortable."

SHAKY JOE OR JOSEPH SEEING THE IMPORTANCE OF SPONSORSHIP

As they had agreed, Anthony went with Joseph to visit his friend Felix at his house, or dump, as they called it. Dump was the better word. The place was dirty and littered with old tires and other junk — clutter from Felix's "trade." Tactfully, Anthony asked Felix whether he had a desire to stop drinking like Joseph had done.

"Well, to tell the truth I've never really thought about it," Felix replied. "At least not seriously. I can take it or leave it. I could quit if I wanted to, it's just that I don't really want to."

"That's not true!" cried Joseph. "How many times have I heard you cursing and ranting about how bad alcohol is? Swearing you'll never drink again! I mean ... that you'll never get drunk again. Cuz for you, 'not drinking' just means not getting plastered, like it used to for me. But now I know that as an alcoholic, you can't take even a single drop. And believe me, Felix, that's the only solution. A.A.'s say that one drink is too many and a thousand aren't enough. Just think about it and tell me if that's not true. The one that gets you drunk, the one that starts you drinking so nothing can stop you, is the first drink. Not the fifth or the thirty-fifth. All those others just come without even thinking. The one you really have to consciously avoid is the first. The first one lights the fuse, and then the bomb goes off."

"Listen Joe, or Joseph, whatever you wanna be called," Felix was irritated. "Get off my back. If you've decided to go incognito and hide out with this secret society, or whatever, then good luck. But leave me out of it. Don't bug me."

Annoyed and disillusioned, Joseph answered, "You don't understand anything. For one thing, Alcoholics Anonymous is not a secret society. For another thing, I'm not hiding from anybody. Your problem is you don't have the guts to face reality and try to stop drinking, not even for one day. That's why you just look for excuses."

Anthony had to step in restore the peace. "OK, OK, no more speeches. Everyone is free to accept or reject what A.A. suggests." And with that

he invited Joseph to leave with him and go for a walk until the meeting. He reminded him that before a person "hits bottom" with his drinking, before a person is sick and tired of being sick and tired, there isn't much that can be done to help. Felix would have to decide for himself, as Joseph had done, and it was clear that he was not ready. He hadn't yet arrived at the level of desperation necessary to be willing to do anything to be free from the dependency on alcohol.

After a long silence, Anthony added, "I don't believe we reach that level of desperation because of physical suffering, or financial problems, as catastrophic as those may be. I believe we hit bottom because of emotional suffering that eventually drives us to intolerable self-loathing — when we have no more excuses and are no longer able to fool ourselves with any imagined pretexts. Felix is still trying to convince himself that he can control his situation with his own willpower if he wants to."

"Unfortunately," Anthony went on, "alcohol itself is the most likely advocate for showing Felix that what we say is true. In many cases, pride and physical dependency on alcohol are so strong that not even the instinct of self-preservation or any human power is sufficient. Acceptance of defeat and willingness to be helped require a great deal of humility. And that usually comes only out of profound desperation. It is not easy to acknowledge and accept one's own complete powerlessness in life. Who wants to humbly ask for help? But without that, it is a thousand times more difficult, if not impossible. This powerlessness, my dear friend Joseph, is the first step in our program of recovery from alcoholism. I believe you have been living in this phase for two days now."

Anthony paused again and looked at Joseph pensively, wondering if he should go any further with this today. Finally he continued, "To stop drinking and truly accept defeat is the beginning, without which any recovery is impossible. But it is only a beginning — a foundation on which the structure of a new life will be built, based on a new and unexpected spiritual perspective. In other words, we must first become aware of our powerlessness over alcohol, without any reservations, and must then be willing to open our minds to the idea of a new spiritual philosophy of life. All of our previous values will change, making way for new ones perhaps never imagined even in our wildest dreams. The first step is just

a starting point and nothing more. Indeed, alcoholism, strange as it may seem, is not in the alcohol. For an alcoholic, drinking is just a symptom of an underlying disease, like a fever caused by a cancer of the soul. An alcoholic is a person who is poorly adapted for coping with life. The root of his illness may be an oversensitivity that causes an abnormal fear of suffering, which in turn sets in motion a number of character defects that prevent him from feeling things normally.

"The spirit of the alcoholic is paralyzed or numbed by fear. The resulting character defects are surely combined with a physiological allergy or sensitivity to alcohol, which increases over time. Thus, alcoholism is progressive. It is also incurable, as you know."

Joseph looked stunned. "I think I'm finally starting to understand things I've been confused about for most of my life. The first drink is like lighting the fuse of a bomb, or a pack of dynamite. Sooner or later, depending on the length of the fuse, the thing will explode. Ignorance of the chain reaction triggered by the first drink is one thing. I really had no idea how that worked, or of the extent to which drinking had really made me suffer. But now I see that the underlying problem is the character defects that instigate the irrational act of taking that first drink despite having seen what it starts. Character defects caused by this half-asleep spirit that is ill prepared for coping with life. Yes, yes, I knew that I drank to avoid seeing, to avoid being me, to create the illusion that I was something else. I was always looking for a solution, something that would help me — whether outside or within me, I don't know, but I couldn't stand being unhappy. I guess that's why I always ended up drinking. That's it, isn't it Anthony?"

"That's it," answered Anthony. "That's a large part of our problem. There's a page in the book by Joseph Kessel that explains very well the need felt by an alcoholic for a Power greater than himself. Here, take the book and read this part out loud. It will help us both."

Joseph read out loud:

"Appeal to a Superior Power, however you may conceive of it," say Alcoholics Anonymous. "Jehovah or Allah, Jesus or Buddha, you may choose whichever you like and think of God however you please. The only thing

that matters is that you should believe in a Force outside yourself to which you can appeal for help.

"You cannot do without superhuman help. To safeguard your sobriety you must reform your whole character. You must lay aside envy, pride, unsociability, hypersensitivity, and anxiety. Your alcoholism isn't an isolated and independent disease. It is bound up with all these character traits. You are destroying yourself with drink so as to exalt or numb, satisfy or forget them. While they exist, you will always be in danger.

"You cannot achieve this inner change by yourself. Therefore, you must realize your innate need of a Superior Power, *of whatever kind*, so long as you can put your trust in It.

"And if, even under these conditions, your mind rejects the idea of divinity, then you must take our free confraternity as your Superior Power. It is certainly wiser than you, reckoning by experience, number of members, and the sum total of their suffering. And when you are overcome by weakness, indecision, or exhaustion, call on the group spirit, with its collective strength, to support and guide your failing courage."

"Thanks to this book," Anthony continued, "A.A. was able to cross the Atlantic and get started in Europe. My sponsor was a great friend of his, and he told me that although Kessler was not an alcoholic, his talent as a writer and especially his human warmth and kindness allowed him to capture the greatness of our fellowship and 'pass the message,' as we say when we try to help other alcoholics."

"But why can some people drink without problems, while others cannot?" asked Joseph.

In addition to having been the person who'd greeted and guided him during his first days in A.A., Anthony was fast becoming Joseph's sponsor: a member with more experience, whom the newcomer can trust and ask questions about the A.A. program.¹⁰ A friend he can confide in outside the meetings, even about personal matters, knowing he will not be

10. The person who greets a newcomer at his first meeting and accompanies him during his first few days may or may not be the same person whom the newcomer later chooses as a sponsor to guide him through the steps of the program and in understanding how the fellowship works.

judged, and that what is said will be kept between them. The sponsor watches the newcomer's progress, and facilitates his relationship with the rest of the group, trying to smooth out any bad attitude or behavior that might arise. A newcomer often comes to A.A. in a state of emotional conflict and confusion that can be dangerous for him and the group both — aggressive, egocentric, destructive, cutting, bad-mouthed, starving for affection, with even his good instincts and sentiments out of balance. He may be depressed and full of scorn, vexation, and complexes. It is difficult to imagine how unhappy an A.A. newcomer can be, and this can lead to behavior that can be dangerous for everyone. This is one of the areas in which only an alcoholic can understand another alcoholic.

But let's go back to Joseph's question. He clearly feels a sense of injustice about the fact that there are people who can drink responsibly with impunity, without going through any of the harrowing experiences that he had been suffering for so long in body and soul. Why didn't this happen to others?

"Joseph, your question is perfectly logical, and I think we have all wondered about it. In my personal experience, which is what we always talk about in A.A., I have seen that there are many different forms of alcoholism, perhaps as many as there are alcoholics. There are no set rules. It is a type of personality disorder, among other things. I would say that there are certain aspects of character and behavior that are fairly common among many of us. This makes us similar, which allows us to understand each other and therefore help each other. The alcoholic tends to be characterized by lack of emotional maturity, a kind of vague fear of life, excessive pride combined oddly with painful shyness, lack of self-confidence combined with a giant ego, perfectionism, idealism, a tendency toward believing that fantasies are real, like Don Quixote — I agree with the phrase I once heard, that 'an alcoholic is an idealist who has ruined his life' — and many other traits typical of an immature personality."

Joseph seemed lost in thought. "It's true, I've also always dreamed of doing extraordinary things, so people would like me, to help others, to save humanity, to earn a place in history ... but I just drowned those ideas in drink and never got around to putting any into practice."

Anthony responded, "I've heard many alcoholics say that their problems began in childhood. A poorly adapted childhood. Emotional trauma in a dysfunctional home, for example, where there was a lack of stability that should have come from a mother and father; lack of love from the mother or father, or an excess from one or both. It's common to hear of an abusive mother being overprotective, for example, without being aware of it at all. There are many variations of this type of dysfunction."

Joseph interrupted, "Yes, that was my case. When I was little my mother called me Little Joey. She adored me, but didn't get along well with my father. Their arguments always affected me a lot, and I used to get scared when they were fighting. Anthony, you know so much about all this!"

"Not that much, really. Nobody probably knows very much for sure about the underlying reasons that some people can drink safely and others cannot. We sort of just draw conclusions based on hearing a great number of experiences that are repeated frequently. Once, I was at an open meeting attended by a lot of doctors, psychologists, and psychiatrists from around the world, interested in developing some sort of preventative medicine for alcoholism. My sponsor spoke at the meeting, and explained that, speaking only for himself, not in the name of A.A. as a whole, he thought that the only solution was to educate parents so that children were sure to grow up in happy, well-balanced families. He said that this should be the case from the very beginning of the child's life. Babies can experience trauma even in the womb, before birth. Once a certain 'line' is crossed and a person becomes an alcoholic, he will be an alcoholic forever.

"Joseph, my friend, this doesn't mean that all people who suffer psychological trauma end up being alcoholics, who lose control trying to remedy their pain with this bad medication, alcohol. But I have seen that when we tell our stories, many of us, without being aware of it, intuitively start by talking about a troubled childhood, from our earliest memories, and consider the family environment quite significant. This can't be pure coincidence. Many who never really thought about it before begin to slowly remember and comprehend, events and situations that help to explain behavior during childhood and adolescence, and a relationship that this has with their drinking experience.

"There may be alcoholics who grew up in balanced homes, and whose problem drinking stems from other causes, such as habit. After years of apparently normal drinking, a person can lose control of their consumption, little by little, or suddenly. I think alcoholism is one of the most bewildering diseases that exists. In any case, the fact is that there are people like you and me who cannot drink without experiencing all of the calamities we have known, while there are other people who can drink with no problem.

"I believe that alcoholism clearly demonstrates that psychosomatic illness is real — that psychological factors can affect the physical body. There is an example of two mothers who have lost babies. Because of the shock of the tragedy, both start drinking alcohol excessively. After a time, one of the mothers stops, and resumes drinking normally, but the other mother is unable to do that and slips into progressive alcoholic drinking. This second mother was a latent alcoholic, and the emotional trauma triggered her compulsion and 'allergy.' Sometimes alcoholism is compared to diabetes or an allergy to strawberries, but the consequences are different. Although A.A. professes no official opinion concerning medicine, psychology, or psychiatry, I think it is good to know a little about these things in order to better understand our disease.

"Back to the case of the overprotected child, for example. It is currently accepted that overprotection causes a child to lack coping skills for dealing with life. This results in conscious or unconscious fear and anxiety, which cause adrenalin surges. High levels of adrenalin eventually affect metabolism. With this altered metabolism, the ethanol in alcoholic drinks is transformed into a sort of 'morphine' substance. This is carried through the circulatory system to the brain, where it affects certain glands and nerve centers, 'numbing' inhibitions and the sense of right and wrong, relieving anxiety, and intensifying unrestrained instincts. When I was young and started drinking, I needed a drink before I could ask a girl to dance. I was shy, but the drink gave me the courage to do it. I think that was how I started. Little by little, without noticing what was happening, I slipped into the trap of relying on alcohol whenever I had to face anything that made me nervous. The alcohol gave me a sense of security and self-confidence. And it became more and more of a necessity, more and more frequently.

"I know some A.A. members who developed this compulsion to drink right from the start, but for me it developed over a period of years. For them, rather than just relieve anxiety, alcohol immediately intensified basic instincts such as aggressiveness, sex drive, and so on. It was as though they were transformed into different people with no restraint. When the compulsion to drink reaches this level, human willpower alone is not enough to rein in the runaway charger. Religion, education, and hard work are to no avail either. Even the fundamental instinct of self-preservation fails. Believe me, Joseph, the only solution is to seek a Power greater than oneself, or Higher Power, that can restore the alcoholic to sanity.

"This is our Second Step, the second phase of the A.A. program. When my sponsor and I talked about it, I felt a strong aversion toward this step. It was clear that it implied that I was crazy. I could not be sane if something had to restore me to sanity. My sponsor had a lot of experience, and he liked to demonstrate what he said with examples. He compared this to the idea of a hot stove. If you see a person touch a hot stove and get burned, and then touch it again and get burned again, and again and again for years, what do you think of that person? He's crazy. He's lost his common sense. Right? Well this is what we've done with alcohol. There's no denying it.

"Indeed, my behavior regarding drink, for many years, was incredibly insane, no doubt about it. I began to see that the solution could not come from within me, since it was me, my ego, my very character that was ill. Whenever I had counted on myself to fix my problems with drink, I had always failed. I was unable to avoid my own self-destructive behavior. And believe me I tried many times.

"The truth is, it is not very important why we got into this situation — childhood experience, circumstances, character defects, clouded spirit. The important thing now is to learn how to live happily, coping with life under any circumstances without having to use alcohol, and without causing others to suffer, either. *Live and let live*, is one of our slogans.

"A sponsee of mine always says that A.A. did not teach him how to stop drinking. He had done that many times. What A.A. taught him was how to not start drinking again. I would say it teaches us not to feel the

'need' to drink, or the need to escape. The program gives us the balance of character and the spiritual serenity we need in order to live. Spirituality is often confused with religion, but the two are different. I can be religious — involved in the principles, rites, and dogma of a religion — or not. The important thing for an alcoholic is to be able to believe in some form of force or Power that is greater than himself, and able to awaken his sleeping spirit.

"Another sponsee, who has lots of problems with the spiritual part of the program (I think she's afraid it's a religion), told me she still didn't know whether there was a God or much less Heaven, or whether God would one day open the gates of Heaven to let her in. What she did know was that for the moment A.A. had opened the gates of Hell, where she'd once lived, and let her out. I'm sure she will comprehend other things little by little."

"Anthony, I understand everything you are saying. And even though a lot of it seems impossible, somehow I have felt this kind of thing. But how can I be sure I will never drink again?"

"Look, Joseph. In A.A. we don't usually say 'always' or 'never.' Such terms may be difficult to trust. Instead we prefer to say 'just for today.' You know, we try to live one day at a time in everything we do. An entire life is really a succession of 24-hour periods, or even of present moments. As my sponsor used to say, 'Eternity is the present moment, and I want to live it intensely.' Nothing is more relative than time. Look at the difference between 15 minutes yesterday evening, and the past 15 minutes just now. We've been jabbering like parrots and the time has been flying."

Joseph nodded. "You're right."

Anthony went on. "They are two periods of time that seem incomparable in their intensity, even though by the hands of the clock they are the same. I think A.A. chose to focus on the present 24 hours to measure time for a simple reason, but don't take what I say as absolute. These are my own opinions. A.A. is its program. That includes the Twelve Steps, the Twelve Traditions, and the Twelve Concepts. My personal interpretation has evolved along with my sobriety, and will continue to evolve, or at least I hope so. As I was saying, for me the idea of living one day at a

time has to do with the fact that in this period the planet Earth makes one full turn on its axis. In this time we go through one full day: morning, afternoon, and night. If we can go through the distinctive periods of a day without drinking, the following day is much the same. We repeat something we have already done. It is easier because it is no longer so strange. Don't you think so?"

"It's true," Joseph agreed. "Today is easier than yesterday. Much easier."

"The same is true of this new way of living or philosophy of life suggested by A.A. It is easier to put into practice one day at a time. Furthermore, focusing on living in the day has a great advantage for someone with a lack of emotional maturity, like me. In this way I minimize the seeming eternity of yesterday and tomorrow. Not for all the gold in the world could I change a single action taken in the past. I have to accept the past as history, including my mistakes. On the other hand, tomorrow hasn't come yet. The future is really only in my imagination, which in my case has a tendency to be negative. If I had a bad experience in the past, I tend to think I will have bad experiences in the future. This is a tremendous mistake that conditions us to failure. Each moment is distinct. Everything changes, including us. This doesn't mean we shouldn't make plans, but we shouldn't be afraid or anxious about the future because of the past. Nothing paralyzes us more than fear. When I was drinking, I spent the day terrified of what might happen, and as a result I never did anything, never took action. I was blocked by anxiety and self-pity."

"Anthony, I understand you pretty well, but there are still things I can't figure out. How does a person actually achieve the self-assurance, the self-confidence that I see in you? You say time is relative. How can I get to be like you, without fears or obsessions?"

"Joseph, I think we are getting to the real starting point, where we can begin to talk in greater depth about the spiritual program of A.A. As you have read, the Twelfth Step of the A.A. program talks about having a spiritual awakening as the result of the steps."

"But what is a spiritual awakening? And how exactly does it happen?" asked Joseph.

"Take your time, Joseph. Don't try to rush things. Maybe you haven't noticed, but it's time for the meeting. I suggest we meet again tomorrow to continue talking. Today we have already talked about the First Step and the Second Step, although not in too much depth. I think tomorrow we could talk about the Third Step. And little by little we'll get into the rest of the A.A. program."

"OK. Tomorrow we can talk about the Third Step. I'll read up on it after the meeting. Hey, Anthony. You are my sponsor, right?"

"Well, that depends on you," Anthony replied. "If you want me to be, I gladly accept. Strange as it may sound, the A.A. sponsor and sponsee help each other. Both benefit from the experiences shared. When I help you, you are also helping me a lot. Seeing you helps me relive my first days in A.A. You help me see that what I have heard since I was young is true, that in this world the more you give the more you receive. This is one of the most significant truths that I have learned in A.A., and there are many ways to give. Sometimes the simplest and least apparent are the most powerful. Especially one: Love, with a capital 'L.'"

"Anthony, I mean sponsor, do you suppose that I will be like you, sober and serene and have sponsees one day?"

"Well, dear sponsee, like you, when I arrived, I was like a poorly mixed cocktail — bitter, with too much gin. Being emotional isn't a bad thing, but being hyper-emotional, or like in my case, being emotionally immature, is indeed a bad thing. I believe that A.A. will, one day at a time, correct the mix and make you into a good cocktail. But let's get to the meeting. That's the most important thing for the time being."

"I sought my soul, but could not see it.
I sought God, but He escaped me.
I sought my companions in suffering
And found all three."

Anonymous (heard in a meeting)

SHAKY JOE OR JOSEPH TALKING ABOUT THE THIRD STEP

As agreed, Anthony and Joseph met again at the café where they had talked the day before.

"Hi, Joseph! How have your third 24 hours gone?"

"Pretty good. I've had a better appetite. And I didn't sleep so bad. Felix came over last night drunker than usual and looking for trouble, but I didn't pay any attention to him. I really liked the meeting last night. I felt like I was finally beginning to really understand what people were saying. I was happy to see Esther again. What an extraordinary woman! She seems to know all about the program, and speaks so well. Plus she's very pretty!"

Joseph looked away from Anthony and blushed a little. Anthony looked directly at Joseph and, after taking a drag on his cigarette, exhaled and began to speak slowly.

"Joseph, as your sponsor I have several responsibilities. In addition to talking about our views on the program, I must give you advice about certain obstacles and dangers that a newcomer to A.A. might encounter. You are not only new to A.A. but you are also a young man in your prime. That's lucky, for sure. You're only 27, and have most of your life ahead of you still. However you also are certainly inexperienced in many ways. Under certain circumstances a redirection of emotions called transference occurs — in this case, one person is attracted to or falls in love with another person in A.A. This is quite common, and perhaps perfectly legitimate, but also dangerous. People coming to our fellowship often have a great need for affection. And with their pockets full of love — the same love carried around during their drinking days, trying to find the partner of their dreams. I like to say that when I was drinking I was a love bum. When we stop drinking alcohol, we are often left with some of its vapors, even for quite a long time, causing us to see 'mirages.' I don't know whether you knew, but the word *alcohol* comes from the Arabic term meaning 'the illusionist,' referring to how the substance makes people see and believe in illusions as though they were real.

"My sponsor told me about an experience that had been related to him by his own sponsor, who was one of the pioneers of A.A. on the other side of the Atlantic, some 27 years ago. He had been welcomed by a group of American A.A.'s in Paris. Some of them had been founding members of our fellowship along with Bill and Bob.

"When he had just a few weeks of, let's say abstinence rather than sobriety — we'll talk about the difference between the two conditions later — a tall and very attractive young woman named Elizabeth came to the group. She was a British actress who, like you and I, had come to A.A. in search of a way to save herself from alcoholism. Without being much aware of what he was doing, the man in question approached her and began talking and explaining the basics of the program, and giving suggestions to help avoid drinking in the beginning — you know, like phoning someone before taking a drink, keeping busy, and so on.

"He was young, like you are now. When the meeting ended, he went with her for coffee to continue talking, and then offered to drive her home. Clearly the phenomenon of transference was taking hold. The man's sponsor noticed what was happening and took him aside, saying he needed to speak to him urgently. The man's disappointment was evident, and it was only the high regard for his sponsor that made him accept that a different member of the group should accompany Elizabeth.

"Later, over a cup of coffee, his sponsor spoke to him: 'Listen, if you are a "Don Juan," that's your own business. There are 300,000 beautiful girls in Paris out there waiting for you. But the ones in A.A. are like your sisters. They have come here looking for help, and are just as desperate as you were when you arrived. You give the impression that you know about A.A. and can help. But having only a few weeks of abstinence yourself, you run the risk of misrepresenting the program, and perhaps distancing these newcomers from A.A. forever. And that would be a crime, believe me. I'm not judging you. I know that your intentions are good, at least on a conscious level. But without seeing it, you could fall into a trap, and the first victim would be you. If it were conscious, it would be like the priest using his frock to seduce a parishioner, or the psychiatrist using his white coat to seduce a patient. The sponsor is there to help his sponsees, but also to defend the group and newcomers from the inexperience of the

sponsees, who still can have instincts run wild. It's not that I'm against all sentimental relationships between A.A.'s — there have been many successful marriages in A.A. But experience has shown that it's prudent to wait until both members have achieved a long period of sobriety. Some of these marriages are examples of love, comprehension, and happiness for the world."

"But Joseph, if I remember right, we didn't meet today to talk about transference. We were going to talk about the Third Step, and I think the best thing would be for me to continue telling you things that my sponsor told me.

"In light of his difficulty to open himself to any idea of a Higher Power, and the need for simple examples and images, his sponsor had said this to him, 'Look, you remind me of the guy who was drowning in the sea, and when they threw him a life preserver he refused it saying he would accept only a blue one with green stripes, as if he were in a position to be choosy.' And in another example, 'You are like a shipwrecked person in a lifeboat in the middle of a storm, being hit on all sides by wind and waves, and tossing about wildly. If you want what we in A.A. have found, I suggest you take the rudder and aim toward us, where we have landed on a peaceful and serene beach. We can tell you where there are rocks, reefs, and sand bars, but can do nothing else for you. You can aim the rudder yourself, but you cannot fill your sails with wind. You need to believe in and trust a Higher Power, and wait for it to fill your sails. You should put as much faith as possible in that Power. Believe me, if you are honest, your sails will fill with wind and you will make it to our beach — to us. And you will find, as we have, the sobriety, serenity, and inner harmony that will give you happiness.' Something or someone must have filled my sponsor's sails. He's been sober for 27 years in A.A. and is happy.

"Now I'm convinced of the necessity of believing in a Power greater than myself. Counting on that Power gives me a sense of liberation from my own limitations — freedom from that prison of superstitions and fears and lack of perspective.

"Having a scientific background, it was difficult for me to believe in anything that could not be demonstrated. Today I believe that no pride

is worse than intellectual pride. One day it occurred to me that when I took the subway I never doubted that if I followed the arrows and signs I would certainly reach my destination. Thousands of people did it every day. So why couldn't I have the same confidence in A.A.?

"Millions of people had come to live sober and happy lives following the indications suggested in the A.A. program. Yes. Despite my pseudo-scientific indecision, I finally decided to turn my will and my life over to the care of a Higher Power that I call God. As long as humans have been on Earth, man has looked up at the infinite heavens and has had to believe in a Higher Power and accept God ... otherwise he loses his sanity.

"I think an alcoholic like me is a person who has desperately been seeking a God. And curiously, the word *spiritual* has the same root as the word *spirits*, relating to alcoholic drink. Somehow I think it was precisely my need for spirituality and being poorly channeled that caused me to get lost in spirits, namely drink, drink, drink.

"Most A.A.'s know the story of the American who went to see Carl Gustav Jung for help to stop drinking. After a long and fruitless treatment, the eminent psychologist told him he thought his illness had no cure, but that perhaps a life-changing vital spiritual experience could allow him to live without drinking.

"I think it is presumptuous of humans to want to explain God. It's like trying to explain trigonometry to a dog. If I were able to comprehend and describe God, well, I wouldn't be far from *being* God.

"Today, anyone who has any knowledge of science has heard of the Big Bang theory. This theory, supported by the theory of relativity, affirms that the universe originated with an explosion that took place about 14 billion years ago. Investigation suggests that everything originated at that moment — time, space, energy, matter, and, later, life and intelligence. Evidence for this theory is seen in the movements of galaxies, background microwave radiation, exponential increase in expansion rate, and so on. This can all be explained scientifically, and calculated back to the moment of the explosion, when the entire universe was created ... out of nothing? It is clear that this theory will serve to increase a believer's faith in God, seemingly explaining the particulars of the moment of creation

described figuratively in Genesis. An agnostic will take pleasure in the scientific experiments and logic that continue to take man further and further in his quest to describe the universe. One cannot deny that the similarities between scientific and Biblical descriptions are intriguing. And God said, Let there be light: and there was light. ... and God divided the light from the darkness.' Is the similarity purely by chance? It is an interesting 'coincidence,' to say the least.

"While sharing at a meeting, a mathematics professor turned to the others and asked, 'Do you feel you get more than you give or give more than you get in the meeting?' Everyone responded that they felt they got more than they gave. The professor pointed out that if everyone was getting more than they were giving, something or someone must be adding the difference. He finished by saying, 'No, friends, in A.A. two plus two does not equal four.' How many times at meetings have we all felt that there is some sort of halo over us or some sort of magic in the room that unites us and makes us feel like we are in another dimension.

"That doesn't mean I would expect God to save me from a charging bull. No, I would scramble up a tree as fast as I could. I don't believe God is a bullfighter waving his cape.

"My dear Joseph, I believe that A.A. and its program arose from the founders' profound understanding that no amount of human willpower could conquer the self-destructive force within the alcoholic. This is why we have to seek a Power greater than ourselves, and it is the reason for the Twelve Steps.

"The practice of one or another religion depends largely on the chance event of where a person is born. Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and so on, predominate in different parts of the world.

"Here's another anecdote told by my sponsor. 'In the early days when A.A. was not very well organized in doing Twelfth Step¹¹ work, a few

11. The Twelfth Step reads, "Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs."

telephone numbers were left at the church where we met in case anyone called for information. That's how my sponsor, who was skeptical about believing in a Higher Power, happened to get a phone call. It was about 5 p.m., and a bartender on the other end of the line said, "Hey, we've got a customer here who's in pretty bad shape. He gave us this number. What should I do with him?" My sponsor told the bartender to put the drunk into a taxi and send him to the corner of X Street and Y Avenue. "Don't worry, I'll pay the cab," he added.

"Still new, he hadn't thought about the fact that at that time of day, at that intersection, the traffic, both cars and pedestrians, would be terrible. He felt guilty. It was one of his first chances to do Twelfth Step work. Just when he was becoming desperate in his attempt to find the taxi that would be bringing his future A.A., he noticed that lots of people were watching someone cross the street against the light. His face was bloody and his coat was in shreds. With a few spectacular near misses and screeching brakes, the man made his way through the honking traffic unharmed. There was no doubt that there is a God watching out for drunks. But in that moment, our young A.A. was overcome with embarrassment, and instead of going to meet his brother-in-suffering he hid behind a tree (which he thereafter called the "tree of shame"). He felt completely paralyzed, not daring to approach the wretched being. The other pedestrians moved out of the drunk's way, giving him looks of pity, contempt, and disgust. Then something amazing happened. Eyes half closed, the drunk staggered and lurched forward, like a robot guided by an unseen force, directly toward the very tree behind which our A.A. man was hiding. As if by magic, the A.A. lost his shyness, and putting his arm around the other's shoulders, said, "It's OK. You've arrived now, too."

"This experience was decisive in helping our A.A. to comprehend and accept the Third Step. That evening, he took Emilio, the man in the shredded coat, to a meeting, where he shared about it. "What extraordinary radar guided Emilio, drunk and bleeding and eyes closed, through such a crowd, directly over to put his head on my shoulder?"

"Since then, our A.A. guy has believed that there is a Force or Higher Power, which he calls God of Love. A newcomer had taken his last drink, and another, sober a little longer, had been able to understand and accept

our spiritual program and turn his will and his life over to the care of a Power greater than himself.

"For me, Joseph, the important thing about the Third Step is to understand that I am ill, and that in some way my ego seems to want to destroy me. I must accept that I cannot count on myself, or my ego, for recovery from my illness, because it is my ego that is the root of the illness, and would consequently lead me to make decisions that are bad for me. I am certain that this is why ever since I put my will and my life into the hands of God, as I understand Him, I have not had the desire to drink, which would be self-destruction for an alcoholic."

Joseph interjected, "Anthony, even if you don't want to hear it, you can't imagine how much you're helping me!"

"Look, Joseph, our knowledge or 'capital' comes from our past. We invest it today so that tomorrow the maximum number of people will get the greatest possible benefit. The truth is that we can give only what we ourselves have already been given by others. Without the experiences accumulated over all these years we would be limited to our goodwill and imagination. But the past cannot be invented or made up. That's why I always say that you shouldn't thank me for what I might say. It is only the result of thousands of experiences and floods of tears.

"Like yesterday, our time has flown. Tomorrow, if you want, we can talk about the Fourth Step. To finish up for today, I want to read you something written by my sponsor's sponsor — he'd be like your 'great-grand-sponsor.' It's his personal view on the profound significance of A.A. in the world. It has made me think a lot. This is his somewhat unusual perspective on A.A.:

"The miraculous thing about this world is the "will to survive" in the face of, and in constant battle with thousands of forms of destruction or self-destruction. The stories of all A.A.'s in recovery start with a need to find a solution to a tremendous problem of self-destruction. I believe that the true nature of our fellowship has depths that we don't even suspect yet. We are lacking in the perspective of time. Each time there is a great danger or threat to humanity and its instinct to survive, humanity itself produces a solution through the least likely of channels. For alco-

holics, the beginning of such a solution took place in 1935 when two men met and decided to help each other survive by sharing their experience, strength, and hope. When I got to A.A. 25 years later, there were 200,000 of us who had adopted this new way of life (180,000 in the United States and 20,000 in the rest of the world). Today, 27 years after that, there are more or less 2 million of us. This exponential growth allows us to project that in another 25 years there may be 20 million, and by 2035, a century after the beginning of A.A., there may be as many as 200 million alcoholics in recovery.¹²

"Oh yes, I know, we should stay in the day, take it one day at a time, but that doesn't stop us from recognizing that all of us are still pioneers in a movement of shared love, a marvelous current of life. With our simple program and principles — "Live and let live," "First things first," "Easy does it," and so on — a veritable revolution is occurring in the world, at the only level, in my opinion, where this is possible today: at the individual level. We don't have religious dogma or rites — only the suggestion of acceptance and an understanding of a God of Love. Each person is free to have his own concept of God. The arrival of Christianity in this world 2,000 years ago was not by mere chance. It was thanks to the humblest and most unfortunate people who began converting the first Christians to a new philosophy of love and life, precisely when the Romans were ruling with brute force, materialism, and sexual perversion. The world was in danger! The expansion of Christianity was so rapid because of the vital need at the time and because it was transmitted widely by soldiers of the Roman Legion to all the colonies of the Mare Nostrum (Mediterranean) — what they considered the whole world at the time.

12. Although A.A. does not keep records of membership, estimates indicate that the number of members in 2010 was about 3 million. Anthony's sponsor's sponsor was certainly over-optimistic because of the rapid growth of A.A. during its first years. In recent years more than 30 other fellowships for recovery from other addictions based on the A.A. program of twelve steps, as well as other treatment programs, have proliferated in response to the recognition of alcoholism (and other addictions) as a disease — this recognition is largely, though not exclusively, thanks to A.A. These factors affect the numbers, and should be taken into account by the reader, and I hope will help excuse the excessive projection of this sponsor.

"Things happening today bear a strong resemblance to what happened in the past, and cannot be pure coincidence. We are seeing the emergence of very real insanity and self-destruction that is threatening the entire planet. We see a frightening escalation of increasingly sophisticated military weapons that are also increasingly difficult to control, wars everywhere, the world divided into factions that hate each other, terrorist attacks, innocent hostages for causes they do not represent or understand, genocide, young people using all kinds of drugs (including alcohol, which is one of the most destructive), new diseases such as AIDS (the transmission of which is also closely linked to drug use), and so on.

"To understand all of this danger and disaster, we must go back more than half a century. What happened? A new spiritual movement began with a simple and beautiful philosophy of love and life — humble and merely suggested. This movement spread around the world in half a century. Carried by whom? By the modern-day legionnaires, American soldiers — the army of the empire of our time. These are the men and women who have taken A.A. with them to military bases and occupied zones. This is even more extraordinary considering that the people who started this movement were the most humble and unfortunate of souls. A.A. was spearheaded by the very people who were destroying themselves with alcohol. The alcoholics. Us! I believe we should not take ourselves too seriously, but should also not underestimate the importance of our fellowship or its marvelous message of life and love.

"A lovely section in a piece of unofficial literature¹³ speaks of our designation as carriers of the message of recovery to alcoholics who are still suffering. It says, more or less, that if God had wanted scholars, experts, or particularly good people to pass the message, He could have chosen from among a great many, and they surely would not have been us. But we are the ones who have been chosen because we have suffered terribly and have been self-destructive, sometimes subconsciously and sometimes consciously. This horrible suffering has afforded us tolerance,

13. In A.A. we consider unity to be of extreme importance. Literature approved by the General Service Conference is considered official, and representative of the fellowship. Nonetheless there are other writings that are widely read and rarely questioned.

acceptance, and love. You could say we have returned from that place of self-destruction toward which humanity is heading. I believe we are part of a great movement of love and life that is capable of influencing the destiny of all humanity, and this gives us an immense responsibility. I feel privileged to belong to this vital and liberating movement, even though I had to suffer and go through difficulties in order to do so.

"Dear friends we belong to the most expensive 'club' in the world, where the price of admission is paid with the currency of suffering, and where the entrance doorway is so low that it's necessary to stoop down to the floor with humility to get in, leaving pride and vanity outside."

"So, Joseph, what do you think of what your great-grandsponsor wrote? As I said before, this perspective makes me think a lot. No, I don't think that everything came from nothing and is going nowhere. I also refuse to believe that my life and my disastrous past have no significance and serve no purpose. Despite everything we have talked about, I really do not know why I drank so destructively for so many years, but now I do believe I know what purpose it can serve: so that I can help others who are still suffering from this illness."

SHAKY JOE OR JOSEPH TALKING ABOUT THE FOURTH STEP

Again, as agreed on the previous day, sponsor and sponsee met — this time to talk about the Fourth Step: "Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves."

"Well, Joseph, today we're going to talk about one of the least comfortable steps. I think that the best thing I can do to encourage you to do the Fourth Step is have you listen to a cassette tape that I recorded of one of our members, Michel L. (the Basque), who unfortunately is no longer with us in this world. Many of us are deeply indebted to him for the example he set in living the A.A. life, his courage, his extraordinary intelligence, his dignity, his faith, and the confidence he always had in our fellowship, until his last day. Let's listen."

Searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves

When I came to Alcoholics Anonymous, I was completely incapable of knowing who I was ... who I really and truly was. I wasn't able to even ask myself that question because it scared me. I was maybe somehow afraid of finding out that this character I loved so much, my beloved me, was perhaps really worthless. Worth nothing at all. This vacant feeling inside caused me panic. I had felt it in moments of uncertainty or frankness, which never lasted more than seconds. I avoided the feeling and fled from it, not only with alcohol but also by clinging to the various concepts of self that were given me by my surroundings, family, friends, neighbors, and society as a whole — my cultural and social origins, nationality, race, religion, name, present circumstances, diplomas, beliefs, past ... all of these elements defined me, but I wasn't satisfied. A person is not great because his name is Bonaparte. Of course not. There has been only one Napoleon Bonaparte in history, and he would have been a great man even with a different name. The man comes before all the labels that are put on him. But I clung to the labels, and became obsessed with them. What does so-and-so think of me? What does so-and-so say about me? What will they say if I do such-and-such? My concept of good and bad was based not on my insides but rather on what was around me. Also, I felt I needed to be the best at everything and in every place. I was appalled by even the smallest criticisms, wanting to eliminate them immediately, but criticism became increasingly frequent and severe because of my foolish behavior due to alcohol. I lashed out in attempts to prove that the criticism was unfounded. But I was a farce. My life was a false front, or, as I call it today, a secondhand existence.

Completely unable to comprehend the idea of looking at myself, I lived through others and for others. That is surely one of the main reasons I had so much trouble accepting the program. One terrifying sentence from the book rang continuously in my head: "Those who do not recover are ... usually men and women who are constitutionally incapable of being honest with themselves."

At the end of my drinking, all of the good social labels that I had once had were falling away, and I was being left with only the bad ones. Others scorned me, and finally I scorned myself as well. But I still didn't see my outrageous behavior — insults, fights, thievery, and so on. I was breaking the law, but if that was outrageous behavior, it was only because the police and judges said so. And all of the bad things I'd done to my family were only bad because they said so. Sure I had moments of guilt and regrets, but I never thought to ask myself exactly when and how I had done wrong. What had

I done against my own conscience? What was it precisely that I didn't like about what I had done, or about myself? With such a lack of self-awareness, despite all the laws and social norms you will never have morals. In any case, laws depend on circumstances. Indeed, in times of war, killing the enemy is not only permitted, it is encouraged and rewarded. But I don't know whether it would be good for me to kill a man without asking myself some questions, regardless of the circumstances.

In short, if I had a problem with alcohol, it was because the doctors and my friends told me so, and not because I had seen and recognized a problem in myself. Such blindness is perhaps difficult to comprehend, but one mustn't forget that I felt alcohol was helping me. With alcohol I was able to have moments of relief, of not feeling anything and not thinking anything and not being anything. But these moments were becoming fewer and farther between. And the price of escaping from myself was first and foremost a growing dependency on my relationship with the means of escape — in this case, alcohol. But there can be other means of escape. Even another person, one's spouse for example, can serve as an escape from self. Secondly, along with increasing dependency comes increasing fear. I don't use A.A. as an escape. It is thanks to my Fourth Step in particular, that I can say I that I do not have a harmful dependency on A.A., because instead of increasing, my fears are decreasing. I have no fear of A.A. or its members. They know what I mean.

When I came to Alcoholics Anonymous I didn't truly have a desire to stop drinking. What I really wanted was for the screams, the criticism, and the punishment that I had been suffering for a long time to stop. In other words, I wanted to renew my image, to again become a person who was seen as good. Under those conditions, you can imagine my disappointment when my friends talked about a thorough examination of conscience. Having always sought escape, I had no idea how to even begin such a thing. If someone had asked me, for example, "Do you think you are prideful?" I would have immediately recalled my mother or father saying, "Michel, you are too prideful." A memory or image is not really anything. The only thing that really counts is the immediate perception, the direct view of what is happening right now in this very moment.

I had already been familiar with many other spiritual programs, starting with the religion I'd been brought up in. None of them had worked for me or slowed my fall into the grips of alcohol, not even a little. Today I think I understand this failure very well, and I am now able to rediscover spiritual programs that I had once found and then abandoned, one after another. Now I can see them through sober eyes and a way of life suggested by the A.A.

program. What was the problem before? I had been a collector, searching feverishly through all the books I could find about spirituality. I looked for as many spiritual ideas and experiences as I could in my travels and in my daily life. Whenever I found some exquisite pearl of wisdom, I added it to my collection, thinking I was building up a real treasure. Everything seemed to fit into my collection regardless of where it came from historically or geographically — antiquity, Middle Ages, Renaissance, the Orient, the Middle East, the West, and so on. I ended up accumulating a significant amount of historical, religious, and philosophical material. But that was the only benefit I got from my efforts. Whenever there arose a conflict between reality and my beliefs, my collection of material served for nothing more than to protect my ego, allowing me to make interpretations in its defense.

Today I do not pretend to have overcome this defense of ego. It is a continuous challenge. A person is never cured of ego, just as he is never cured of alcoholism. But I have come to the following conclusion, which, for me, is the introduction to a new life: When there is a conflict between reality and me, there are not thirty-three possibilities, but only three.

The first possibility is that this reality is inadmissible, unacceptable, and should not exist, and that I am right. My ego does not permit even a suspicion of truth in it. This is the voice of rejection, and also rebellion, and escape in any direction. This is, for example, the alcoholic who swears he will never drink again, when he is already picturing the nearest bar in his mind. This is the religious man who proclaims his vows of chastity because he desires a woman. "No, I won't drink." "No, I don't have sexual desire." But the desire is still there, and the person will have to shout ever louder trying to drown it out. Through this kind of thinking I have gotten into absurd and incredible situations. In my opinion, this is the route of personal willpower, domineering pride, and of the all-powerful and immovable ego, dictator over everything that moves. The one who follows this line of thinking prefers strong character, and believes that Truth, with a capital T, is written somewhere with sacred letters of stone and fire and that no one has the right to interpret them any way other than his. For he has of course understood the truth and knows where happiness lies for all humanity. Freedom? To do what? This attitude can be impressive. I know from personal experience — from being that way. But the Fourth Step allowed me to discover in myself what this excessive pride was covering up. What made me want to impose my truth, what I called THE truth, on other people, on the rest of the world, was nothing but an aspect of the fear, mentioned earlier, of finding out I was worthless. It is also rejection and fear of life on life's terms. An attempt

to stop its incessant, seemingly haphazard movement, both progressive and regressive. I would have loved to find an immovable truth, an absolute certainty, to which I could cling. I would have loved it if progress were constant and lineal instead of this apparent mayhem.

Unfortunately I have had to admit that if truth had been discovered by someone or dictated by God, I would have had to rediscover it and live it in my own way along a long and treacherous path. My friends and spiritual teachers, subjected to the same conditions, could walk alongside me, but I would never find anyone to carry me, or any book that would explain exactly what I should do in any given situation. Freedom is a terrible responsibility, and a double trap. Relinquish it and obey a master — one who knows the truth — who offers a small amount of serene happiness, or accept it and take it from others to offer them a small amount of serene happiness. The first option turns you into a slave. The results are opposite, but the path is actually the same: relinquishing freedom in the name of security. I cannot afford to do this. It would lead me to drink. Both methods lead to sadness. Not joy. The small amount of serene happiness is the opposite of joy.

The second possibility is, perhaps, indecision with respect to my conflict with reality. "I am nobody and can do nothing. Everything is predetermined destiny." This is the voice of fatalism, of submission, and self-degradation. And really it is just another form of defending the ego. I have also been one of the alcoholics who say, "I'm no good." "I've lost everything." "You're right, condemn me, I can't even go to A.A." Under the surface, this can be understood to mean, "Leave me alone so I can drink in peace." This is only another way of expressing one's own inadequacy, but it also allows the alcoholic to avoid confrontation with self. He clings to a social definition, outside himself. His attitude of complacency, abjection, and servility is a form of false humility that I call self-humiliation. How often have I been a fake of this type in order to continue drinking! The person who takes this fatalistic role makes a good partner for the person who takes the domineering prideful stance discussed first. One rules, the other obeys. One is the protector, the other, the protected. It is a case of the blind leading the paralyzed. In the end, the two find themselves elbow to elbow at the same bar.

The Fourth Step served to show me my own tendency to yield to a human authority for which the desire to give orders was greater than the desire to help. A simple rationalization allowed me to think I could keep drinking as long as I maintained a minimal guise of agreement with the opinions and obedience to the rules of the dominating personality. It is very comforting to think that the other person possesses the "truth" — and consequently also

one's own truth. Acting with this form of unquestioning obedience, a person quashes his own impulses, desires, and personal resistance, rather than choosing to look at them. The other person is given charge. I submit to him or her. I obey this or that moral code, dogma, or command. I'll be fine as long as I stay in line.

Is this a frank recognition of what we are inside? Will I not find my neighbor attractive because of a moral code that prohibits that I look at her? It is better to accept that I have the temptation. If I refuse to recognize it because it is officially forbidden, the temptation will just become greater. I, in turn, become either a blind hypocrite, or a person tormented by unending inner conflict between what I should be and what I am.

I should at all times, and in all cases, try to avoid this horrible situation of conflict, so well exemplified during my drinking days, when my right hand held the glass, ignoring what my left hand was doing — swearing never to drink again. In all areas of my life today, I must try to avoid returning to this behavior.

Finally there is a third possibility. I compare it to the Universal Law of Gravitation. In space, any two bodies attract each other. Earth attracts the Moon, and the Moon attracts Earth. Each of the two bodies experiences this attraction. The force of attraction is proportional to the mass, or in my analogy, to the importance of each body. Everyone knows that if I threw an iron out the window, it will fall and hit the ground. But few people know, or stop to think, that the ground has also moved (albeit imperceptibly) toward the iron. And if another nutcase on the exact opposite side of the planet threw an object of the exact same mass, from the exact same height, at the exact same time, the movement of the ground would be cancelled out. However, that would not change the fact that the attraction between the planet and the objects is mutual. Why this comparison? Because I think that when there is conflict between reality and me, or between another person and me, both will change. There may be one thing that needs to change, and another that needs to accept, but when I truly accept something, the feeling of obligation disappears. To accept the things I cannot change, and to change the things I can — that's our Serenity Prayer, which adds the wisdom to know the difference. This wisdom begins with the Fourth Step.

How do I distinguish between what I can change and what I cannot if I do not know my weaknesses and my strengths, my inabilities and my possibilities? This third way of dealing with conflict takes into account that in each situation there can be movement in more than one direction. There are alternatives. My best strategy is to become aware of the alternatives.

It may be simpler to explain with the example of a train. We usually say that we take a train, referring to how we make a decision and take action. We could also say that it is the train that picks us up and takes us to a different place. Really, in order to travel by train, we must first get onto the train and then let it take us. If we lived with this awareness in everything we do, I think we would no longer feel sadness, even regarding death. Even death would change for us, becoming something more active. It comes for us, but if we truly want it in our hearts, we accept it. It remains to be seen whether death, taken in this way, really even exists in the way we usually think of it, but that's another story.

For me, the A.A. program is revolutionary, on a personal, individual level — not coming from a new philosophical or religious system. In my experience, no new system designed to save society, the world, humanity, or the soul could do anything for me if I didn't practice the simple program of Alcoholics Anonymous.

My non-alcoholic friends may find salvation, peace, or fulfillment by helping others, or at least it seems that way. But not me. I must start by taking care of myself. My revolution must happen not on a societal scale, but at my own individual level.

The grand altruistic and romantic inclinations that overpowered me when I had drunk enough came to nothing. They served only to briefly distract me from my inner desperation, still in search of a label that was really created by others.

The Fourth Step constitutes the crux of the only revolution that is possible for me. I must look at how I reproach this society into which I was born. This society that has seen me grow up, and on which I depend. Its hidden and blatant aggressions, flagrant injustice, coldness, hypocrisy, mistakes, wars, miseries, debauchery, unbridled materialism, sexual obsessions, and the loneliness it has caused me. For all this, the A.A. program gives me a simple solution: to begin by changing my own intolerance, aggressiveness, brutality, coldness, obsessions, fears, and incessant conflicts that I so readily reproach in others or in my own construed identity, in which I seek refuge. The only way to help others and begin to change anything is to change myself.

If I perceive here and now, in this moment, the tendencies I have and how they contribute to my destruction or growth, I begin to feel an energy that I do not hesitate to call revolutionary. I feel somehow guided, despite myself, toward freedom and simplicity.

When I take a moral inventory of myself, I do not try to decide whether this or that part of my character should be removed, changed, or retained and developed. I don't try to make it look better. I don't choose to be this way or that. What is, is. If I dispute the existence of my character traits as they are, I am not accepting myself as I am, but choosing to deny reality.

The only means I have for recognizing that tendency known as the subconscious — which could be dangerous for me if I ignore it — is to quiet my thinking. Then, in the ensuing silence, things that have been hidden or submerged beneath the surface can rise and become visible. Thinking is an expression of my ego, generally based on past experiences and projections of these into speculation about the future. Objectivity regarding the true present moment is difficult because of the subjective intimate relationship of my thinking with my ego.

My thinking, conscious mind tells me that I have done this and that ... that my experience demonstrates that I am like this or like that ... or that I can change and be otherwise ... that if I were like that, I could do such-and-such ... that I have tendencies to develop like this, which will lead me to whatever. How can I see and listen to the true me with all that chatter? If I am thinking, I lose the inner silence I need. This is compounded by the fact that I am observing myself, being the observer and the observed. I am the object of my own observation. My ego distances itself so as not to get involved, to not be disturbed and be able to continue being the center that gets stronger and stronger. Thought brings dissociation at all levels. I dissociate in order to compare. Compare myself with others. I am more this way than that guy ... less that way than that other guy. Or compare myself with myself. Before, I was more than that guy. In the future I want to be more than that other guy. Thought separates time into past, present, and future. But when the ego is not the center, eternity is right now.

For example: If I start taking my inventory with the question, "Do I have fear?" my thoughts immediately respond by looking for fear as defined by society — because fear taken in this way is external. My thoughts look to the past for help. When the bouncer at the Whiskey a Go-go came after me to throw me out of the club, I was afraid. When the boss opened my desk drawer and found an open bottle of wine, I was afraid. On the other hand, when I jumped into the water to rescue a drowning child, or when I discovered a thief on the balcony, I was not afraid. Not able to understand the discrepancy, my brain tries to analyze. It seems I am afraid of some things and not others. What am I afraid of? Punches? Loneliness? Not being loved? Losing status? Things get complicated again. Back at such-and-such a time I

was alone and it didn't bother me. But when my girlfriend left me I was very much afraid of being alone. By rationalizing, dissecting, classifying, naming, declassifying, starting over, reanalyzing, and on and on, it gets messy. For what? For nothing. Even if I split my brain apart, if I write pages and pages of inventory, I will never be able to understand for certain whether or why I have fear, because when socially predefined, the idea of fear means little or nothing. It is external to me. Whether I answer yes or no, there will always be a little gremlin inside me saying the contrary. On the other hand, if I am able to cut out the thoughts about past and future, and find that inner silence of the present moment, I can *become* my fear ... I can *become* my resentments, my anxiety, my obsession to drink, or my desire to smack somebody.

The same is the case with positive tendencies. If I get a feeling of immense satisfaction, of fulfillment, and I dissect it, analyze it, name it, the feeling vanishes. Who hasn't had this experience? Taking a walk in the mountains, fresh air, clear blue skies, a panoramic view, cluster of little houses around a church in the distance, everything peaceful, calm and beautiful, and then I think, "Oh, how happy I am!" And with these words, this thought, something begins to disappear. From that moment, anxiousness begins to creep in. I begin to analyze the situation. How long has it been since I've felt this good? Will it last? No, this can't last because it is already going away; My ego is taking over, and with it, my thinking.

I am observing my happiness, asking questions, interrogating, and the inner noise is getting louder. The turmoil of thought is drowning out the pure experience. Fortunately, if I allow myself, I can go back — well not exactly back, because that would be returning to the past — but I can again find a state of inner silence.

We are alone, miserable, and anxious. The boss has let us know he is not satisfied with our work. We ask ourselves a thousand questions. Haven't we done our best? Are we really incapable? Or is the boss trying to find a reason to fire us because he's having financial problems? And on and on. We struggle with questions and answers and paranoia, and the looming specter of getting fired at the end of the month. What will we do then? We are gripped with fear as if by a crab in our guts. We can't sleep at night, and the next day we are tired and afraid, and even less able to think clearly and perform well. Our thoughts only aggravate the situation. If we stop to look inside ourselves, without dissociating into observer and observed, without asking whether the boss's judgment was right or wrong, without judging ourselves, without using past experience to decide who we are or whether what has just happened should have happened or not, without clouding ourselves with the

future or the end of the month ... if we stop focusing on the crab in our guts, the fear that grips us in this moment, if we stop analyzing it and trying to name it or explain it, and without trying to make it go away, it will go away. The fear is there, and we *are* this fear. We don't even call it fear. The word "fear" is nothing but a word. It is better to see the emotion for what it is, like a movement inside us, something we feel, something we live, something we *are*. Then, curiously, inexplicably, the fear is gone. It disappears. The same is true of the obsession to drink. We stop struggling. We accept the obsession or the fear or whatever, and it disappears.

Trying to analyze amid the cacophony of thoughts uses up all of my energy. If I don't make myself one (figuratively and literally) with my instincts and tendencies, I cannot do my Fourth Step.

I once attended a meeting where the main topic of discussion was whether our moral inventory should be done in writing. Many people argued with vehemence that it should indeed be done in writing because that is what the Big Book says. Trying other methods would be dangerous. I believe that this kind of argument comes from a desire to see others follow in one's own footsteps. This tendency does not harm me as long as I do not use it to escape from myself. Personally I believe that there are as many paths for following the A.A. program as there are alcoholics in recovery. What about people who don't know how to write? To try to impose one particular method of doing a Fourth Step is to enter into sectarianism and exclusion. The authors of the Big Book give us their personal experience and suggestions. It is not through curses and divisions and distinctions that we help the alcoholic who is still suffering, still rolling in the gutter, or how we help ourselves. For me it is clear. If I try to give orders through threats, something I have done frequently in my life, I am trying to escape from myself.

It was my feeling during the meeting that some people were avoiding the Fourth Step by focusing on rules. A few months later, this feeling was confirmed, unfortunately, in the most awful way. The person who had been most forceful, most dogmatic, had relapsed. I need to write in order to solidify my thoughts, and I did my moral inventory in writing. I also keep a diary. This way I have a fragment of inventory every day. But I don't think the writing is as valuable as the lucidity of the moment. I think it is even somewhat detracting. But I write because if I didn't I wouldn't have the discipline to meditate. In any case, my moments of greatest happiness have not come through writing. Furthermore there is a danger that should not be underestimated: believing that what we have written is definitive. We tend to take the paper in hand and say, "it's done," with the satisfaction of having completed the job.

If the Fourth Step is going to tear us apart, it might be better to wait. Doing something like this without a profound desire could cause us to break down, generating an inner conflict that would deplete our energy and leave us exhausted and despairing because we have not been able to accomplish it.

The result would be the opposite of what we expected. Like all of the steps in the A.A. program, the Fourth Step is a "living" step. As long as I live, I evolve, changing with every action taken. If I want to be effective, I need to feel well, and understand my motives and my fears. Ideally I would be continuously aware, continuously in myself, not outside, somewhere else. If I avoid myself, my spirit escapes from my body and I lose myself. It may seem overly simplistic, but an example would be how I wash dishes, or bathe — whether I am in the action fully or lost in an imaginary dialogue with someone who worries me. To be fully conscious of what I am doing may not seem like such a big thing, but actually it is huge. Unfortunately, my moments of full consciousness are still quite rare. If I were fully conscious at every moment, as I would like to be, I would be in a state of permanent inventory or Fourth Step. The Serenity Prayer is helpful. As long as we don't let it become a rote superstitious recital, it can work as a quick little moral inventory.

My Fourth Step helped me to see that there were still many types of people that I could not tolerate, to the point of even rejecting their presence on earth, wishing they had never been born. Despite how these thoughts embarrass me, they still come, sometimes in painful attacks. Therefore, once I have recognized and accepted these states, I need to try to see the process that leads me to such aggressiveness.

I need to ask myself whether I can really live without enemies, and how the lack of such conflict would affect me. Perhaps this attitude of intolerance serves me as a stimulus. Perhaps I would have trouble taking action without some sort of opposition. It is essential that I clearly see these dynamics. Not only do they cause me suffering, but also it seems evident that what I create in my contact with others is my contribution to the evolution of the society in which I live.

If I don't change, if I don't transform, nothing changes in my relationship with society. What can I do? How can I free myself from this great disturbance in my life?

It isn't simply a matter of becoming tolerant of others. I need to start by becoming conscious of my way of acting. I could demonstrate generosity and approach my enemy with compliments and gifts and concessions. I could try conciliatory tolerance, being good and generous. But this effort would be even pettier.

If, on the other hand, I am content with not wanting anything — if I simply become conscious of my intolerance toward others, of my hate and its dynamics, of my inner revolution, complete and total, then, despite myself, a radical transformation will occur.

I have to accept the experience. I have to start by accepting the reality of the suffering. This is not a bad thing. Would I change if I weren't disturbed?

On the other hand, isn't it peace and security that I am searching for? Eternal peace and lasting security, separate from the disturbances of life, seem to be closer to death than life. We aren't fully aware of how important disturbance, agitation, and insecurity are for us.

Would we have started on a spiritual program like ours, or any other, if alcohol hadn't beaten us out of our lethargy? I'm sure it is the uncertainty and insecurity that lead to my aggressiveness and violence. As a bureaucrat I want the whole world to respect my decisions and opinions so that everything goes smoothly.

Who is the imbecile that doesn't think like I do? I'll show him what I think. Neither anger nor shouts and punches, not even physical or emotional torture in some cases, are enough to change anything. In the end, the only solution that seems plausible to me is that my enemy would just stop thinking. In other words, die, nothing more nothing less.

I realize that the disturbance that arises in me is necessary as a stimulus for me to continue living and progressing. The sister of intolerance of others is gossip or slander. I have suffered greatly because of that, and can't stand the idea of participating. Why should I be so interested in what other people do? Especially in what people who do bad things do! It seems I will get to know them better that way, but can I really get to know them if I don't try to know myself? Isn't my life difficult enough without getting involved in the lives of others?

The argument, "but everyone else does it" (which isn't even true), does not make me feel any better about having spoken badly about other people. I've become convinced that when I talk about others, whether to criticize or judge them, or to imitate them, it is because I am empty. It's because I have a need to torment myself, and this is really a repulsive realization.

Here, again, the answer is the same as for violence and aggressiveness. If I want to stop the gossip and defamation, I must, in the first place, be conscious of my intentions. When I start criticizing, I suddenly feel the need to stop, without needing any willpower. I don't have to condemn or excuse

myself. I only have to become truly conscious of my behavior; I have to see it. It becomes easy to see that criticism and intolerance are merely means of escape. Escape from this inner life that I am afraid of discovering.

When I accept looking at myself, I no longer feel the need to escape, and criticism disappears. Intolerance and criticism come from being obsessed with our egos, our well-being, the desire to be better than we are, to have more of this or more of that, to get more attention from others, to get a better position, to demonstrate to others and to ourselves that we are something, that we are someone. This continuous search, this need of the ego to grow, isolates us.

To escape from this isolation, we get into domestic fights and the criticism that causes so many different problems, from which we need to escape. Still, we always need to escape.

"Joseph, I don't think the Fourth Step needs any more explanation. Tell me when you feel you are ready, so we can get together to do the Fifth Step. But you should probably take your time to digest everything we've talked about these five days. If you 'work' the program with too much intensity, it can end up becoming an obsession. In A.A. everything should be taken soberly and serenely, don't you think? We don't want to get rid of one obsession just to take on another."

Manuel M. of Paris
1986

8

FEARLESS (1995)

As I continued to learn about the principles of our program, I started to fear that I would never be able to fully integrate because of my rejection of anything divine. I'd been born into a family that had been anticlerical for generations as a reaction to the Church in Spain in the late 19th and early 20th centuries — backward and intolerant, and in which even the most normal instincts were considered sin. With a profoundly humanist ideology, respect for science and the theory of evolution, and free will, most of my family were teachers and professors adhering to the liberal movement of the Free Educational Institution. To them, the Church and Catholicism represented a primitive fanaticism, and outdated fetishism based on fear of an omnipotent, cruel, and vengeful God. For my family, the majority of Spanish people at that time did not follow the noble, human principles of Christianity — they were Catholics simply because of fear of the unknown.

Thus, in A.A., I felt trapped. On the one hand, I believed that my newfound abstinence from drinking depended on believing in God — of my "own understanding," but nonetheless in God. And I still felt incapable of feeling or believing in anything to do with the divine.

It seemed I wasn't being sincere about the program when I talked with my fellow members. And when I talked about God with them, I felt I was being a traitor to the principles I had been raised with. First I spoke with my sponsor, Fuller P., who had 17 years in A.A., and with Nick H., who had 24 years, when I arrived in 1960. Both of them responded that I should not be afraid of my own feelings, whatever they were, or of the changes that might come.

The idea that continuing as I was might one day lead to my returning to drink horrified me. I had understood that a profound change of my personality might relieve me of my defects, my deficiencies — the

Gordian Knot of my alcoholism that led to an uncontrolled desire to alter my life, exalting it, diverting it, or destroying it. I had felt that there was something about the A.A. program that inferred that no human willpower could, for very long, suppress my subconscious desire to destroy myself one way or another. This was more than a method or philosophy of life. Even if I never drank again, I would always be at risk of destroying myself in any of a thousand ways — from “creating a cancer in myself,” to getting into impossible emotional situations, or finding other “toxins” such as codependency, gambling, excessive sex, and so on.

During these 35 years that I’ve been in A.A., I’ve unfortunately seen hundreds of examples that have confirmed the intuitions I felt in early sobriety. Alcoholism is not in the alcohol. The substance was only a medicine for an illness, mainly of the spirit. Drinking was a form of escape, and thus, abstinence was a return to prison. Because of my way of thinking at the time, I was hesitant to get involved in the A.A. program because of the importance it placed on a Higher Power. This problem became a real obsession for me. How could I live the program without believing? How could I put my will and my life into the care of something I could not even conceive of? How would I be able to discover the exact nature of my defects of character, and then be entirely ready for God to remove them, if I could not conceive of a God? How could I humbly ask Him to remove my defects? How would I be able to improve my conscious contact with God and ask for knowledge of His will for me?

One day in 1961, after receiving a call to go meet a newcomer, something very important happened to me. A call had come from a bartender saying he had a customer who needed help. I told him to put the guy into a taxi and have him taken to a specified intersection where I would be waiting. When I got there, I wondered how we would find each other in the bustle of pedestrians and traffic, which was chaotic at that hour. Then I noticed a lot of people turning their attention to a wretched man weaving his way through the hubbub. He was filthy and bloody. I was well known in the cafés around there, and suddenly felt panicked at the thought of associating with such a drunkard. I quickly hid behind a tree, paralyzed by the fear of going to meet the poor man. But, eyes half closed, the drunk made his way straight to the tree behind which I was hiding! How had he found me? My fear vanished and I put my hand on his shoulder and helped him. This experience helped me to come to believe

in a Higher Power, and became an anecdote that was recounted in the *A.A. Grapevine* (January 1991), in an article titled, “The Tree of Shame.”

Who was I to say who or what God was? Or what God was made of? The A.A. program says, “God as we understood Him,” but I could not understand God. When contemporary French scientist and scholar Jean Guitton (a firm believer) was asked whether there was a God, he answered, “Is there a God? There are thousands, millions, in everything and everywhere!”

Perhaps God could be my own best part — perhaps, my conscience, or the vital force that had led me to stop escaping from reality with alcohol, to stop destroying myself. Perhaps God was in the force I felt when I first came to A.A., the power that seemed to come from those three Americans who greeted me in 1960, whom I had never seen before, and from the 200,000 souls that made up A.A. at that time, and all those who had made A.A. possible during its first 25 years.

At a meeting a friend said, “God is for anyone who wants or needs Him.” Another, at another meeting, asked everyone at the group one by one whether they had the sensation that they were giving more or receiving more in A.A. The answer was unanimous. Everyone felt he was receiving more than he was giving. The conclusion was that there must be something or someone that was making up the difference, and that that something or someone was God. In fact, in many things in life, two plus two does not equal four.

Maybe believing or not believing in God is not really so important when a person strongly rejects the idea. Maybe what is really important is that we sense a power of love that guides us toward others and teaches us to respect them and to respect ourselves — setting free an extraordinary wealth of sensitivity, grandeur, and love that I believe every human being possesses. I believe we all carry a Saint Francis of Assisi within us, and that what is commonly called adversity is often the obstacle course we have to run so that each of us can find his soul and happiness. But expecting a human to truly understand God is like expecting a dog to understand trigonometry: it is simply beyond his capacity.

It’s curious to see how the great initiated and great scientists come closer and closer into agreement in their comprehension of the mysteries of the universe and life, becoming ever humbler in their assertions. The

Big Bang, expanding universe, matter, antimatter, stop squarks, self-contained universe with no beginning and no end, eternally pulsating, created or self-created, by a creator or without a creator. Life, transformation of matter, evolution, mutation, created or suggested? Intelligence. *Homo sapiens sapiens*, receiving the breath of life from the divine, or developed through evolution? The soul, the conscience, the spirit, arising from the 100 billion neurons of the human brain, a creation of God?

And now I ask myself why it is so important for me to know, to understand. Because of fear, perhaps, of not being anything, or of disappearing, or maybe because of pure egocentrism, or inability to accept what cannot be reasoned, and inability to live with what cannot be understood ... because of pride. Perhaps it is fear of the beyond, if there is such a thing. Now I know why in A.A. the concept of humility is so important.

It seems to me that in A.A. today there are two main movements as regards the interpretation and practice of the program of recovery. The largest group is of those who believe in a divine providence that brought them to A.A. and protects them — in a God, in whose care they place their wills and lives without fear. Then there are others, like me, who believe that God is a new and vital attitude of happiness that reaches its height when love guides reason, and that this cannot be comprehended by human beings.

The most important thing in the life of an A.A. is his own recovery and helping other alcoholics who are still suffering — this is also essential for his own happiness. Another important thing is that we keep A.A. as open as possible, allowing as many people as possible to find and fit into the great mosaic of our fellowship, making for the greatest possible diversity of concepts of a Higher Power or God.

Today I have no doubt that Emilio, drunk and eyes half closed, in the midst of all those people and cars at the intersection of Boulevard Saint Germain and Boulevard Saint Michel was guided to put his head on my shoulder, even though I was afraid and hiding, by an extraordinary force, in response to desperation and love combined — and the way I see it, beyond human understanding. "But for the Grace of God ..."

Manuel M. of Paris
Area 5, Zaragoza

9

REFLECTIONS THAT HELP ME STAY HAPPY

A short time after I came to the doors of A.A., the fellowship provided me with the possibility of achieving physical and mental balance. At certain times, nonetheless, the ups and downs of life combined with my old habits of self-destruction put me into precarious and fragile situations. When this happens, I take certain measures and attitudes that restore my inner peace, and consequently my serenity — this is the path to regaining the joy of living every day fully.

The first thing I do is check to see whether I am reliving past events, which I need to quickly accept once and for all, or whether I am projecting into the future, which is nothing more than antics of my fearful imagination — in either case I am forgetting that the only reality is life at the present moment. Forty percent of my instability comes from the past, another forty percent comes from fear of what might happen to me, and only twenty percent is actually in the moment. This small percent of instability can be handled with relative ease by practically anyone, even in the worst of cases.

With this quick return to the present, my thoughts begin to settle back into place — my fearful, self-destructive, and negative personality relaxes.

Next I check to make sure I have slept and eaten well. Have I exercised? Am I clean and well dressed (without spending more than a minute or two in front of the mirror)? I try to study something, have fun, and not forget my sex life, all within a healthy balance. I try to dedicate the appropriate amount of time and effort to my work. If I did less, I would feel guilty. I think about whether I am living in accordance with the spiritual principles I have learned in the A.A. program. Am I being reasonable with myself, not expecting more than is feasible given my personality at the moment?

I always wanted to have it all — health, money, love, adventure, prestige, and so on — without first addressing my spiritual well-being. The promises of the A.A. program are spiritual, and are what is best for me. I should be satisfied with my evolution and be patient. Wanting everything at once is the best way to get nothing. It is the frenzy of wanting to receive and possess that compromises the capacity to give. And it is only through giving that we truly receive in this world. I want to be vigilant to make sure I am approaching people in order to give the best of myself without expecting anything in return.

In the morning, the first thing I do is “plug in my iron,” to carefully press out the most destructive wrinkles in my personality, especially those that stem from my childhood: self pity, fear I’m not loved, fear of change, fear of death, and others that arise from my emotional immaturity.

I’m not religious because I don’t believe in the heaven or the hell that religion teaches. But I do believe I have had a spiritual awakening that has helped me to get out of the hell on earth that I suffered in for so many years.

Everyone is as happy as he decides to be, and I grant myself every right imaginable to have a marvelous day today and enjoy everything good and beautiful. I will not compare with other moments so as not to kill the charm of the present one. I will live this vibrant moment as captured by my senses right now.

I accept myself, respect myself, and love myself in order to find balance and stability today, in this moment, so I can share it with others. I accept happiness without worrying that it is just a chance occurrence that won’t last. True happiness is a new spiritual condition to which I should continually accustom myself. To say that because I was never happy before I will never be happy in the future is as absurd as saying that because I used to drink I will always drink.

*Manuel M.
Zaragoza, Spain*

10 HAPPINESS

When you feel this Higher Power vibrate within you, so necessary for human beings but at the same time so misunderstood, you feel happy. Perhaps this power is a blend of instincts, intuitive knowledge, and love of life that have accumulated and evolved through the history of human existence in a spiral of growing complexity and ascending spirituality. This force is projected through every living being and at the same time carries the echoes of evolution and life’s changes of direction.

Essential for humanity, this power, needed because man feels orphaned and unsheltered when conscious of self, this sensation, this vibration, has been called God since the very beginning. And the name is capitalized to show God’s vital importance to man.

Paradoxically, this God has given to the supposed scum of society — the soul-sick, self-destructive alcoholics, drug addicts, anorexics, gamblers, codependents, and so many others — an incredible and unique power, on the condition that they are freed from their dependencies through gaining profound self-awareness and a spiritual awakening.

This gift is the power to help others who suffer the illness of dependencies. The choice of these people is surprising. It would seem that professionals such as doctors, religious men, or wives and mothers would have been better prepared for the purpose. But the power has been given to those whose own hands still tremble because they too have suffered, giving them the sensitivity that allows them to comprehend and love those who are still suffering without judging them.

Few people are aware that what we call adversity is, in many cases, the path that permits us to climb the steps to spirituality. When you hear the heart-wrenching groans of your brothers around the world, and they

spark the vibration of love in your soul, be generous and give the very best of yourself.

This is the path to your own daily liberation — the path that will lead you to feel profound inner harmony. This is the path to happiness.

Manuel M. of Paris
Hotel El Jaragua, 12 October 1996
Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic

11

A SPIRITUAL AWAKENING

It seems to me that there must be as many ways of perceiving a Higher Power as there are alcoholics in recovery, without forgetting that each of us is by nature in continual change, so our perceptions also evolve over time. My own experience can still evolve a great deal.

Dominique B. left us in 1997, taking with her the “love that envelops and converges” — her faith. I wish she had known how much love and respect her example of life in A.A. inspired in me.

Dominique B. was one of the people who have influenced me most profoundly in my A.A. life. I greeted her when she arrived at the Quai d'Orsay group in 1963. At the time, that was the only French-speaking group in France. Her blue eyes emanated a light full of love and sweetness, and at the same time, a great and serene power.

Dominique B. and François L'Hermite (president of A.A. in France after Joseph Kessel) started a group in the Rouen prison. Here is what she said to the warden when refusing to be accompanied by guards in the meeting room:

“Sir, in order for the message of A.A. to be transmitted, we must feel free, at least in spirit. We alcoholics know from our past experiences that we might be accepted and understood only if we try to adapt ourselves to the way others who are not alcoholics think. When I came to A.A. in Paris, something extraordinary happened. I felt understood, like a liquid being absorbed by blotting paper ... by some sort of capillary action ... as if the other alcoholic and I had become one person. This is one of the miracles of A.A. that we often experience.”

Following is a text written by Dominique B. of Rouen a few days before her death. It was read on Friday, 26 September 1997, at Saint-Maclou Church, during the funeral.

What We Live Today: A Spiritual Awakening

Text by Dominique B. of Rouen (Translated from the French)

The concept we have of a spiritual awakening is vague and seemingly unreal ...

The spiritual awakening is a profound mystery that can be described only through a series of analogies. Nevertheless, we can indeed experience its effects and fruits. It is the presence and actions of God within us. It is a new dynamic in our lives

- combining all our vital forces*
- giving us conviction to follow a path of light and truth*
- promising a future of plenitude*
- and fulfillment of our lives*

In a dimension I never suspected existed – a spiritual and sacred dimension within me – I feel

- capable of GOD, capable of LOVE, capable of SPIRIT*
- and these new capabilities transform me into a spiritual being*

We are not sufficiently conscious of all this. Only when awakened to the spirit do I find happiness, power, and peace in Him. And only in awareness of these forces will I be able to really feel them and use them and advance along the path of consciousness.

We would be able to enjoy more of the fruits of the spirit if we were more conscious of Him. We could trust more in the spirit that lies within us when we ourselves are incapable of prayer, not knowing what to ask for – namely what we need without knowing it, and what brings us extraordinary joy, and what we would never dare to ask for or look for on our own. His action makes us generous and helps us to overcome our limitations and take action against our weaknesses.

The more aware we become of this extraordinary transformation in ourselves, the more we live in the joy and peace of the spirit, in truth and in love.

It is this spirit that inspires us in our new life and makes us children of God.

It is this spirit that gives us fulfillment in life, and abundance of love.

To love one's neighbor is not a distant action, but immediate and right here.

Faith is simply the love that unites and guides us.

Our entire life is impregnated with this law of love.

12

THIRTY-NINTH ANNIVERSARY OF A.A. IN FRANCE

La Rochelle

Article written by Martine, journalist for *Ile-de-France*

In November of 1960 the A.A. movement was born in France when four men started the Quai d'Orsay group, first French-speaking group in the country. At the same time, the book *Avec les Alcooliques Anonymes* came out, compiling the articles by Joseph Kessel published in *France-Soir* about the American Alcoholics Anonymous.

This is not just the anniversary of a group, or a friend. This is OUR ANNIVERSARY — the anniversary of the movement, of the first hand of A.A. held out, of the first passing of the message to the French. This message was first passed by an "ally" of A.A., journalist Joseph Kessel, and not by a member alcoholic. It was the beginning of hope for many of us, and for everyone who has attended even one meeting in France during these 39 years.

Thus, the main topic chosen for this anniversary celebration 13–14 November 1999, in La Rochelle, is "The Beacon of Hope."

Following are some memories to share:

Imagine a meeting room, a table with a green cloth, two chairpersons (a man and a woman), and behind them a wall of large windows. It is 2 o'clock in the afternoon on a cold, gray, autumn day. Out the windows you can see the ocean marking the horizon, more green than blue, its surface scarcely scratched by barely visible white sailboats. And, muted by the glass, seagulls dance in the low sky.

This makes a good start toward serenity for me. Thanks for coming! And good peaceful sharing, too, marked by the simplicity and diversity of the members present.

Imagine the port with its emblematic towers ... on a stormy night, with driving rain and wind tearing at umbrellas ... and a seafood restaurant. Inside the dining room, the delicious hot soup is served, with chunks of monkfish.

Imagine the auditorium filled for the plenary meeting, and the voice of Manuel speaking, recounting anecdotes about the first French-speaking group in France. I want to read you the letter sent to Joseph Kessel by General de Gaulle in 1961.

My Dear Joseph Kessel,

I have read your book Avec les Alcooliques Anonymes with much interest and emotion.

The admirable thing is this devotion to, this apostolate for those who are "on the road back." The amazing thing is the talent you deploy, as never before, in your description of such vibrant souls among those in extinguishment.

Be assured, dear Mr. Kessel, of my sentiment of friendly and faithful admiration.

Ch. de Gaulle

From here in this room we have a view of the open sea, the port with its forest of masts, and the stands of A.A. and Al-Anon literature, subscriptions to *Partage*, the cafeteria, lunch tickets, souvenirs ...

Each person chooses his own way of taking part: sharing in a meeting, doing service, or just making light conversation here and there.

Once again, thank you for coming. And thank you to A.A. for these events. We have a date next year for the fortieth anniversary of A.A. in France, in November of 2000, to be held in Paris.

*Martine
Ile-de-France
December 1999*

13

MY NAME IS MANUEL, AND I BELONG TO ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS

During my first years in A.A., I always introduced myself in our meetings by saying, "My name is Manuel, and I'm an alcoholic." This is the usual form of introduction in A.A. meetings around the world.

A few years later, every time I said these words, it just didn't feel right. It seemed to imply some sort of defense or apology for an illness. Alcoholism is indeed an illness that is incurable and progressive, and it continues developing even if the person stops drinking alcohol. The progression is produced partly by the aging of cells, partly by the "brainwashing" action of alcohol, and partly by the repeated toxic effects of the "first drink." In addition to being incurable, progressive, and fatal, I would add that alcoholism is "contagious" — we must not underestimate the anxiety suffered among family members living with an alcoholic if they are not aware of and practicing the A.A. program.

Still today, this illness is poorly known and quite misunderstood, even by specialists in alcoholism, psychologists, and psychiatrists. I believe it is a complex, partly psychosomatic illness involving destructive obsessions. It seems to me that there are as many forms of alcoholism as there are alcoholics, given that it is partly a personality disorder.

For many years now I've preferred to introduce myself at meetings by saying, "My name is Manuel, and I belong to Alcoholics Anonymous in body and soul." Without A.A., I believe I would have died a long time ago, and I never would have had the chance to conceive of what I now think of as my soul and spirit, or my true identity.

I am certainly not an alcoholic because of my qualities or virtues, but rather because of my deficiencies or defects. From my most tender child-

hood years, my emotional development was hindered. This created serious difficulties in my ability to accept myself and my daily problems. It was as though I were poorly armed for coping with life. As a result, I developed a self-destructive ego and discovered alcohol as a poor medication for my ills. I couldn't see that the alcohol didn't really free me, but actually caused the opposite of free will in my life. My sexual desires were also intertwined with all of this. Being a "practicing" alcoholic is truly catastrophic. The dependency on alcohol is not only physical, but also affects everything else that governs a human being — we need to drink even to think.

Being an A.A. and practicing our principles is a privilege. All our values in life change. Living for appearances no longer makes sense. Being able to help others becomes the most important aspect of being human in this world. I arrived 41 years ago, and I am now a happy 78-year-old.

The birth of Alcoholics Anonymous is considered to be 10 June 1935. That was 66 years and 7 months ago — 24,300 days. We have adopted the 24-hour period for measuring time for a variety of reasons. Astronomically it is the period it takes the planet Earth to rotate one full turn on its axis. One full day. If we are able to not drink for a morning, afternoon, and night — one full day — the next day is a repetition of something we have already done. Not drinking the next day is easier in that sense.

We A.A.'s make up a long chain of links, connected one to another by a bond of fraternal love. Most of the first and oldest members are gone now, but their position in the chain is eternal. The existence of our fellowship is possible because of the mutual understanding and accumulated experience shared between its members.

When I arrived in 1960, there were already 250,000 of us in the world — 230,000 in the United States and Canada, and 20,000 in the rest of the world. Today, I believe there are about 2.5 million of us living a daily program of recovery. There are about 100,000 groups in about 150 countries. Is that a lot? Not enough? I can't say for sure, but I feel that we are losing ground.

Every day there are more and more people drinking self-destructively in order to escape the reality of their lives. And the percentage that finds

A.A. is probably decreasing. On the other hand, there are many other fellowships now that follow the same twelve-step program of recovery, helping many thousands to live by our principles. Those who are addicted to other drugs, sex, gambling, overeating, codependence, and so on are all self-destructive, like we are, but they use different means to their end.

In today's world the most dangerous illness is self-destruction — the destruction of people and of our planet. We who are in recovery play a very important role with our philosophy of life and accumulated experience. We are self-destructive by our very nature ... and we have seen the devil himself.

Manuel M. of Paris

14

FORTIETH ANNIVERSARY OF A.A. IN FRANCE

Our prehistory: 1948–1959

More than 10 years of struggling and failed attempts to start a French-speaking A.A. group in France.

Our history: 1960–2000

Our boat finally set sail in 1960. That was 40 years ago, and I was one of the sailors aboard. It seems to me that these first 40 “miles” of our journey have been most important. Our little fishing boat has become a ship, with all the necessary structural support. But if we lack the essence, the love that gives us power to move forward, the structure of the vessel is of no use.

The only purpose of our fellowship is to rescue the shipwrecked by inviting them aboard to sail with us before they drown on their own. This is what we have been doing all these years.

The growth rate during the past decade has seemed insufficient for some. Our old-timers who have lived through dramatic periods, have put in place the mechanisms to deal with any difficulty. Respect for our three legacies — the Twelve Steps, Twelve Traditions, and Twelve Concepts — which guarantee our unity, allows us to change with the times if necessary, but without losing our course, ever working for the good of A.A. as a whole.

In the twenty-first century, which is just beginning now, we will see A.A. develop around the world, guided one day at a time by the spirit felt at the fourth international convention, held in Toronto in 1965 — the theme there was “Responsibility,” and more than 10,000 recited the

Responsibility Pledge in unison at the end. As a witness to A.A. history in France, I have complete confidence in our Higher Power, which has allowed us to grow and live to this day, through all kinds of stormy weather. This power has never abandoned us, and never will.

Manuel M. of Paris

15

A VERY SPECIAL HUMAN FELLOWSHIP

Perhaps because I am celebrating 41 years of sobriety and do not have any great problems, thanks to A.A., I feel a profound conviction that this does not belong to me alone.

To be an A.A. is a great privilege, but it carries with it a daily moral obligation to those who, still alone and disoriented, continue suffering and being dragged down by this cancer of the soul, alcoholism.

We A.A.'s make up a very special human fellowship. Due to the fateful consequences of our use and abuse of a poor medication, alcohol, we finally came to find and identify with each other. We used alcohol to exhilarate, appease, escape from, or satisfy serious defects of character such as fear, shyness, boredom, or inability to cope with life.

For most people, alcohol is associated with fun, celebrations, parties, and happiness. But for us, it is a real poison that destroys body and soul.

I had always thought drinking gave me freedom and that abstinence would be a prison, when in reality it was the opposite. Alcohol led me inevitably to the opposite of freedom, and to my own destruction.

I thank God for leading me that day in Paris, in 1960, to find this marvelous fellowship of boys and girls of all ages — Alcoholics Anonymous.

Manuel M. of Paris

16

SIXTY-SEVENTH ANNIVERSARY OF A.A. IN THE WORLD

10 June 2002

In its 67 years of prodigious existence, one day at a time, A.A. has experienced the miracle most desired in the world — rejuvenation. The average age of A.A. members has continuously been getting younger. Our fellowship is the youngest it has ever been, and as this has been happening, our legacies — steps, traditions, and concepts — have lost neither their value nor their timeliness.

Excerpt from *Campos de Castilla*, “Proverbios y cantares”

XXIX

Caminante, son tus huellas
el camino, y nada más;
caminante, no hay camino,
se hace camino al andar.
Al andar se hace el camino,
y al volver la vista atrás
se ve la senda que nunca
se ha de volver a pisar.
Caminante, no hay camino,
sino estelas en la mar.

Antonio Machado

(English translation)

Wayfarer, your path is
your footsteps, nothing more;
wayfarer, there is no path,
you create a path by walking.
By walking you create the path,
and looking back
you see the trail that never
again you shall tread.
Wayfarer, there is no path,
but a wake upon the sea.

“A great part of our capital comes from our past. We invest it today so that tomorrow the greatest number of people will benefit from it.

“We can give to others only what we have already received.

“Without accumulated experience, we would be limited to our well-intentioned imagination. But the past cannot be imagined.”

From the brochure 1960–1985, 25 years of A.A. in France

I have always wanted to discover the passion that inspired our pioneers and get it to rise again from the roots like tree sap so the branches can grow with the same vitality and strength as the trunk that produced them.

When we lack this vital energy, consisting of shared love, the branches, even those that appear to be solid, end up drying out. Time covers up small events and disguises large ones. This is why we feel it is important to record our thoughts, discoveries, and experiences, and send our stories to publications of the fellowship.

Ever since I arrived in 1960, I have felt strongly that I belong to A.A. in body and soul. Without this profound sentiment, I would not have found the passion of the fellowship, and I would surely have died long ago.

The bells in my tower have tolled 65 times. Today my life history has two well-defined parts — before I came to A.A. and after I came to A.A.

“I sought my soul, but could not see it.
I sought God, but He escaped me.
I sought my companions in suffering
And found all three.”

Anonymous (heard in a meeting)

Manuel M. of Paris

17

MILLIONS OF LINKS IN THE CHAIN

With all my gratitude for everyone who has made A.A. possible in the world — founders, old-timers, newcomers, and everyone else — my name is Manuel, and I have a profound feeling of belonging in body and soul to this miracle of our times called Alcoholics Anonymous.

It is clear to me today that if I had not arrived at my first meeting in mid 1960, I would long ago have ceased to be one of the inhabitants of this planet, and it would have been impossible for me to gain an idea, not even superficially, of who I really am. I certainly would have been incapable of initiating something so distant and fleeting as was, for me, a spiritual awakening.

It is for these reasons that I feel I belong to our fellowship in body and soul, and why I introduce myself in meetings, "My name is Manuel and I belong to Alcoholics Anonymous."

A.A. has existed for more than 24,000 days, one at a time. We have adopted the 24-hour period as a unit of lifetime, astronomically based, on which we try to focus our hopes and efforts. A day on Earth comprises a morning, an afternoon, and a night. I try to live each day fully. And although storm clouds of adversity sometimes shroud the sparkle of the starry heavens, I need not fear that tomorrow the stars won't be up there shining in all their splendor.

We are each an integral part of a chain, like millions of links, joined to each other by a profound fraternal love born of our common suffering and our common hope, shared daily between us. We still feel gratitude and affection for those first links, those who started our fellowship, and who are no longer with us. The development of the chain has been

possible only because of the warmth and understanding that those first members knew how to give, paving the way through their example for the accumulation of shared experiences that lengthens and strengthens the chain. The result is 65 years of A.A. to date.

The solder that fuses the links of the chain can solidify only in the presence of profound unconditional love felt by one human being for another. The forge of life continues producing links with a variety of "factory" defects, like mine. One of the gifts given us by God is the privilege of being able to take these links without judging them, transmitting to them this message of tolerance and fraternal love, and perhaps, as a consequence, helping them.

I know now that we come into this world to give the best of ourselves, and that this is the only way to achieve peace and happiness.

Our chain has millions of links today, but it is only as strong as the weakest. It is the responsibility of all of us to aid and comfort those who are suffering. Indeed, the security of the fellowship as a whole depends on this. A.A. is like a generator, receiving and producing the only energy capable of helping us — and this energy is love.

I believe that the most dangerous illness of the human being is self-destruction. I believe we need to understand a very important truth: alcoholics are self-destructive to the extreme. We A.A.'s are people who have seen the devil himself, and have come back to tell about it. I feel a great sense of gratitude toward the A.A.'s who arrived during the first 25 years of the fellowship. During the first 15 years, they wrote the steps. That is to say, they discovered a way to put words to the melody of the symphony of love that is A.A. Since 1950, we are all works in process, seeking and finding happiness through a written program that has been proven by experience.

The important thing about A.A. is not to arrive first, but simply to arrive and stay — living a genuine inner change, subtle yet profound, that leads us to live in another dimension and experience a spiritual awakening. It is a change that allows us to be able to live without alcohol, and without needing to find other means of self-destruction such as gam-

bling, excessive sex, codependence, cycles of depression, or any number of other forms of self-inflicted injury.

Accruing many years of abstinence is of little value in itself. The truly important thing is to live this new sober life harmoniously and happily a maximum number of days a week. This is possible through passing the message.

For 20 years of my life I searched for my soul and my God through the "spirits" of alcohol, and it was a disaster. I did not realize that in fact I was suffering from a serious spiritual illness that could be relieved only through a spiritual awakening. For the past 41 years now, I have been sharing and trying to help my fellow members of A.A., and my life is now harmonious and dynamic. With my 78 years of age I feel younger than I did at 37 in 1960, when I came to A.A. Those who welcomed me read me the Promises of A.A. — the scope of which I did not understand until years later. I remember those people from my first weeks in A.A. practically every day.

Wherever they are now, and I hope they are together drinking water in meetings, I pray they keep a place for me there, as they did for me in the rooms years ago. But everything in its own time. I'm really in no hurry. I still have a lot to share here.

Manuel M.
Area 5

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A NEW LIFE Mûr-de-Bretagne

As every year, when my professional, family, and tennis obligations permit, I go to Mûr-de-Bretagne. This year the main motive for celebration was to commemorate 35 years since the arrival of Alcoholics Anonymous in the Brittany region of France. The organization, the ambience, and above all the human warmth, were magnificent.

I had experienced the great difficulties we had to go through so that our fellowship could finally start a group there. The establishment of the Croix d'Or (Catholic) and Croix Bleu (Protestant) years earlier, and especially activities of the church in rural areas, made it much less likely that people who needed our help might come to our strange fellowship, suspected of being an American sect. Our members who had been in the Paris groups for a time, and then moved out into their home regions for family or work reasons, were considered apostles. By coincidence, there were twelve of them.

I had arrived a few years before, and maintained the office at 65 Quai d'Orsay — the job of administrating the organizational structure of A.A. in France. In those days I had the mission of helping the "apostles" in their arduous work, encouraging them and coordinating their efforts, as that was important for the future of A.A. in France.

The joke was, "Good thing your name isn't Jesus, right Manuel?" [Jesús is a common Spanish given name] My response was that the name Manuel comes from the Hebrew for "God is with us," and that although they hadn't crucified me yet, contending with them was an even worse form of martyrdom.

But I digress. As you might deduce from what I have already said, I have been in our fellowship for 43 years now. That is a wonder. I arrived at 37 years of age, meaning unequivocally that I am now 80 years old. And although I try to live one day at a time, once in a while I do wonder how many years I have left.

I was in that state of mind in Mûr-de-Bretagne on 27 April at 10 o'clock in the morning. According to the program, the meeting topic was "A New Life." I felt somewhat perplexed and fanciful. Could A.A. offer me yet another miracle?

Full of enthusiasm and hope I went to the meeting, and when it was my turn to speak I asked what I should do in order to obtain this "new life." The chairperson knew me well, and answered calmly and with aplomb:

"Look, Manuel. Thanks to the program of Alcoholics Anonymous, you have been living a new and happy life. Don't forget your 20 years of drinking before coming to our fellowship. What A.A. promised you, it has given you in abundance, paid in full. And that will continue as long as you practice our principles, until you leave on the journey of no return. I would dare to say that perhaps everything you have achieved here can continue in a way that we cannot comprehend. And that journey must be quite pleasant, given that nobody comes back."

Manuel M. of Paris
The Harmony group

Note: A dozen years have passed since then, and I continue to enjoy the A.A. promises in my life. Since then I live even more in the here and now, and the date of departure on that journey of no return is not my problem ... nor do I know whose problem it might be.

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DIALYSIS AND TRANSPLANT

Conversation between a psychiatrist and his longtime patient

Psychiatrist:

"But, my good friend, what have you done to achieve such an amazing transformation? Please explain it in strictly scientific terms, you know what I mean, don't you?"

Patient:

"In scientific terms, Doctor? Well, as you will remember, my liver was very bad and my general state of health was deplorable ... not to mention every other aspect of my life. I went to Alcoholics Anonymous, stopped drinking any beverage that contained any alcohol, and since then I've been going to A.A. meetings twice a week. So, in scientific terms, I'd say it's something like dialysis for the body together with a transplant of the soul."

Manuel M. of Paris
The Harmony group, Zaragoza
February 2003

THE LANGUAGE OF THE HEART

Article by Véronique K.

Le Big Studio, 2003

Dobri tchass zbogom

Joseph Kessel said of Alcoholics Anonymous:

"[A.A. is] Perhaps the most extraordinary and most poignant discovery that can be made during the course of a lifetime despite having dedicated it to the search for the exceptional."

Joseph Kessel (1898–1979)
Avec les Alcooliques Anonymes

Thanks to the pen of writer and scholar Joseph Kessel and his long articles published in *France-Soir* from 24 July to 16 August, 1960, titled "The New World of Alcoholism," the French public was introduced to the existence of Alcoholics Anonymous — already well established in the United States, and existing but still obscure in Paris.

These articles were compiled and published as a book titled *Avec les Alcooliques Anonymes* at the end of 1960 by Librairie Gallimard.

"The most extraordinary thing," said Manuel M. (member of Alcoholics Anonymous and friend of Joseph Kessel) "is that you have passed the message of A.A. without even being an alcoholic."

"That's nice praise," responded Jef. "But I was just doing my job as a journalist."

It went further than that, as Jef became president of the French A.A. General Service Board, and later (principles before personalities) a group bearing his name started at number 7 rue Lions-Saint-Paul, Paris.

Five years after his articles were published, there were two stable groups in Paris, and two in the north of France, as well as a few loners who shared by post. Today there are 550 groups throughout France, without counting the service centers, "antennas" in hospitals, and groups in prisons.

Before setting out on a journalistic mission, Jef had the habit of saying "*Dobri tchass zbogom*," which means, "God be with us."

Since that time, God has never abandoned us, although we have at times abandoned Him. And A.A. has developed more than ever expected. In a country where wine is not even considered alcohol, A.A. groups have formed in the most renowned wine-growing regions: Chablis, Mâcon, Beaune, Saumur, Jurançon, and Bordeaux.

So, "*Dobri tchass zbogom*" to you Jef, watching us grow and loving us from Heaven above!

Véronique K.
Le Big Studio

Joseph Kessel

The articles on Alcoholics Anonymous have told a lot, and in a most unusual way. They had nothing to do with revolutions or wars, bandits, or heroes; nothing to do with remote countries, little known tribes, or savage beasts. They had nothing to do with any of that. The objective of my work was to narrate stories of ordinary people in the setting of ordinary cities. These people belonged to all social strata. They were common mortals except for their inner inferno, and within it the most banal, the hell of alcohol.

Everything started with a game of chance. Passing through Paris, a set-designer friend who had arrived from America told me of how a friend of hers had been saved after losing himself to alcohol and becoming a wretch. The instrument of this miracle had been the association Alcoholics Anonymous. Her story was told with such intense drama that I felt a strong need to find out more about the great work of which this was merely one chapter.

At first I wanted only to write a sort of "human interest" story, whether of crime or horror, or heroism, or sainthood. And I found all of this in Alcoholics Anonymous, in copious amounts.

But in the undercurrent of the great abyss of desperation there was some marvelous secret of humility that had given the most pitiful wretch back his dignity to live.

Above and beyond the "human interest" story there was a great and noble and very beautiful story that had allowed us to never despair in the face of the disgrace of the human being.

Joseph Kessel (1898–1979)
Reporter, writer, scholar

Yves Courrière

The abbreviated version of the articles on Alcoholics Anonymous titled "The New Land of Alcoholism" consisted of no fewer than 20 long pages that appeared in *France-Soir* during the summer of 1960, between 24 June and 16 August. These articles elicited a large number of letters, demonstrating the great impact they'd had on the general public, who had learned through them of the existence of A.A. in Paris. Until then, A.A. had been confidential. The entire manuscript was published in 1960 in the "L'Air du Temps" collection published by Gallimard directed by Pierre Lazareff.

Avec les Alcooliques Anonymes was the fifth great volume of work that Joseph Kessel produced after the war for his old accomplices, and which made 73 in a prolific bibliography.

The Lion continued its exceptional course. An illustrated edition for children had existed since 1959, and some selected parts were even being read in schools!

Meanwhile, two new Kessel publications were out in bookstores. All this by 1960. He was passionately interested in the exceptional fate of Doctor Kersten, but it was because of A.A. and personal reasons that Joseph Kessel watched very particularly with great attention from the moment the book came out.

While *Les mains du miracle* happily surpassed 100,000 copies sold, *Avec les Alcooliques Anonymes* was still far from reaching the expected interest. Saturated with dramas, the bookstore customers did not show the same enthusiasm as the readers of *France-Soir*, or that of the most important person in the nation, who, on 8 January 1961, wrote to the author at Quentin-Bauchart Street (see the letter from General de Gaulle in chapter 12).

The Quai d'Orsay group

Due to such reactions, and, above all, to the increasingly frequent calls that were coming in to the American Church, Kessel did not lament the mediocre sales of his book, nor did he regret having made so much effort so that A.A. could become known and continue developing. Kessel did not like getting involved in any associations — the Albert Londres Prize [highest French journalism award] was the only one he'd been a part of for more than 30 years — but he frequently visited the A.A. group at Quai d'Orsay. He would sit in a chair, and when the meeting finished, liked to talk with some of the "rescued souls." Manuel M. was one of them, and told him with infinite gratitude about his experience, explaining briefly the drama he had lived until less than a year earlier.

"I was at the end of it all, and you saved my life." That was no exaggeration.

Yves Courrière

Excerpt from his biography of Joseph Kessel, *Sur la piste du lion*
Librairie Plon 1985

In celebration of the third anniversary of A.A. in France, in the big room at 65 Quai d'Orsay in Paris, where the first French-speaking group in France was founded with the help of lawyer Nick H., Joseph Kessel responded to the gratitude shown by friends of A.A.:

"I would have had to have a cork stopper where my heart to not have felt the extraordinary profound spirituality of the A.A. message, and the power of love that emanates from this fellowship. I am the one who thanks you. I was just doing my job as a journalist. If my articles have helped you to find good direction, I am very happy, but without A.A. and its program, my articles would not have done you any good."

Bill W.

Bill W. advised us that we would have problems starting A.A. in France because it is a country where wine is not even considered alcohol, and is an intimate part of French traditions and customs.

A SKY FULL OF GOOD STARS

This year I was not able celebrate New Year's Eve with my friends in France, and I am truly sorry. As usual, the organization of the event is left to an efficient, diverse, and enthusiastic group. They bring together all the necessary specialists: decorators, electricians, restaurant staff, musicians, managers, and so on, who all give their best to welcome the new year ... with pleasure and love. They demonstrate the qualities that should serve as an example for everyone doing service in A.A.

Each year, a theme is selected for the decoration of the hall, which holds more than 200 people. The theme this year, which has deep meaning for me, was "A Sky Full of Stars."

Shortly after I came to A.A., my sponsor, Fuller P., asked me whether I paid attention to the etymology of words. I answered that in French, not very well ... and then confessed that in Spanish, not either.

He said, "Look Manuel, all of us A.A.'s depend on a written program. For that reason, a thorough understanding of the words is very important. For example, the word *serenity* is very important in our philosophy of life. Do you know what it means? It comes from the Latin *serenus*, meaning 'clear' or 'fair,' and was used to refer to the weather, as in 'clear or unclouded skies.' For us alcoholics it is extremely beneficial to have a serene soul, without storm clouds. Another example is the word *humility*, which is also key to the A.A. program. Etymologically this word comes from the Latin *humus*, meaning 'soil' or 'earth.' The person who keeps his feet firmly planted on the ground maintains humility."

Not long after that, he gave me an etymological dictionary. One day, considering that the only requirement for A.A. membership is the desire

to stop drinking, it occurred to me to look up the word *desire*. It also comes from Latin, from the word *sidus* or *sider-*, meaning "star." It refers to being immobile, or paralyzed. The related word *desiderate*, meaning "to feel a keen desire," comes from the Latin *desiderare*, which can be taken to mean, escape from the bad influences of the stars — to stop seeing them above as inevitable destiny ... to escape paralysis and start moving.

Desire is therefore a force of freedom for a person who is responsible for his actions. Curiously, when I was drinking, before I found A.A., I complained about my sad fate, the "bad star" I'd apparently been born under. There was a song at the time that had the following lyrics:

(Translated from the Spanish)

"What star reigned
the day I was born?
What bad star guides me
wherever I go?"

Manuel M. of Paris
The Harmony group, Zaragoza

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GROWTH IN WINE REGIONS OF EUROPE

Information taken from the book *70 Years of Growth* from the International Convention in Toronto 2005

FRANCE

The first French-speaking groups.

American A.A. members began meeting in Paris in 1949, and formed an A.A. group there in 1955. However, the first French-speaking meeting did not start until 1960, after the French newspaper *France-Soir* published a series of articles on Alcoholics Anonymous written by reporter Joseph Kessel.

Manuel M. (a Spaniard living in Paris) wrote to the newspaper for information. In 1961, the Quai d'Orsay group was formed by Manuel M., François B., Jean M., and Lennart (a Swede). Other groups followed, and in the early 1970s, a French General Service Office opened its doors in rue Trousseau.

SPAIN

The first meetings in Madrid.

A Mrs. García of New York informed the General Service Office that a Dr. E. Pelaz, psychiatrist at a Madrid sanitarium, wanted to start an A.A. group. The G.S.O. sent literature to Pelaz, and to an A.A. contact in Madrid, an American named Ray C. Ray and fellow member Dan C. started having English meetings in Madrid in 1955. By the end of the year, the number of members had quadrupled, and a Spanish-American group started meeting at the sanitarium. Soon afterward, a separate Spanish-speaking group was formed. This attracted other members, and fostered the formation of other groups around the country.

ITALY

Italy joins the ranks.

It is thought that Italian-speaking A.A. started in Italy in 1972, when Giovanni and Ermanno joined ranks with a small American group that was meeting in Rome. With the help of some of the American members, including Carol C., the first Italian-speaking group was formed. Two years later another group started in Florence, and two years after that, one in Milan. In 1978, representatives of several groups made arrangements with the G.S.O. in New York to sponsor publication of an Italian Big Book, which was already being translated. *Alcolisti Anonimi* was published in 1980.

PORTUGAL

A new beginning in Portugal.

In 1956, English-speaking groups were already meeting in Lisbon, and in 1959, at Lajes Air Base in the Azores. However, A.A. did not become established in Portugal until 1975 when American Ed A. returned to the country after going through rehab in the United States, and began passing the A.A. message in hospitals. As a result, Portuguese-speaking groups were formed in Lisbon, Porto, and the Algarve. Portuguese A.A. literature sent from Brazil contributed to the development and stability of groups in Portugal.

GREECE

Letters from Greece.

An American pilot and A.A. member informed the New York G.S.O. that he had given a copy of *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* to Rev. Charles Hanna of the American Church of Athens. The Rev. Hanna initiated correspondence with the G.S.O. in 1957. With his work, three loners living in Athens, servicemen Frank O., Gus, and Cal, started the first Greek meeting in the Port of Piraeus.

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PRESENT-DAY ALCHEMISTS

Zaragoza, 10 June 2007

72nd Anniversary of A.A. in the World

We drinkers, drunks, winos, alkie ... who are addicted to the spirits of alcoholic beverages, fermented or distilled ... we alcoholics, are the present-day alchemists. Abject living distilleries of disaster, of mutations, of horror, we convert drink into tears, into sweat, into blood, into semen. We have defiled what society has exalted in celebration, homage, fiestas, gaiety ... in self-defamation, dragging ourselves into snake pits of dementia and disgust, to self-destruction and the very gates of hell.

What fate ... what unlikely consequences! It is as if the path of suffering were the chosen way to prevailing, to this final mutation, through a profound realization distinguishing good from bad, some kind of awakening of a sleeping spirit ... capable of transforming suffering into joy. Having been slaves kept dormant by defects of character, we awaken to a life of generosity and brotherly love that leads in time to inner harmony and serenity. The A.A. program of recovery is in large part a model for undergoing this change of life.

Today marks 72 years since the official beginning of the miracle called Alcoholics Anonymous — the day that Dr. Bob, in communion with Bill W., stopped drinking alcoholic beverages of any kind. A profound and very special mutual openness and identification between the two souls made it possible.

I do not know what really happens when one alcoholic talks with another, sharing experiences, disgraces, and yearnings for happiness. The fact is that at the same time Dr. Bob was able to stop drinking, Bill W. was also relieved of his own obsession to drink.

When I talked about my problem with my family, with specialists, with doctors, or with a friend, I had to adapt myself to their way of being or seeing things. Otherwise they could not understand. When I spoke for the first time with A.A.'s, with those "gringos" as I called them in those days, at the American Church at Quai d'Orsay in Paris ... people I had never seen before in my life ... we understood each other instantly. We somehow were one. They penetrated my soul, and I penetrated theirs — as if by capillary action, the way a liquid is absorbed by a porous material. From our first conversation we felt hope, and we wanted the same for others. We wanted to be happy in this world without touching a drop of alcohol, just for today! It worked for me, and continues to work 47 years later. I believe that this way of "absorbing" each other by capillary action is part of the miracle of A.A. that has been taking place around the world. Today, 72 years after its beginning, I can only express my gratitude and love for those who first felt these sensations of salvation and discovered how to transmit them and put them down in writing so that millions of people can live lives full of peace and happiness. Seventy-two years is a very short time compared to the history of humanity, and for the fellowship to have perceived and understood how very important this movement of life and love really is for the world.

It seems that we have long since crossed over the barrier of the lash of alcoholism, carrying the possibility of help around the world to people suffering self-destructive dependencies and inability to cope with the world they live in. A.A. allows us to develop a new understanding, not only of our problems and defects and incapability, but also of a profound change in values and how to focus on the here and now. This in turn allows the best of our souls to emerge, along with a desire to share what we have learned with others who are still suffering what we have suffered.

In this world in which self-destruction is seen in a thousand forms (wars, genocide, global warming, and so on), humans continue to live with unbridled egocentricity, showing complete disregard for the well-being of others and for the preservation of the natural world. Exactly the way I lived when I was still drinking out of control. Perhaps the example of A.A. can help in the salvation from other forms of self-destruction. Indeed, we alcoholics represent self-destruction par excellence. And

the simple principles of our program represent the solution. I am fully convinced that when humanity finds itself corralled and in danger, a solution emerges from within humanity itself. I believe that even the appearance of Christianity, with its new message of peace and love, was no coincidence — it became a necessary salvation for humanity during those decadent and putrid Roman times.

Given my advanced age and the great mystery of the unknown beyond, and the journey of no return (despite the A.A. principle of living one day at a time), I cannot stop wondering whether our Higher Power is creator of the universe, or whether human life has any real significance, or whether the metaphysical philosophy of French scholar Jean Guitton is true. In fact, I believe that for me this problem is like a trigonometry problem for a dog — incomprehensible.

During the 47 years I have been in A.A., I have never really come to know why I drank. However, I have indeed come to understand the great privilege it is for us to stop drinking in A.A. We have been honored with the greatest gift that exists in this world: to be able to be useful to others who are suffering. Our founders and pioneers understood first how to sense, then how to interpret, and finally how to transmit these marvelous teachings for generations to come.

Manuel M. of Paris
The Harmony group, Zaragoza

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SYNTHESIS OF A SPIRITUAL AWAKENING

Encounter

While it is true that the abuse of alcoholic beverages is what led us to one day meet each other, the underlying reason for the connection that has kept us together is a number of common character defects. These include an inability to cope with life, insecurity and instability, subconscious self-destructiveness, and overall emotional immaturity.

Definition

Because of this emotional immaturity we jokingly say that Alcoholics Anonymous is a fellowship of boys and girls of all ages who are willing to grow and share in a project to start a new life in a new dimension.

Consciousness

We gain consciousness when we accept that alcoholic drinking is a *symptom*, like a fever, of a physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual illness that has overpowered us.

Trajectory

The new trajectory that we choose and desire does not end when we stop drinking alcohol. On the contrary, that is the moment when everything can really begin.

Projection

Our projection is the path suggested in the A.A. twelve-step program of recovery that leads to a spiritual awakening, catalyzed by a new set of

values. These new values give rise to attitudes such as living in the here and now, and frequent self-examination.

Belonging

We must understand and accept that separating ourselves from this new way of life, which includes attending meetings and sharing, causes our "batteries" to run down. We must continually renew and store the vital energy produced by this program of life.

The Individual

The individual within the group is a support for the collective consciousness that exists in proportion to our ability to form ties of love with others. Our individual progress depends on the well-being of the group and of A.A. as a whole.

The Group

The A.A. group is the entity from which emanates the power that transforms escape from life and self-destruction into gratitude and joy.

Conclusion

Boys and girls of all ages, we arrive one day and are transformed by an extraordinary force and united by a collective consciousness of indefinable fraternal love that liberates and illuminates us. For me, all of this constitutes a spiritual awakening.

Manuel M. of Paris
The Harmony group, Zaragoza
6 January 2008

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WHY "ONCE AN ALCOHOLIC, ALWAYS AN ALCOHOLIC"?

When, after 20 years of bewilderment, anxiety, and blunders of all kinds, I finally arrived at 65 Quai d'Orsay in Paris, at the American Church, where they had meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous in English, and I met three "gringos" who explained what I was suffering from. They told me I had a disease called alcoholism that was misunderstood and incurable — and that "once an alcoholic, always an alcoholic."

That phrase made me shudder. It felt like a sentence to life in prison. Seeing my expression of terror, one of them, named Fuller, invited me to join him the next day, when we would have more time, so he could explain what he knew about our very peculiar disease that was so little known and had such a bad reputation — this was long before alcoholism was recognized by the World Health Organization.

Fuller had not touched a drop of alcohol in 17 years, and since it was mid 1960, that meant he had come to Alcoholics Anonymous when it had been in existence for only 8 years.

"My dear companion in misfortune," he said to me with a big smile. "Once you pass the imaginary line between normal or even heavy drinking and alcoholic drinking, there is no going back. Once an alcoholic, always an alcoholic. If you accept this principle fully right from the start, you will save yourself a lot of problems and suffering. We have never known an alcoholic who has been able to drink again without suffering the consequences sooner or later.

"In the United States, they have kept track of what has happened with the first five or six thousand who came to A.A. They were all either in

complete abstinence or in full alcoholic drinking. A third category, of those who might be drinking normally, did not exist at all.

"This demonstrates what I have told you, Manuel. We in Alcoholics Anonymous are not professionals, and do not try to find philosophical, physiological, psychic, or moral reasons for our drinking behavior. The only thing we want to do is, by means of our program of recovery, never drink again and learn to live happily, without trying to escape from life as we used to do by getting drunk."

This first conversation when I arrived at A.A. helped me greatly and was crucial for my comprehension of my disease and behavior, but it left me with a desire to understand more about why I was different from other people, and what was determining and conditioning my life so much.

Today, 49 years later, without having touched another drop of alcohol, I want to share with you who are reading this, the conclusions I have come to about my own alcoholism. The first thing I want to establish is that, the way I see it, there are as many forms of alcoholism as there are alcoholics. This is because, in addition to being incurable, progressive, and fatal if not arrested, alcoholism is an illness influenced by all of the facets that make up the personality of an individual. Customs and environment are also influential.

The eminent Dr. Israel, who I believe was the first to receive a professorship in "alcoholology" from the Paris Sorbonne University, said that alcoholics may have been born with a kind of hypersensitivity, such that disturbances in the environment affect them greatly. Arguments between parents, shouts, or other noises can cause spikes in adrenalin production (a normal physiological reaction to fear). When the frequency or intensity of these reactions is greater than normal (due to hypersensitivity), the "configuration" of the metabolic system may be altered and become abnormal. When the child grows up and drinks alcohol, the ethanol is not metabolized in a normal way. Instead, an enzyme (D12) reaches the brain and causes a "need" for more — the phenomenon of craving.

A subconscious sensation of well-being is recorded in the biological memory, and the person begins to use alcohol to relieve all kinds of dis-

comfort such as shyness, fear of sex, and so on. In fact, this reaction is common in practically everyone, but those of us who, due to altered metabolism, develop the phenomenon of craving fall into a trap that results in dependency on the drug, alcohol. The metabolic change appears to be permanent, and nothing can reverse it. This is why the only solution for an alcoholic is to never drink a single drop of alcohol again.

The problem is complicated by the fact that alcoholism involves certain personality deficiencies or emotional immaturity, which could also be caused by the aforementioned hypersensitivity in childhood. It is curious that when we tell our stories in A.A., we virtually always start with our childhoods. We seem to intuitively know that our alcoholism started then, and that alcohol has not been more than a bad medication we came across because of social customs that have been deeply engrained in the history of humanity since ancestral times.

The ideas of Professor Israel are not only supported by my own experience, but they also give me great relief by giving an explanation for my apparent stupidity.

Without the program of Alcoholics Anonymous, I would never have gained stability or been able to live a happy life. Simply having the knowledge of the illness is not enough to bring us happiness. It is the A.A. program that has made it possible for my values to change, and for me to live without fear. It is no coincidence that our literature includes the Saint Francis prayer, not as a religious reference, but as an inspirational example of the beautiful philosophy of love.

I believe that our disease is the most patent demonstration of the reality of psychosomatic illnesses and that happiness is found in the absence of fear in life, and in living here and now at all times.

Manuel M. of Paris
The Harmony group, Zaragoza
July 2009

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THE A.A. SPONSOR

Lack of sponsorship and possible consequences in our fellowship

From my first days in Alcoholics Anonymous I realized the importance of sponsorship and the spiritual role it plays. I am certain that if I had not used sponsorship continually and earnestly I would not be where I am today. I am sorry to see that this custom is being lost, and relatively few A.A. members use sponsorship consistently — and this attitude is passed on to newcomers, and proliferates.

Sponsorship embodies the profound reasons for the success of A.A. and the notion of responsibility. It is our future. To be a sponsor, one must understand the A.A. program, tolerance, tact, and above all, discretion.

Furthermore, the sponsor helps the sponsee to become useful, first in the groups, and later at other levels. I believe that one of the reasons that there seem to be fewer people doing service is because they have not been taught to do it.

Sponsors also help to protect the group from the attitudes of those who arrive without scruples, by explaining how A.A. works, how it doesn't work, and about mutual respect. My experience has shown me that lack of sponsorship undermines the quality of the message that we should give help and love without expecting anything in return other than the good feeling we get from having done it.

The newcomer, in many cases, feels a need to talk about, or "vomit," all the awful experiences he has been through. The sponsor is there to listen, comfort, orient, and calm the newcomer. Otherwise, these lamentations

could hamper the proper function of an A.A. meeting. Without knowing it, the newcomer turns the meeting into a "wailing wall." This is also common among those who have been around longer, but are not working the program. The A.A. program is a way to change character defects, the true cause of suffering. The program teaches us to recognize the deficiencies deep within our personalities that are the root of our inability to cope with life, resulting in our reliance on the "bad medicine," alcohol.

When I came to A.A., we had a list of members able to sponsor, selected by a committee based on the following points:

- Length of time sober
- Experience as a sponsee
- Experience as a sponsor
- Regular meeting attendance
- Knowledge of the program
- Free time available

I have also tried to encourage this practice in groups I have participated in since that time.

I can assure you that when Nick H., Fuller P., and "Mac" McD. left, I did not have their knowledge and qualities, but they had prepared me to help the new people who were arriving.

As is common with the emotionally ill, the alcoholic needs to recharge his "batteries" of peace and tranquility. We ask, "How are your emotional batteries? Don't forget to recharge them." This energy is generated by the A.A. group when it functions well.

An A.A. sponsor or sponsee with low batteries is like a rag doll, with no soul. It can be shaken and moves, but does not transmit anything.

The one thing that has helped me most to preserve the treasure that A.A. has given me, has been sharing and trying to help others.

The sponsor serves as a model. Someone we want to be like. When I arrived, there were only three people in the group, all Americans, and I took all three.

Nick H. was the philosopher who always said, "Look for what you're asking about in the program. I think you'll find something there that will help you. You have to find the answer yourself."

Fuller P. was goodness and tranquility. He gave of himself freely to others.

With Mac I sometimes got angry. I think we had the same character defects, and seeing them in him bothered me because it was a reflection of what I didn't like in myself. Over time we both made progress that brought us closer together.

Manuel M. of Paris

ANECDOTES FROM MY FIRST YEARS IN A.A.

Coffee Service

At my third meeting after first coming to A.A. in Paris, I offered to make the coffee. I was certain that instead of practicing real abstinence, those "gringos" had some trick that allowed them to drink without suffering ill consequences. I was carrying a flask of cognac in my pants pocket, and decided I would discover their secret with a trick of my own.

Before I actually served the coffee, the man who would later become my sponsor walked across the room to the kitchen and said, "How nice of you! It's only your third meeting and you're already offering to serve others." His words hit me like punches. In a low voice I admitted to him that I had put some cognac in the coffee. His surprised face frightened me. Then, with a look of compassion and a calm voice he said, "You must be suffering terribly to do such a thing. Come on, I'll help you make a new pot of coffee ... and don't worry, we won't tell anyone."

My First Twelfth Step Call

It was early 1961. A handful of A.A. members met at the American Church in Paris, at number 65 Quai d'Orsay. The first French-speaking group of Alcoholics Anonymous in France was being born!

Our three American friends, Nick H., Fuller P., and Mac McD. had a lot of experience and helped us a lot. The one who had been around the longest, and was treated with great respect and admiration by the others, had been sober for 24 years. He emanated human warmth, serenity, and harmony. Turning to me, he asked if I would like to go with him on a Twelfth Step call, meaning to go visit an alcoholic who has asked for help. No Legion of Honor medal or lottery jackpot could have made me happier than that invitation. My ego was bursting at the seams with enthusiasm.

We went out to a luxury hotel not far from the American Church. All kinds of ideas were going through my mind. Sure, a Twelfth Step call could be risky, but at my 37 years of age I was strong and fast. I had been chosen despite my lack of experience because I would be able to help in case of difficulty, I thought. Nick H. was a lawyer of a certain age, and well known in the diplomatic circles of his country. I would be able to help him in case our drunk friend was belligerent. Anyway, going to a high-class hotel looked good.

We got to the hotel and asked for the room of Mr. Dhan M. At the door, Nick asked me to knock. I did several times, but there was no answer. Nick took out a card with the address, days, and times of our meetings, and wrote a few words on it. Then he asked me to slip the card under the door. "After calling us, he must have continued drinking, and he's probably passed out now," Nick said, seeing my expression of disappointment and anxiety. With a calm and measured voice, he went on, "I know you're disappointed. Am I right? Believe me, Manuel, we cannot do any more today."

"But what will become of Mr. Dhan," I asked.

"I've written a few words on the back of our card with the meeting schedule."

"What did you write?"

"When you're tired of suffering, we'll be waiting for you at one of our meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous.' And believe me, Manuel, there is a power greater than ourselves that can do for this man what we cannot do."

Two days later, our new friend Dhan M. came to a meeting at number 65 Quai d'Orsay. He was not in good shape. But with the help of a Higher Power and the program of Alcoholics Anonymous, he was able to overcome his difficulties. Next January he will celebrate his 44th A.A. anniversary, and he promised me he will do everything he can to be in Dijon on 17 November 2001 to celebrate the 41st anniversary of Alcoholics Anonymous in France, along with his 82nd birthday.

Manuel M. of Paris

28 WHEN MORNING SMELLS LIKE FURNITURE WAX!

I was working at a cabaret in Saint-Germain-des-Prés in 1961, when Flamenco and South American rhythms (especially Guaranís) were all the rage. It had been scarcely a year since I'd come to Alcoholics Anonymous, thanks to the articles by Joseph Kessel that had come out in *France-Soir*. I was the happiest person on earth, everything was possible, and I was capable of anything!

One day, about halfway through the show, a group of customers arrived — Madeleine Robinson, José de Villalonga, Gary Cooper, and other friends. Among them was a person with a distinguished air who was visibly drunk. Waving at me with a gesture I knew well, he said, "Put a bottle of champagne on every table, on me, please." I responded that I could not do that without the consent of my customers. He looked at me without seeing me, and appeared to have not understood. Then he asked me to make a phone call, and handed me a card. We had only one telephone, next to the bar, where I coordinated the show and controlled the lights. I pointed at the phone, told him he could use it, and gave him back the card. Because he was so close to where I was stationed, I overheard much of his conversation. "Yes, yes, Love, you are so right. But without you my life is senseless. Yes, I know I promised you, but give me another chance" After a few broken words, there was a long silence. He stood there with the phone in his hand and a blank look on his face.

With a conviction that defied all logic, and a lack of awareness that challenged all hope, I blurted out, "Excuse me, Sir, please wait. The show is ending, and I need to do a few things, but then, if you like, we could talk. I have something very important to tell you."

His friends were already getting their coats, and he told them to go on

ahead without him. I was finishing the books and, as every night, the other employees were wiping the oak tables with furniture wax. The man was sitting with his chin resting on his folded hands, propped up on the handle of his cane. Suddenly, with a heavy sigh, he muttered, "It already smells like morning." If I had had any doubt, these words convinced me this was a fellow brother in illness and desperation. It was true that he had not asked me for help, but I could offer him some hope. I was a living example of the solution to his problem. You had to have woken up in a lot of nightclubs for your mornings to smell like furniture wax.

I approached him and told him that I had inadvertently overheard part of his phone conversation. I explained that it had been only a year since I'd been just as desperate as he was, but that, thanks to having read an article about Alcoholics Anonymous, I had started going to A.A. meetings and hadn't had a drop of alcohol since, and that I was now happy and my life was terrific. He looked at me and repeated several times, "Alcoholics Anonymous. That's my problem, isn't it."

I went on, "If I understood correctly, your wife is going to start divorce proceedings tomorrow. Look, she probably isn't asleep yet, being so upset. If you want, we could phone her again and try to change her mind."

"Yes, yes," he replied. "O.K., but *you* have to talk to her. Explain your experience and help me."

My conviction and faith were stronger than any adversary, and my desire to help him was even stronger. We phoned long distance to Biarritz, talked for at least an hour, the three of us taking turns, and as incredible as it may seem, his wife arrived in Paris the next day. We went to meet her at Orly Airport. I had asked my wife to come with us — she'd been going to Al-Anon for a short time by then.

While my new friend and I went to 65 Quay d'Orsay, the only A.A. group in France in those days, for his first meeting (just 6 hours short of his first 24 hours without a drink), our wives waited to have dinner with us at Chez Francis, Place de l'Alma.

Both he and I continued attending meetings. All is well, and morning hasn't smelled like furniture wax ever since.

Manuel M. of Paris
The Harmony group, Zaragoza

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SAINT FRANCIS THE PHYSICAL THERAPIST?

Saying that everything was better in the past is not so true in A.A. The human warmth surrounding those of us who arrived in 1960 and formed the first French-speaking group in France was indescribable. We were like the shipwrecked who survive a storm clinging to a piece of driftwood. We all swam toward the same destination — the physical and emotional sobriety that would save us. From a clinical standpoint it was difficult to find adequate care for overcoming severe symptoms of withdrawal. In those days, the distinctions between "alcoholic" and "drunkard" or "anxious" and "insane" were virtually unknown among the general public and even in the medical profession. We tried urgently to help newcomers as soon as they arrived, in an attempt to avoid unfortunate commitments to psychiatric hospitals, where many alcoholics were sent for their apparent madness. We had learned that sugar-water or hot chocolate were helpful in easing the pangs of withdrawal. Just being there to hold a hand or pat a back could help an alcoholic get through a rough moment. Explaining how we had gone through it too, and that the suffering would pass, and that it's better to endure it once and for all — our personal experience was of great help. Some of us were instrumental in preventing newcomers from ending up in Sainte Anne or Perray-Vaucluse (psychiatric hospitals for women and men, respectively). Let's not forget that this was back in 1960.

On one occasion, taking advantage of the fact that my wife had gone away on vacation, I offered my home to help newcomers. Perhaps because it was summer, the number of "guests" was remarkable. When my wife returned, the doorman and his wife took her aside and explained: "Madam, as soon as you left with your little boy, your husband began bringing home all kinds of strange people ... old and young, men and women, and the other day, a colored man. It's none of our business, but

we feel obliged to tell you that your husband is a real pervert, and this place has been a continuous orgy."

My wife knew perfectly well what had been happening, and without blinking an eye, said, "I don't know whether you were aware, but my husband is a physical therapist, and the clinic where he works has closed for the summer. The people you saw are patients who could not go without treatment. You will have noticed that some of them arrived with great difficulty and in bad shape."

When I learned of the excuse my wife had given, I felt bad. "Why didn't you tell them the truth?" I asked her. She, who was a member of Al-Anon, replied, "What about their anonymity? And furthermore, your ego is big enough already. It would have made you sound like Saint Francis of Assisi."

Manuel M. of Paris

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NO TURNING BACK

For more than half a century, one of the things I have reflected upon most is my belonging to our fellowship. And I have come to a conclusion: in this world we can refuse an honorific title, abdicate a throne, convert to a different religion, change political parties or labor unions, reject a lifestyle or form of education, divorce a wife or husband, fall out of love, change hobbies or nationalities or even sex, stop being fans of the football team we've supported forever, ... but we can never erase our names from the list of alcoholics in A.A. — even if we have stopped participating in groups or have relapsed — because there is no list of names.

When in your inner conscience you feel you have become part of A.A., there is no turning back. Why not? Because Alcoholics Anonymous is more than a belief or creed, more than a throne or political movement or religion ... Alcoholics Anonymous is a way of life, a way of thinking, a way of feeling and being. It is living in the here and now, every instant, in which all values and parameters change.

When you have shared with others who are "your people," it becomes spiritual. This is the spirituality that was behind the founding of our movement and has guided us to where we are today.

A person can learn to stop doing bad things, or stop thinking bad thoughts. But when you share your torment, your wretchedness, your pains, and at the same time your hope, and your happiness, something breaks in your mechanism, and it becomes impossible to shift back into reverse. For this reason, among others, a genuine encounter with Alcoholics Anonymous is an unforgettable experience that changes us for the rest of our lives.

Manuel M. of Paris
Area 6

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CURRUCHITO

Circumstances, destiny, divine providence, a Higher Power, or perhaps God wanted me to be one of those fortunate enough to escape — first the tragic Spanish Civil War, and then the Second World War. I stowed away on a boat leaving Bordeaux (France) in November of 1939. Twenty-three days later we reached the warm sandy beaches of the Dominican Republic, at Puerto Plata. I was not yet 16 years old, but was full of spite and resentment toward the whole of humanity. I believe that later it was those unfortunate events that served as my excuse to give free rein to certain character defects that had been growing in me since childhood.

An alcoholic is no more than an idealist who, due to emotional immaturity, has failed in life with respect to his ideals and principles, and tries to escape from this failure through alcohol. I decided to take the world and my life without caring what anyone thought, without caring about any concept of what it meant to be human. I had no principles and no limits. The only thing I wanted to do was satisfy my thirst for adventure, my lust for life, and my desires. But all I did was drink without measure, ride horses, play tennis, box, seduce all the women who crossed my path, and fight to show that I was the strongest and the best. I soon had gained a most envious reputation.

Some 20 years after coming to Paris, I decided to return to the Dominican Republic. The first thing I did, of course, was go to the A.A. meetings. What a surprise! The first person I ran into there was an old drinking buddy, Curruchito. I had often thought of him and wondered what his fate had been. We embraced heartily, and I asked him how he had found our fellowship. With a calmness and self-possession typical of him, he related the following story.

“Well, my old friend, this is what happened. I was at a dance with my wife, and I was quite drunk. Suddenly I realized that another guy was staring at my wife. I glared at him to show him I meant business, and he just glared back at me. So I stood up, and so did he. I marched toward him, and he came toward me at the same time. I took out my gun and pointed it at him, and he pointed one at me too. Good Lord, I had no option but to shoot. With a tremendous boom there was an explosion of glass, and the mirror that had been in front of me fell in shards to the floor.

“I was arrested, and a judge gave me a light sentence on the condition that I go to meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous. That was about 15 years ago, I haven’t had a drink since, and I live a sober and happy life. I believe that on that day at the dance I somehow killed, symbolically, the alcohol within me. Still, without the help of A.A. and a profound awareness thanks to the program and fellow members, the “old Curruchito” would have quickly destroyed me again.”

*Manuel M.
Zaragoza, Spain*

WHEN THE CRAVING STARTS

When I started drinking, back in my youth, I already knew that when I took the first drink I couldn't stop, and that the more I drank, the more I wanted to drink.

I was always looking for excuses that might justify my behavior, which was abnormal any way you looked at it.

On one occasion I was in a posh bar with a distinguished young woman of the tennis club, who tactfully but with intrigue finally asked why I was drinking one whiskey after another at such a fast rate. I remember telling her coolly without the least loss of composure that I had experienced a great tragedy with devastating consequences in my life. After letting her beg to know what had happened, and making it clear that it was very painful for me to talk about, I finally told her that a few months previously I had had a serious motorcycle accident.

She was overcome by curiosity and determination to know more. I finally confided to her that my genitals had been injured, and that the doctors had had to amputate my penis and one of my testicles. She stared at me with a look of shock, pity, compassion, and pain. It was clear that I no longer had to explain my drinking, and at the same time I had aroused in her the maternal instincts that are so profound in all women, combined with evident tenderness and affection. As the double whiskeys kept coming at an accelerating rate, my libido increased along with my drunkenness and daring. The decisive moment arrived quickly. I think my story gave the girl a feeling of protection.

I don't remember exactly how we got to my apartment, or how we proceeded to freely enjoying the most sublime of sexual pleasures. A few

minutes later, she asked, "But how were you able to do that ... after the accident and all?"

"Well," I answered, "isn't it amazing how far they've come in making realistic prosthetic body parts. Practically perfect!"

We ended up living together for a long time, and I have many fond memories, but my alcoholism continued to progress inexorably, becoming the master and executioner of my life, and of the people around me. Like so many others, in the end my friend couldn't take it any longer.

Manuel M. of Paris
The Harmony group, Zaragoza
26 July 2001

HAPPY TO BE HAPPY

From its beginnings, the Quai d'Orsay group was fortunate to have of a solid core of consistent members. Among them was a particular guy who seemed more like a wayward wise man or someone disguised as a wino in order to look the part. He even had a gruff voice, and said incongruous things, almost always the same.

One day I asked him to explain what he had said. He immediately replied:

"And you, an old-timer, don't understand what I'm saying? Well I'll explain in detail. If I am still an alcoholic today, even though I haven't had a drink in a long time, it's because when I was young I was a shy and introverted child, with a lack of emotional maturity that I seem to have been born with. I was afraid of life, and of other people. My parents fought frequently, and I hid under my bed. One day I drank something that had alcohol in it. The drink seemed to free me. I tried it again on other occasions, feeling I had found the miracle medication for my discomfort. With alcohol I was able to say and do things I hadn't dared before. It was like a cure-all.

"But then alcohol betrayed me and turned into a domineering tyrant, and that's how I ended up here. Since then, my problem has not been drinking alcohol. Not drinking has been fairly easy for me with the help of the rest of you. What has been more difficult has been allaying my fears and finding happiness. At first, my new life lacked spice. It was boring. I no longer had the anxiety of being thrown out of the house by my wife, or the feelings of guilt associated with so many things I did, and which produced charges of adrenalin. Then one day my sponsor, in whom I regularly confided my feelings, said to me, 'You don't drink now, and that is

very good, but you aren't making any progress beyond that. If we practice and live the twelve-step program of recovery, step by step and one day at a time, we learn that we have a right to be happy. Since childhood you have had wrinkles in your soul, pressed in by fears and suffering. The program irons out the wrinkles, and our soul becomes smooth. If you practice our principles day by day, you will develop a new attitude and learn to cope with life without fear. You will be able to face your feelings and not feel sorry for yourself, and that will bring you happiness.'

"Today I can say that I am happy, and happy to be happy. I have come to understand the traps of my past. Today I live in the here and now. I try to live and let live. I try to turn my problems over to the care of a Power greater than myself, rather than trying to take care of everything with my own ego. I try to share and help others, not only in meetings but in every area of my life. I get by on a very small pension, but it's enough for my material expenses, and my spiritual life has been enriched enormously. Manuel, right now I am recharging my batteries. Thanks for talking to me."

I was left perplexed and speechless. My friend's words made me reflect. We have to open a door to our deepest levels, and along the way we experience a spiritual awakening.

The old wrinkles in the soul cause us to confuse suffering with life. When I stopped suffering I felt empty or dead. When things started to go well, I always managed to create some sort of problem — arguments, debts, fights, run-ins with the law, and even prison. I didn't feel alive unless the adrenalin was flowing.

Today I want to be happy, and happy to be happy. It seems that being happy is simple. The difficult thing is to be simple. We must live in accordance with the best of our true selves.

Thank you dear friend for sharing with us your experience, and for helping us to better understand the devilishness of our character defects.

Manuel M. of Paris

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RECIPE FOR TURKEY WITH WHISKEY

1. Buy a turkey of about 6 kilos for six people, a bottle of whiskey, salt, pepper, olive oil, and strips of bacon.
2. Wrap the turkey with the bacon, tie it, salt it, pepper it, and dribble with olive oil.
3. Preheat the oven (thermostat level 7) for 10 minutes.
4. Have a glass of whiskey while you wait.
5. Put the turkey on a platter and into the oven.
6. Pour two glasses of whiskey and drink them.
7. Turn the oven up to thermostat 8 for 20 minutes to brown the turkey.
8. Drink three glashes of whiskey.
9. After half 'n hour, open the oven an shheck how ish cummin' along.
10. Grab the bottle of whiskey and take a long guzzhle.
11. After 'nother haff-'our, stagger over t'th oven, an open the damn door.
12. Burn yer hand on the damn offen! SHHIDT!
13. Try to sid down on a schair an drink five or shixsh glashesh of wish ... wishk-key, or ... whaddever
14. Ledth' tur- -key bake fer fer hoursh .. fer FOUR hoursh.

15. Whoopie! Fife more drinkshsh!

12. Take oven outt' th'turkey.

8. Take a big shwig u'whishkee.

19. Try again t'take turkey out'uven th'uven, cuz it messhed up th' frsht time.

6. Get th'turk- -key off th' floor an wipe i'off w'atowel an putt't ona plat ... on a plate-r ... a tray.

22. Shlip on the greash an fall on the kish'n floor. Aughh! Try to get up.

36. Deshide to shtay on floor an finisshh bottle whissshk ...

20. Crawl t'bed shhleep ...

21. Next morning eat cold turkey with a good mayonnaise and soda water. Spend the rest of the day cleaning up the disaster in the kitchen.

Anonymous

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TWELVE ANECDOTES

My long trajectory in A.A. has proceeded steadily, illuminated by anecdotal bright spots of all colors, sometimes sad, sometimes cheerful, but always profoundly human. Here are a dozen, our lucky number.

One: The Sign of the Cross

This happened more than half a century ago during the first years of my beloved Quai d'Orsay group.

There was one member who had adopted the habit of going around to each person at the beginning of the meeting and making the sign of the cross with his hand, from shoulder to shoulder and from feet to head. This seemed out of place to me, and with a certain tone of reproach I said to him, "Excuse me, but it's better not to make political or religious signs here." With a scornful attitude, he replied, "Listen, old-timer, I'm not making any kind of sign. I'm just telling my fellow members (making the horizontal hand movement) 'If you drink' (and then making the vertical movement) 'you're screwed!'"

Two: The Three Elephants

I think it was in 1971 or 1972, while I was holding down the A.A. office at Quai d'Orsay where we attended to anyone who came looking for information about A.A. It was about nine o'clock in the morning, and a middle-aged man came in, somewhat agitated and worried, and said, "I would like to stop drinking, but I'm really afraid that I'll go through delirium tremens." I told him that I was no doctor, but thought that what he was talking about was what happened to people who kept drinking, not those who stopped. But that in any case, in an hour there would be

a meeting, and someone there would be better able to inform him. After the meeting, the man was calmer and he told me he would try to come back the next day.

Indeed, the next day he came back, but in a state of worrisome anxiety. "Everything was going fine," he said. "But just before I got here I saw elephants ... a big one, a medium-sized one, and a small one." I didn't know what to do. I had him lie down on a bench and put a clothespin on his tongue — I'd heard that people could swallow their tongues and choke. He moved convulsively. When another member arrived, and I told him about the elephants, he made me take the clothespin off the man's tongue. It turned out that in the plaza next to the meeting place there was a circus, and they had three elephants — a big one, a medium-sized one, and a small one. Our new friend wasn't convinced, so we went with him to see them. He ended up staying in the group and quit drinking. But he never forgave me for the clothespin!

Three: The Bath

Once in a while, in special cases, I have taken a newcomer home with me to be with me during the first so very important and difficult 24 hours without a drink. This was the case with one guy during the early days of our first group. Everything was going well when suddenly, struck with an imperious craving to drink, he begged me to give him a beer. I asked him to hold out, and told him it was better to get over the misery all at once instead of drawing it out with more drink. He gave it some thought and then said, "OK, I won't drink a beer on the condition that YOU drink it." I looked at him first with surprise, and then with anger. "You're asking me to throw away my hard-earned years of sobriety? You're a real scoundrel!" Then the two of us burst out laughing. After that little episode, he said he felt better. I suggested he take a hot bath to relax. He accepted, but had a difficult time getting into the tub.

A few days later, at a meeting, he told about how he had been able to quit drinking. "Manuel helped me a lot, but don't go to his house. You'll stop drinking, but he'll scald you alive!" I hadn't realized the water had been so hot.

Four: The Countess

I was at the A.A. office at 65 Quay d'Orsay, at the American Church in Paris, when the door opened. In walked a very elegant woman with indisputable class. "Is this the office of Alcoholics Anonymous?"

I responded with our usual, "Yes, Ma'am, my name is Manuel and I belong to Alcoholics Anonymous. How can I help you?" Since starting this service, I had learned to be attentive and concise.

"Good," she went on. And then lowering her voice, "Although it may not seem possible, I believe I have an aristocratic society form of alcoholism."

I acted astonished, looked at her with great interest, and admitted that I had never heard of that kind of alcoholism. "It must be serious, I don't know."

At that moment a young member who installed heating systems, and who was already well versed in the A.A. program, walked in and I asked him, in front of the woman, to help me out. "Please, Miguel, this lady says she has an aristocratic society form of alcoholism."

Miguel understood the situation and walked over to the woman. "Let's see. You drink too much. Sometimes you drink so much that the next day you don't remember what you did. And on occasion you pee the bed."

"Yes, yes," said the woman with a look of surprise. "But how do you know that?"

Miguel said, "Because that's what we call alcoholism, and you are very lucky to have come to the place where you can get help."

I suggested she attend a meeting. When it was over, a couple of members came to see me. "The new woman is very intelligent, and she heard a lot of important things, and she feels very grateful."

Indeed, the new member became quite active in the fellowship and helped many other people who suffered from aristocratic society alcoholism.

Five: Teresa

For years I was very lucky to be able to do the service of attending to the hundreds of people who came into our A.A. office. They taught me a lot and helped me to understand the A.A. program myself. One day a woman came through the door.

"Good morning, what can I do for you? My name is Manuel, and I belong to Alcoholics Anonymous."

"Look, Sir, it's not for me. I have a friend who has some sort of problem with alcoholic beverages. She's very timid, and asked me to find out about this kind of problem."

Because of certain details in her manner, or intuition, or I don't know exactly what, I suspected that she herself was the person with the problem. I explained how we in A.A. view this illness as progressive and incurable. I also told her my own story. I gave her copies of all the pamphlets we had, and thanked her for being so nice to help another person, who, from what I understood, could be just like me in her illness.

About a week later, the same woman came back in and said that her friend was much better now. Then she asked if I could give her another set of pamphlets like the ones I'd given her before. This happened again a couple of more times. On the sixth occasion, when she came in, she said, "I'm glad you're sitting down because I have something to say that will surprise you. You see, I didn't really come here for a friend. It was for me all along."

"That's impossible, Teresa!" I replied. "But now, please sit down because I also have something to tell you. First, I'm very glad that you've been able to stop drinking, and that the principles of our program have helped you as they also help me. But what I want to tell you is that I've figured out that you are a nun, and that in your convent there are at least five other people who need the help of A.A."

Looking quite surprised, she started laughing. "But how did you know?"

"I'm not sure," I admitted. "Your way of speaking, your gestures, your way of sitting. You asked me for the same set of pamphlets five times. Maybe it's the change in your voice and in your eyes. Whenever I have spoken to you it's always been as though you were a fellow member. But I never said what I suspected. There are many reasons A.A. is anonymous, and this is one of them."

Some time later, the mother superior of the convent wanted to meet me, and I went with Teresa. She thanked me a lot. I explained that the best thing that can happen to an alcoholic is to have the opportunity to help another, and that I was the one who was benefitting most. She said, "Well, you can be sure that I understand, because the same is true for us — not counting the money we're saving by not buying so much wine for the convent." We all started laughing.

My friendship with Teresa and admiration for her are great. I understood the great suffering the nuns must have felt when drinking. They believed deeply in their religious convictions, and their drunkenness must have affected their libido and caused a great sense of guilt. After all, they were "married" to God.

Six: Henry the Little Tailor

Henry the little tailor (thus affectionately distinguished from the other Henry, who was big) became a member of our first group in 1961, but it wasn't easy for him to stop drinking. The rest of us had quit, but he kept relapsing. One day he asked me to be his sponsor. I accepted, saying that A.A. helped us to stop drinking, not to drink and then sober up for a while now and then. I think that his difficulty made us all a bit fearful that perhaps the program had its faults. After a brief period of abstinence, Henry relapsed again. I saw him and scolded him for not calling me before taking the first drink. He went away sad and dejected. They found him dead the next day.

I felt horribly guilty. Everyone in the group supported me and tried to help me avoid depression. This was a great lesson for me. Who was I to say what another person should do? People come to A.A. with problems of all kinds, and the best you can do is tell your own experience and what the A.A. program suggests, but not what the other person should do ...

without knowing it, I had maybe pushed him to make a fatal decision. Being an alcoholic in A.A. is a great privilege, but also a great responsibility. Human lives sometimes depend on us. We mustn't be the "sorcerer's apprentice." We should give love, consoling, and affection, and have a good attitude and be available when someone asks. I have told this story hundreds of times so that it may, at least, serve as a lesson. After more than half a century, I still never want to forget it.

Seven: Four Reasons

When I came to A.A. in 1960 I was welcomed by three North Americans. One of them had already been in A.A. for 24 years without a slip. When I heard that, I could not contain myself. I asked him why he still came to meetings after such a long time without drinking.

With perfect calm he replied, "I have four reasons. The first one is so that I don't forget that I must always avoid the first drop of the first drink. The second is to welcome people like you, as I was welcomed when I first came to A.A. The third is to tell you that it is possible to stay sober one day at a time. And if you want to know my fourth reason, come see me at my office tomorrow." With that he handed me his business card.

He must have been somebody important because when I got there the next day I was accompanied to a magnificent office. "Hi Manuel!" he greeted me jovially. "You've come to learn my fourth reason for still going to meetings, right? Well, this life is not always pleasant, and at least a couple of times a week I need to listen to the symphony of love that we hear in A.A. meetings, where we give the best of ourselves without expecting anything other than the opportunity to help others, like I was helped when I was young like you, dear Manuel."

Eight: A Good Example

I'd been in a bad mood for a few days, and for some reason I unleashed on my sponsor, Fuller P., "You gringos always have the best of everything."

He answered, "First of all, I'm not a gringo. I'm an alcoholic who was born in the United States. You are still in a little boat being tossed by the

storm, and you are jealous because you see me calmly sunbathing on the beach. If you want to join us, we're waiting for you. But in order to get to this place, you have to put your rudder into the water and aim your bow in the right direction. Then ask your Higher Power to put the wind into your sails. You cannot do it all on your own. Believe me, if you do that with honesty and courage, you'll arrive."

Nine: A Good Sponsor

One day a very pretty English girl came to a meeting. She was the first woman to arrive in our group. François was sitting next to me, and seeing my face, made fun of me, joking, "Girls drink, too?"

I went over to greet her, and after introducing myself I offered to explain the A.A. program to her. Everything was going well, and I had just offered to walk her home after the meeting when my sponsor, who "happened" to be close by, said, "Manuel, after the meeting I'd like to speak with you."

"No, Fuller, I'm going to walk Elizabeth home."

"Don't worry, Lennart will do that."

Only the great respect and consideration I had for Fuller P. could have restrained me.

When we were alone later, he said, "Look, if you are a Don Juan, that's fine with me, but there are 300,000 pretty girls in Paris waiting for you out there. But girls in the group are like your sisters, and they arrive like you did, disoriented and lost. They need affection and understanding. Although you are still new yourself, under the circumstances you could seem like a wise old-timer, and could then end up giving the wrong impression of what A.A. really is, and what it can mean in our lives, as you yourself have told me. I am your sponsor, and I can help you. But I also have to protect the group from your instincts and your innocence concerning what A.A. is, and for what it serves. Don't be mad. Soon enough it will be your turn to have moments like this one that I am having now."

And with that he gave me a big hug.

Ten: Saint-Lazare Railway Station

I was doing service at the Quai d'Orsay office when someone called. He said he was at the bar at the railway station, and fed up with life, and that he was going to throw himself in front of a train. I already had experience and knew what to say. I told him to give himself another chance, that I would tell him my story, and if he wanted, I would send someone to the station to explain A.A. to him. Finally he agreed to have someone meet him. There was only one other person in the office at the moment, Claudine. We always had two on duty, and if possible a man and a woman. As an exception to the rule, I accepted her offer to go meet the guy, since she had a lot of experience.

After an hour or so, Claudine came back with someone, and we started the ritual: "Hi, my name's Manuel, and you made the right decision to phone us."

"But I didn't phone anyone," he interjected. "I was in the bar at the station and this pretty woman showed up and told me not to worry, to come with her, and that I would be saved, too. To tell the truth, I am overwhelmed with problems and I drink all the time."

I checked the newspapers the next day to see if anyone had committed suicide by jumping in front of a train at Saint-Lazare station, but no. No one had. The guy who had phoned most probably had a few more beers and forgot all about killing himself.

Eleven: The Astronaut

In those days Perray-Vaucluse psychiatric hospital was the main place for treating alcoholics, and we wanted to start a group that would meet right there in the hospital. The man in charge had invited us, and we'd already gone to talk with the doctors. This time it was the head doctor who called us for a meeting. "Manuel, we have a patient here who would like you to come talk with him." I left another member to man the office, and went to take advantage of the opportunity.

Pierre, legionnaire, big, strong ... in ten minutes we had formed that

je-ne-sais-quoi kind of bond that is felt between alcoholics, as though we had known each other forever. The doctor who had been observing everything said, "The immediate affinity that you two have shown for each other is amazing. What is it?"

"I don't know doctor, it happens a lot at our office, but I can't explain it."

Our friend Pierre spoke up, "Look Doctor, Manuel is like a retired astronaut. He's been to the moon, and we've been talking about the landscapes we've both seen there."

"Yes, yes," I agreed. "Pierre is right. We have a different perspective on things. Your binoculars don't see the same landscapes."

Twelve: Minneapolis

It was the year 2000. A.A. was celebrating 65 years of existence, and I was celebrating 40 years since my last drink of alcohol. I had come to A.A. at 37 years of age ... so I was 77. And able to afford the trip to the Minneapolis convention, I was a happy man.

There were 70,000 people from around the world. The theme was "Pass It On — Into the 21st Century." All the old-timers who had more than 40 years sober in A.A. were to put their names into a big top hat, from which fifteen names would be drawn to select those who would go up to the podium to speak. I was 20 days short of 40 years, but the guy in charge, who knew me, said, "We'll trust you for those 20 days. Put your name into the hat. Anyway there are more than 40 of us, so your chances of getting picked aren't that big. But you can sit in the front row with the old-timers, and have two companions with you."

Fearing I might be picked, I did what he said anyway. The second to the last name drawn was "Manuel." I wanted to die. The friend sitting next to me said I looked pale and was sweating.

"I'm terrified," I told him.

"Don't think that way. It's not you who's afraid, it's your ego that wants to look better than everyone else up there, and that's impossible. Just get

up and say you are an electric cable through which a current of love and life has been flowing for 40 years."

Now it's 15 years later, and as I write this, A.A. is getting ready to celebrate 80 years in the world, and I will celebrate 55 years sober in A.A. I have already bought my ticket to go to the convention in Atlanta, God willing. I hope I will be able to go, but I have gotten used to living one day at a time, right here and right now. Having expectations about going to the convention is not necessarily a bad thing, but is really just mental frolicking and should not perturb me.

My sponsor, Fuller P., used to say, "Manuel, if something perturbs you, it means you are still perturbable."

La Ñapa

In the Dominican Republic, when you buy something, if you ask for "*la ñapa*" (the bonus), they'll give you a little extra of whatever it is you're buying. Well, here's a little extra anecdote for you, one about my time at the Quai d'Orsay office.

Someone knocked at the door and I answered. There stood a man of 50 or 60 years. I shook his hand and asked what I could do for him. He started crying. I tried to console him and asked him to tell me why he was crying.

"Sir, I have descended the rungs of society to living in the street. I drink even though I want to stop. But the reason I'm crying is that I cannot even remember how long it's been since anyone has shaken my hand."

I started crying, too.

The man went to groups for quite some time, and eventually stopped drinking. He went back to work and had a very good job.

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TO BE AN A.A.

To be an alcoholic in A.A. is to be someone who was apparently destined to disappear, suffering a horrible death. For it is through the destruction of one's own soul, an inexorable devouring self-destruction, that one begins.

Thanks to a series of coincidences, the fortunate alcoholic finds salvation in a simple program of life developed a little more than 70 years ago now, when a number of people wrote it up based on their own experiences and hope.

An A.A. is a person who has been through this and learns that the best way of helping himself is by helping other alcoholics who are still suffering, and that it is therefore important to not stop going to meetings. He also knows that he will never be alone again, even if no one is around. He knows that just for today he can be happy — happiness is the absence of fear. He no longer needs to escape by drinking or by any other means. He measures his life in hours, days, and years of happiness.

The alcoholic in A.A. is someone who desperately sought God and could not see Him, who sought his soul and could not find it, who finally sought his brothers in suffering, and then found all three.

Past and Future

Alcoholics Anonymous offers us a new life. Many of us did not believe that we would be able to recover, to be reborn. We thought that our errors of the past, bathed in alcohol, were like granite tombstones that would weigh on us forever. It seemed to us that any attempt to start over would be in vain, because those errors would always cast their shadows on our present life. We were about to succumb to the gangrene of our

previous injuries, holding us prisoners in a dismal dungeon. We were only waiting for vultures to fight over our remains.

Thanks to others who had also suffered this way, we saw the possibility of a new dawn, and we clung like the shipwrecked to driftwood. We hung on, day after day, without losing hope, even though at times the memories of past suffering confused us in how we interpreted people and events.

Self-deception is strong, and can make the unreal seem real. One day I said to myself, "I want to always live HERE and RIGHT NOW!"

Moments of bad mood, or bad temper, lead us to interfere with others. These are just escape valves for the "steam" of suffering that is still latent within us.

Nothing is set in stone. Being REBORN into a new life, as a new person, is a reality, a privilege, and a responsibility to share with others how we have come up out of the snake pit and insanity.

We have found the path on which through shared LOVE we find happiness ONE DAY AT A TIME!

"AS WE UNDERSTOOD HIM"

The purpose of this writing is to share my experiences with anyone who, like me, has had difficulty comprehending, conceiving of, feeling, or believing in a Providence that shelters, protects and guides us. And so that, above all, this difficulty is not a hindrance, as it was for me, to advancing along the relatively easy road to a spiritual awakening.

I have not gone back to having desires for self-destruction by relapsing into drinking, or by any other subtly disguised method. For me, a spiritual awakening is a profound change of values. I learn a new way of comprehending, feeling, loving in other words, to live on a previously unsuspected new level, guided to a sober, serene, and harmonious life; namely, to happiness.

Who am I to say who or what God is? Or what God is made of? The program says, "God as we understood Him." But I could not understand the concept of God at all.

When asked whether God exists, French scientist and believer Jean Guilton replied, "Does God exist? There are thousands of millions, it's in everything, in everyone, and everywhere!"

Perhaps God is the best part of me, perhaps my conscience, or perhaps it is that vital force that I felt when I came to A.A. in 1960 and was welcomed by those three Americans, whom I had never seen before in my life. Out of all 200,000 A.A.'s in the world at that time, those three represented for me everyone who had made A.A. possible for its first 25 years. At one meeting, a friend said, "God is for whoever wants or needs him." Another asked people whether they felt they got more out of A.A. than they gave, or felt they gave more than they got. Everyone felt they

got more than they gave. The difference had to come from somewhere, and for him, that was God.

Perhaps it's not important whether we believe in God, if we are resistant to that. Perhaps the important thing is to feel a force that guides us to others and teaches us to respect them and to respect ourselves, liberating an extraordinary wealth of sensitivity, grandeur, and love that I believe lies within all of us. I believe that all of us have a part of Saint Francis of Assisi inside us, and that what we call adversity is what guides us along the path to finding our souls and happiness.

Expecting a human to understand God is like expecting a dog to understand trigonometry: it is beyond the capability of the species. It is interesting to see how religious scholars and scientists are converging in their understanding of the great mysteries of the universe and life, and becoming more humble in their assertions. The Big Bang, expanding universe, self-contained universe, with no beginning and no end, matter and antimatter, life from a divine breath or through structured evolution ... why do we have such a demanding need to know and understand? Fear of not really being significant, or of disappearing without a trace? Or maybe it is simply the inability to just accept something we don't understand. Is this inability to live with what we don't understand caused by pride? Perhaps it is fear of the beyond. Now I know why the concept of humility is so important in A.A.

I believe there are two main factions in A.A. The majority of members believe that there is a kind of divine providence that led them to A.A. and protects them — a God into whose hands they have placed their wills and their lives, without fear. Others, like me, believe that God is a new and vital attitude of happiness that blossoms when love guides reason, and that we cannot understand.

The most important thing in the life of an alcoholic in A.A. is his recovery and helping the alcoholic who still suffers. This is an inevitable condition of his happiness. We must keep A.A. open so that all alcoholics can find a place with us in this grand mosaic of a fellowship, allowing many different concepts of a Higher Power, God.

I doubt there is anyone who is farther from a concept of a Higher Power than I was, so I beseech you to stay open-minded, regardless of your current beliefs and obstacles. Be willing and without fear.

Today I have no doubt that a Higher Power guided blind-drunk Emilio to me, hiding behind a tree, at that busy intersection in Paris. There was some sort of extraordinary "transmitter" connecting desperation and love, and in my view, incomprehensible to humans.

I have remained open and willing to conceive of or comprehend a God, but I imagine that, being human, it is beyond my capacity for the time being. The new attitude that has led me to a spiritual awakening consists mainly in helping others with all my energy, especially those who are suffering the most. Comprehending, conceiving of, feeling, or believing in God does not have the same effect in everyone, but I am absolutely convinced that there are very few people who can live without feeling something of a Higher Power.

I believe that the influence of a Higher Power reaches us through I-don't-know-what path directly related to our openness and willingness to give love to others and to respect ourselves.

Manuel M. of Paris
Zaragoza, Spain

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TO LIVE HAPPY LIVES The Purpose of Our Program

Once we accept the A.A. program and have put it into practice in our daily lives, I believe there is not much difference between a member who has been in A.A. for many years, and one who is relatively new. However, the member who has been around longer has had more days to reflect and to appreciate peace and serenity, which contribute to clarity, and that is no small thing.

In ancient times, humans learned how to ferment the juice of grapes and produce the alcohol (ethanol) that seemed to make food taste better and added laughter to the celebrations of feasts. The "spirits," as they called them, produced in them a state of euphoria and fun — except for a small minority, in whom alcohol caused dependency and all kinds of nonsense: the alcoholics. Over time, humans refined their knowledge and increased production of all kinds of fermented wines and beers, and later distilled liquors and stronger spirits.

For centuries, the miserable men and women who could not control their consumption of alcohol suffered the incomprehension of society and the scorn of their fellows. No cures, detoxifications, or special treatments helped them to drink reasonably, because their alcoholism was not in the alcohol content of the drinks, but rather in a peculiar physiology and metabolism, and above all in their personalities characterized by emotional immaturity. In many cases these were people who had suffered traumatic experiences even as children, and felt a lack of love ("the spiritual thirst of our being for wholeness," said C. G. Jung in his letter to Bill W.). They were dreamers. It is said that we alcoholics are idealists who have failed in real life. This idea fits like a glove ... or like a wedding ring — as if we have been tricked into marrying insanity and self-destruction.

Not until less than a century ago, in 1935, did a patient of Dr. Silkworth's, Bill W., have a spiritual experience (or parapsychological moment) that led him to conceive of a program of recovery capable of helping him stop drinking and confront his sick ego. Our sick egos are the false personalities that we had to develop in order to face life, because we were fragile with emotional immaturity. The Twelve Steps of the A.A. program have helped millions of alcoholics to live happy sober lives.

Our program was partly inspired by the life of Saint Francis of Assisi. In his youth, he was a lost sheep, but his desperation helped him to intuit that only by helping others would he find happiness in his own life. This is the spiritual basis of the A.A. program.

I came to Alcoholics Anonymous in 1960 at 37 years of age. Since then I have tried to follow the A.A. way of life, which includes trying to live in the present moment. My anxieties and fears have disappeared, making room for a life that is happy, joyous, and free. "Happy, Joyous, and Free" is the theme that has been selected for the upcoming 80th anniversary International Convention to be held in Atlanta, Georgia, U.S.A. on 2-5 July 2015. God willing I will be there celebrating my 92nd birthday and 55 years of sobriety in A.A.

Thank you, Saint Francis! Thank you, Bill! Thank you, A.A.!

Manuel M. of Paris

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A LONG TRAJECTORY

Since coming to Alcoholics Anonymous in 1960, and through intuition more than any sort of wise reflection, I have sensed the magnificent transcendence of A.A.'s spread around the world, as well as the fact that one of its greatest obstacles has been the deeply rooted wine culture in countries such as France, Spain, Italy, Portugal, and Greece. In addition to ancient tradition, the enormous economic interests involved in the wine-growing industry compound the problem.

Thanks to the articles by Joseph Kessel and the strong group of North American A.A. members in Paris, the first French-speaking group in France was born at the American Church at Quai d'Orsay. Only three years later, a second group was formed at Belleville. An Italian member went to Italy to pass the message, and in 1961, Ignacio of Rentería, in the Basque Country, started an A.A. group there with literature we sent him from Paris.

We were also in contact with Rafael C. in Tenerife (Canary Islands), and with Emilio of the Notariado group in Barcelona, to whom Jean Jacques M. took literature in Spanish. Curiously, these groups never closed their doors. After more than half a century, they still exist. This is evidence of the importance of following our program, not only practicing the Twelve Steps, but also the Twelve Traditions and Twelve Concepts. A good foundation requires solid cornerstones to ensure success in the short term and long term.

When I had lived 20 years of intense recovery in A.A. I returned to Barcelona, where was born, planning to start a business. It was the year 1980. I spent the summer on the Costa Brava, and had a house in Barcelona. One day I went to a group called Gratitude, and was surprised when a

friend named Javier told me that a guy from Aragon with a Galician accent had asked if there were any groups in Zaragoza (Aragon) — and the answer was *no*. I was shocked that in the fifth largest city in Spain there was no A.A.! I immediately decided to move to Zaragoza and start my business there.

In those years, the groups in Spain were trying to decide where to set up the General Service Office for this country. I fully supported and encouraged José Antonio in making that happen in Avilés (Asturias). We were not mistaken. The GSO has been functioning there wonderfully ever since.

The first group to start in Zaragoza was the Pilar group, and the second, the Harmony group. Today there are 17 groups in Aragon following the principles of our fellowship.

For my business, and “coincidentally,” I traveled to many places around Spain that were in need of our message, and added many new friends to my list of contacts. In Madrid, Manolo “father” and Nina; in Seville, Conchita and María Ángeles; in Santander, Luis, Manolo, Fidel, and Paco; and groups in Perlora, Javier, Fuengirola, and so on.

I have always kept close to my first group in Quai d’Orsay in Paris. I go there every year to celebrate my sobriety anniversary, and at the same time the anniversary of the group and French-speaking A.A. in France, which is just a few months “younger.” I haven’t missed a year in my 55 years of sobriety. On each occasion I have written or said something to remember the human warmth with which those Americans in Paris greeted us and passed the A.A. message to us. All of us here in wine-growing Europe owe them our sincere gratitude — and I above all, as I was the first to receive that message.

Manuel M. of Paris

NOTE:

We have recently started a French-speaking group in Barcelona. In September of 2015 it celebrated its first year, thanks to our Higher Power.

40 SPIRITUALITY

Dr. C. G. Jung wrote to Bill W. on 30 January 1961 about one of his patients and said that “His craving for alcohol was the equivalent of a low level of the spiritual thirst of our being for wholeness, expressed in mediaeval language: the union with God.”

I can identify with this entirely, being an alcoholic myself and having had this need for wholeness, both good and bad, for 20 years of my life (from age 17 to age 37).

Jung went on to explain that a person could achieve such a union with God through an “act of grace,” such as the spiritual (or parapsychological) experience that Bill W. had, or through “personal and honest contact with friends, or through a higher education of the mind beyond the confines of mere rationalism,” such as we learn in the program.

“Good” and “Evil” can each prevail in this world. Personally, with my 55 years of sobriety, I am happy. And I believe that once I embraced our program and desired with all my heart to live and practice what is suggested in A.A., the change in my values became continuous, on a daily basis. The program is the architect of my new way of feeling, thinking, and living.

A religious practice such as that of Saint Francis of Assisi, or a humanistic practice such as that of our program, provides a way for changing values.

A person who is emotionally immature and hypersensitive can easily fall into a diabolical and harmful dependency. We alcoholics do not have exclusive rights to self-destruction. When I came to Alcoholics Anonymous in 1960, A.A. was the only widespread twelve-step group. Today

there are more than 30 different fellowships using practically the same program of recovery, each oriented toward a different common problem of self-destructive addiction to a substance or behavior.

The problem of emotional immaturity, stemming from early childhood seems to be common to all of us. For this reason we are ill prepared for coping with life. We confuse living with suffering, and in an attempt to protect ourselves we create giant egos and artificial "paradises" as through alcohol, drugs, gambling, anorexia, codependence, and so on.

The A.A. program is largely aimed at confronting this killer ego, and making way for a new spiritual capacity, based on giving our best to help others without expecting anything in return except the good feeling we get from doing so.

This way of looking at life has led me closer and closer to Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, to whom is attributed the following:

"We are not human beings on a spiritual journey;
we are spiritual beings on a human journey."

One day in a meeting, one of the members, who was a mathematician, asked the other members one by one whether they felt they gave more at meetings than they got out of them, or got more out of them than they gave. The response was unanimous. Everyone said they felt they got more out of meetings than they gave. Necessarily, something or someone other than the members present must be making up the difference. That is our Higher Power, or God as we each understand him. My friends, in A.A. two plus two do not equal four.

I believe that trying to describe God or the Higher Power is beyond our capacity of comprehension, just as trigonometry is beyond the capacity of comprehension of a dog. But on certain occasions during our lives we are able to sense that Higher Power, and that may distinguish us from other animals.

Going back to the letter from Dr. Jung to Bill W.: "You see, Alcohol in Latin is 'spiritus' and you use the same word for the highest religious experience as well as for the most depraving poison. The helpful formula therefore is: *spiritus contra spiritum*."

You cannot summarize the entire drama of alcoholism any more clearly and simply.

Personally, I always used to resist any ideas of the divine, but now I believe firmly that spirituality is necessary in order for humans to be able to live happily.

I compare religions to the pipes that carry water to the house. Well, I'm not too fond of plumbing. Even though it may be more work, I prefer going straight to the spring and kneeling down to drink. Still, I have nothing against those who practice religion.

I have heard it said in meetings that it is simple to be happy in A.A. and in the world; the difficult thing is being simple.

LETTER FROM C. G. JUNG TO BILL W.

January 30, 1961

Dear Mr. [W.],

Your letter has been very welcome indeed.

I had no news from Roland H. anymore and often wondered what had been his fate. Our conversation, which he has adequately reported to you, had an aspect of which he did not know. The reason that I could not tell him everything was that those days I had to be exceedingly careful of what I said. I had found out that I was misunderstood in every possible way. Thus I was very careful when I talked to Roland H. But what I really thought about was the result of many experiences with men of his kind.

His craving for alcohol was the equivalent of a low level of the spiritual thirst of our being for wholeness, expressed in mediaeval language: the union with God.

How could one formulate such an insight in a language that is not misunderstood in our days?

The only right and legitimate way to such an experience is, that it happens to you in reality and it can only happen to you when you walk on a path, which leads you to higher understanding. You might be led to that goal by an act of grace or through a personal and honest contact with friends, or through a higher education of the

mind beyond the confines of mere rationalism. I see from your letter that Roland H. has chosen the second way, which was, under the circumstances, obviously the best one.

I am strongly convinced that the evil principle prevailing in this world, leads the unrecognized spiritual need into perdition if it is not counteracted either by real religious insight or by the protective wall of human community. An ordinary man, not protected by an action from above and isolated in society cannot resist the power of evil, which is called very aptly the Devil. But the use of such words arouse so many mistakes that one can only keep aloof from them as much as possible.

These are the reasons why I could not give a full and sufficient explanation to Roland H. but am risking it with you, because I conclude from your very decent and honest letter that you have acquired a point of view above the misleading platitudes one usually hears about alcoholism.

You see, Alcohol in Latin is "spiritus" and you use the same word for the highest religious experience as well as for the most depraving poison. The helpful formula therefore is: spiritus contra spiritum.

Thanking you again for your kind letter

I remain

yours sincerely

C.G. Jung

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SOME IMPORTANT DATES

- 1930-31 Rowland H. visits Swiss psychoanalyst Carl Jung
- 1933 Ebby visits Bill W.
- 1934 Bill W. has a spiritual experience
- 1935 Dr. Bob stops drinking 10 June; Alcoholics Anonymous is born
- 1938 The Twelve Steps
- 1939 The Big Book
- 1941 Jack Alexander article published in the *Saturday Evening Post*
- 1946 The Twelve Traditions
- 1950 Dr. Bob dies (15 years in A.A.)
- 1950 First International Convention, Cleveland, OH (3,000 attend)
- 1955 International Convention, St. Louis, MO (3,500 attend)
- 1960 International Convention, Long Beach, CA (8,900 attend)
- 1962 The Twelve Concepts
- 1965 International Convention, Toronto, Canada (>10,000 attend)
- 1970 International Convention, Miami, FL (11,000 attend)
- 1971 Bill W. dies (37 years in A.A.)
- 1975 International Convention, Denver, CO (20,000 attend)
- 1980 International Convention, New Orleans, LA (22,500 attend)
- 1985 International Convention, Montreal, Canada (>45,000 attend)
- 1990 International Convention, Seattle, WA (48,000 attend)
- 1995 International Convention, San Diego, CA (56,000 attend)
- 2000 International Convention, Minneapolis, MN (47,000 attend)
- 2005 International Convention, Toronto, Canada (>44,000 attend)
- 2010 International Convention, San Antonio, TX (53,000 attend)
- 2015 International Convention, Atlanta, GA (65,000 attend)

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IMPORTANT DATES IN WINE-GROWING EUROPE

- 1959 Joseph Kessel travels to the United States
- 1960 Kessel publishes 24 articles in *France-Soir*
- 1961 Ignacio of Rentería contacts A.A.
- 1963 Nick H. reports to New York on the history of A.A. France
- 1965 Formation of the A.A. European Committee in Wiesbaden
- 1967 Meeting of the A.A. European Committee in Paris
- 1968 Meeting of the A.A. European Committee in London
- 1969 Letter from Bill W., organization by language regions
- 1972 First prison group in Rouen
- 19?? Formation of a loners committee
- 19?? France sends delegate to a meeting in New York
- 1981 First Spanish-speaking group in Zaragoza, Spain
- 1985 Brochure "25 Years of Gratitude"
- 2014 54th Anniversary of A.A. in France (two meetings in Spanish)
- 2015 First French-speaking group in Barcelona

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THE ORIGINAL SIX STEPS



For Ed -

1. Admitted hopeless
2. Got honest with self
3. Got honest with another
4. Made amends
5. Helped other without demand
6. Prayed to God as you understand him

Ever

Apr/1953 Bill W.
 Original A.A. steps

(Handwritten by Bill W. many years after the 12 steps were formalized, probably for Father Ed Dowling)

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HUMOR HELPS

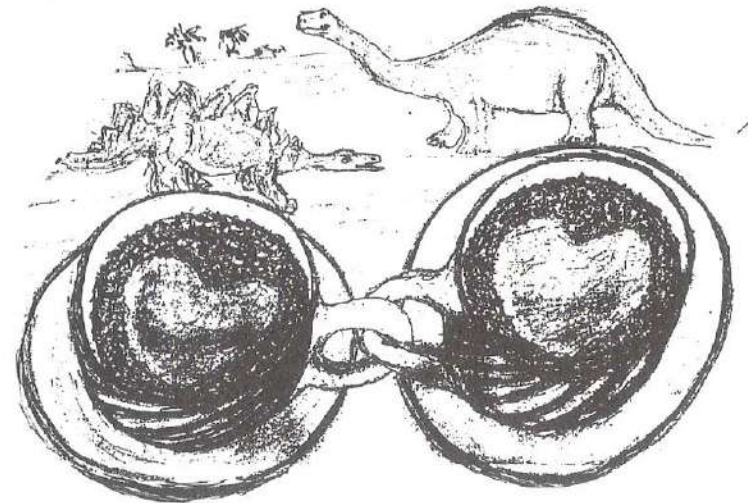
Dear God,
 Grant me patience ...

Right now!

* * * * *

Said one A.A. old-timer to another:

"We've had to drink hundreds of coffees with hearts drawn in the foam in order for our own hearts to soften."



46

DR. BOB'S PRESCRIPTION

R. H. SMITH, M. D.
 520 NATIONAL BLDG AKRON, OHIO
 PHONE ME-85.3 REG. NO. _____
 FOR alcoholics
 ADDRESS _____ DATE Feb 1937
Always remember to
 1. Trust God
 2. Clean house
 3. Help others
 4R 1 2 3 INF. *[Signature]* M. D.

Always remember to

1. Trust God
2. Clean house
3. Help others

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FIRST LIST OF A.A. GROUPS IN FRANCE 1963

L'alcool est il un problème pour vous ?

LES ALCOOLIQUES ANONYMES POURRAIENT PEUT-ÊTRE VOUS AIDER

A. A.

PERMANENCE TELEPHONE SOL. 44.87.

ALCOOLIQUES ANONYMES GROUPE DU 15°
 4, Rue Quinault
 Réunions le Jeudi à 20 h. 45

SEPT SOIRS PAR SEMAINE A 20h45 DANS LE QUARTIER DE VOTRE CHOIX

REUNIONS	JOUR	HEURE	ADRESSE	QUARTIER
Mardi	20h45	97, RUE JULIEN LACROIX	PARIS 20°	
Jeudi	20h45	Mairie, Pyramides - Belleville		
Lundi	20h45	45, QUAI D'ORSAY	PARIS 7°	
Mercredi	20h45	Mairie, Invalides		
Vendredi	20h45	Mairie, Invalides		
Samedi	20h45	Mairie, Invalides		
Dimanche	20h45	1, RUE CHARDY	ISSY-LES-MOULINEAUX	
Vendredi	20h45	Mairie, Invalides		

REHABILITATION **UNITE** **SERVICE**

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LETTER FROM BILL W. TO MANUEL M.

W. G. W.
BOX 458 GRAND CENTRAL STATION
NEW YORK 17, N. Y.

December 20, 1967

Manuel Morales
Comite A.A. Europeen
88, Quai d'Orsay
75 Paris (Villama)
France.

My dear Manuel,

Thanks very much for your letter of December 6, announcing the marked interest now growing concerning our proposal for a meeting of General Service people at New York. It was very good to have your initial reaction and a full report will be very much appreciated.

Allow me to congratulate you on your own demonstration of the A.A. way of life.

Meanwhile, may the coming year be counted among your finest. My regards to all.

Ever devotedly,

Bill Wilson
Bill Wilson

WGW/nw

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ANNIVERSARY CONTRIBUTION RECEIPTS

Our warmest thanks to you for helping carry on world-wide "Twelfth Step" work at your General Service Office.

Received \$ 2.00 on 9/6/62.

From: MANUEL

Manuel
Staff Member

Our warmest thanks to you for helping the General Service Office of A. A. carry on its work in the U. S. and Canada and all over the world.

Received \$ 3.00 on 10/28/63

From:

Manuel
Manuel
Staff Member
Staff Member

GRAPEVINE ARTICLE

This story published in the *A.A. Grapevine* in January 1991 was written and submitted by a friend of mine, but is about my own experience, recounted earlier in this book.



MY NEW GOLDEN RULE

I will think of you
as I would have you think of me.
I will speak of you
as I would have you speak of me.
I will act with you
as I would have you act with me.

Before saying anything about anyone,
I will ask myself three questions:

Is it the truth?
Is it loving?
Is it necessary?

Rarely have I spoken badly of anyone
after asking myself these questions.

THE ICEBERG

Alcoholism is a physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual disease. Like an iceberg, only a small part is visible above the surface.



Loneliness
Fear
Laziness
Anxiety
Shyness
Immaturity
Neglect
Complexes
Dishonesty
Exaggeration

Intoxication
Dependency
Trembling
Forgetfulness
Blackouts
Nervousness
Insomnia
Depression
Anger
Desire to die

With the sunlight and warmth of the A.A. program, the ice deep within the soul begins to melt, and, slowly, as we begin to help others, we experience a change in our way of life and in our values.

Sense of freedom	Self-respect
Happiness within	Desire to live
Helping others	Believing in something
Spiritual awakening	Feeling understood
Accepting the program	Sense of belonging
Living here and now	Feeling aware

SONG WRITTEN BY MARÍA VICTORIA

Gift from my daughter for my 85th birthday and 48th A.A. anniversary

Manuel

Esa flor
su sonrisa de cara al sol
su sabor
miel de caña y fruto de amor
y esa brisa que coge y recoge
la felicidad
esa rosa, esa risa y brisa
para ti papa

Esa flor
su sonrisa de cara al sol
su sabor
miel de caña y fruto de amor
y esa brisa que coge y recoge
la felicidad
esa rosa, esa risa y brisa
para ti papa

El color
Arco iris de color
el calor
cielo abierto en el corazón
y esa fuente que brota las notas
de nuestra canción
esa fuente de agua-alegría
brota noche y día
su canto de amor

El color
Arco iris de color
el calor
sol abierto en el corazón
y esa fuente que brota las notas
de nuestra canción
esa fuente de agua-alegría
cascabel de luz
Manuel, eres tú

Manuel (English translation)

This flower
smiling at the sun
its fragrance
molasses and fruit of love
and this breeze that gathers and reaps
happiness
this rose, this laugh and breeze
for you papa

This flower
smiling at the sun
its fragrance
molasses and fruit of love
and this breeze that gathers and reaps
happiness
this rose, this laugh and breeze
for you papa

The color
rainbow of color
the warmth
open sky in the heart
and this fountain that springs forth the notes
of our song
this fountain of water-cheer
springs forth night and day
its song of love

The color
rainbow of color
the warmth
open sun in the heart
and this fountain that springs forth the notes
of our song
this fountain of water-cheer
jingles of light
Manuel, it is you

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POEM BY ARLETTE
FOR HER FATHER FRANÇOIS

When You Passed Away, Papa

When you passed away, Papa, I cried for just one day
And then I hid my pain away with all my love
Behind a shadow curtain so not to remember
As if I had to protect myself
And the last years we had together
When you were a father strong and kind
I hid them far away and had you reborn
In the hide of the beast you had been
During the long years of my childhood
When you were nothing more for me than fear and suffering
You told me that I had the passion of the street
Indeed it was there that I didn't feel lost
The boulevards were my playground
Like blotting paper I soaked up the air and the smells
I turned a lamppost into a tree, and I climbed it
And all of Paris became a vast forest
When at times I saw a bum on a bench
I thought of what you would become sooner or later
And that it was time to get back home
But that was your field of operation
Some have cheerful wine but yours was sad
And when you came home everything became sinister
We had to hug you to smell your breath
And immediately knew whether you'd been drinking
And we didn't dare to move or smile or say anything

We knew that the slightest thing could bring out the worst
And that we mustn't set off your fury
But of course, one of us always made a mistake
And then you smashed the house to bits
Everything flew; tables and chairs, glasses, bottles, and plates
You fed your rage by shattering the dishes
And then the strikes rained on us in buckets
The pain didn't matter, we felt only the fear
The only feeling I had for you was horror
But one day an article appeared in *France-Soir*
That talked about how to stop drinking
That evening when you left you had an odd air about you
And from that night on, you never again took a single drink
And when I told all my friends
That you were the president of Alcoholics Anonymous
I didn't understand their surprised looks
Because for me it was something to be proud of
The first, coming from you
And I was not mistaken because then thanks to that
As an electrician you started your own business
And there were nothing but nice surprises
We got a bathroom in our apartment, not in the building hall
And hot running water directly into the sink
Butter croissants and cinema every Sunday
And no more sending us away to camp along Channel shore
And even though it was still alcohol you all had in common
You had real friends then not drinking buddies
You were just a worker and he was a prince
One was from Dallas and another from the province
I came into contact with a new world
And finally felt the world becoming round
And I was able to grow up under your loving gaze
Which I hadn't seen until the age of ten
And life gave you a second chance
With your granddaughter you got your revenge
You raised her almost from her first steps
When she learned to swim it was with you

How well we got along after she was born
 Through our love for her we found each other
 And you stopped by to visit me every week
 And have a coffee and talk about the weather
 You were strong and comforting
 And I found the strength to go on
 But once again when I no longer thought about it
 My fear came back when you died
 I was still too young for you to leave me
 And it took me years to forgive you
 But now when I look back over the path traveled
 I see that everything I am proud of now is thanks to you
 Because I saw you fight and overcome your demons
 Pray tell what better example could I have had?
 If you see me from above you must be in Seventh Heaven
 I've succeeded in life so you get your revenge
 I've had all the occupations that you could have had
 I've traveled across half the world
 And after my first daughter who you loved so much
 I've had another daughter who would have made you smile
 She's the living portrait of me as I was of you
 That she did not get to know you has been my great sadness
 While one misses you because you're no longer here
 The other feels empty for having lived without you
 Our ages don't matter, neither mine nor hers
 One becomes an orphan when one loses a parent
 Since I never got to say goodbye to you
 I blow these words to you that they may do so.

Arlette
 For her father, François, cofounder
 of the first French-speaking
 A.A. group in France

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CHRISTMAS GREETING FROM NICK H.

This greeting card, given to me by Nick H. for Christmas when I was three years sober, showed me the greatness of the spirituality of the American A.A.'s. The power of their spiritual convictions was evident in all their actions.

*Lord make me an instrument of Your peace—
 Where there is hatred let me sow love—
 Where there is injury, pardon—
 Where there is doubt, faith—
 Where there is despair, hope—
 Where there is darkness, light—
 Where there is sadness, joy.*

*O Divine Master grant that I
 may not so much seek to be consoled
 as to console; to be understood as to
 understand; to be loved as to love;
 for it is in giving that we receive; it
 is in pardoning that we are pardoned
 and it is in dying that we are born
 to eternal life.*

prayer of St. Francis

Greetings at Christmas

NICHOLS HALL

ALCOHOL, A LEGAL DRUG

Alcohol consumption has given rise to numerous controversies. There are those who say that alcohol invigorates, reduces tension and inhibitions, and adds cheer to life. Getting drunk is often a way of escaping from personal responsibilities and problems, at least for a short time. Indeed, alcohol can make a person feel euphoric and relaxed, but it also has negative side effects, such as loss of mental control, sensory perception, and physical coordination. A hangover demonstrates the effects alcohol has on the body, mind, and spirit.

Why do people drink alcohol? Getting drunk can't really be considered fun. Losing control of oneself doesn't really make anyone happy. Nonetheless, despite the negative effects, many people feel impelled to drink one drink after another. And what is it that makes alcohol intoxicate us?

The answer to both questions can be found in a neurotransmitter called serotonin, a chemical associated with the sensation of pleasure. As the day advances to evening and daylight diminishes, serotonin is converted to melatonin. But alcohol retards this process, and consequently prolongs the sensation of "good humor." On the other hand, if serotonin does not convert in time, it reacts with a toxic substance called acetaldehyde, which is produced by the body from ingested alcohol.

This chemical reaction results in a series of hallucinogenic substances called tetrahydro-beta-carbolines. Salsolinol, a substance synthesized from acetaldehyde and dopamine (another neurotransmitter in the brain), inhibits the reuptake of serotonin. Then the dopamine begins to form a substance called norlaudanosoline, which is a precursor to morphine alkaloids. In other words, the alcoholic actually becomes addicted to a type of morphine.

However, the consumption of alcohol does not necessarily have to cause addiction. Depending on genetic predisposition, some people produce greater quantities of morphine alkaloids when they drink. Under normal conditions, the negative side effects of drunkenness are enough to make a person stop drinking. Thus, the body has little chance to produce enough of the addictive substances to cause addiction. However, persistent regular consumption of alcohol can eventually increase this possibility.

Some people should not risk drinking alcohol at all. Asian populations, especially Chinese and Koreans, lack the enzyme that breaks down acetaldehyde. Thus, with only a small amount of ingested alcohol, the person experiences accelerated pulse, abdominal pain, and a flushed face. For this reason, there is little alcoholism in Asia — otherwise, the population would quickly die off due to alcohol intoxication. Many never go beyond the first drink because they have no natural defense against acetaldehyde.

Source: *Timeless Secrets of Health & Rejuvenation*, by Andreas Moritz.

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CONCLUSIONS

So, what conclusions have I come to after more than half a century sharing a new way of thinking, feeling, and acting, that has set me free and allowed me to live in peace and harmony?

I am among the people who have "returned," who believe that in humanity there are powers of goodness and love that can unite us all in fellowship, regardless of our differences, be they social, political, economic, philosophical, religious, or racial.

I have belonged to Alcoholics Anonymous since the age of 37, and I am now 92.

I am convinced that in this world that is being worm-eaten by the pandemic of self-destruction, the solution will come from within. In our case, we alcoholics have had to search deep inside our innermost selves to find the spirituality that frees us from our defects. Thus we finally gain harmonious happiness in our daily lives.

Manuel M. of Paris

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I FEEL HAPPY

I was born 12 years before the beginning of Alcoholics Anonymous in the world. At my current 92 years of age I can say that throughout my 55 years in the fellowship I have tried to live, one day at a time, the harmonious spiritual philosophy that our program fosters.

In this chaotic most recent century in which so much seems to be heading toward collapse, I intuit that the rise of A.A. will mark a great turning point in the world.

I believe that when humanity falls into self-destruction, as has been the case this past century, from within this very humanity will arise a movement of shared fraternal love to save itself.

The arrival of Christianity in its day was no coincidence, nor was the arrival of A.A. eighty years ago. Both came when they were needed.

Eighty years is very little time in history for predicting the ultimate significance and scope that our program will have in the whole of humanity, which seems to be as self-destructive the as alcoholic himself.

Millions of people, including me, have already been able to live happily by applying the principles taught in A.A., and this fact gives us hope for a better future.

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ATLANTA, GEORGIA, 2015

80 Years — Happy, Joyous, and Free!

The fourteenth International Convention. Celebrating eighty years of A.A. in the world.

Sixty-five thousand attendees, 100,000 visitors, 5,000 volunteers, ready to guide the disoriented, 20 meetings simultaneously in nine different languages ... everything prepared, everything organized, everything easy to find in that immense space filled with people from around the entire globe.

This is Alcoholics Anonymous in its greatest exuberance.

We can be satisfied with our fellowship and very certain of its unprecedented impact on humanity. The need and responsibility for preserving intact our principles and values is vital for the future of the world.

When speaking of Alcoholics Anonymous, Joseph Kessel said that because we have hit the bottom of despair and “reached the end of the night,” we have been “chosen among men.”

I don’t know if we have been chosen because of our suffering caused by desperately seeking the hopes and dreams of our youth erroneously (due to our character defects) through alcohol.

What I do know is that since I found and have been living daily the spirituality of our program, my life, for the past 55 years, has been very happy.

Manuel M. de Paris

Circumstances, chance, God ... or I don't know what ... wanted me to be a witness among you to certain events of great importance: the arrival of Alcoholics Anonymous in France, the formation of the first French-speaking group there, and the subsequent spread of A.A. in wine-growing regions of Europe.

This wonderful love story began 55 years ago now, more than half a century! During this time I have taken notes to record events that have seemed important to me, and have saved all kinds of documents, publications, photos, drawings, and curiosities, with the idea of one day putting together what I call our "family album."

The purpose of this book is to transmit and to share all that I have received and felt — the sensations, the ambience, and the extraordinary sponsorship of those North Americans who first greeted us.

All of these writings reflect real life personal experiences. I speak for myself. I am the only person responsible for what I say here, and in no way mean to represent the fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous in part or as a whole.

