

Principles From Our Past

AS

Guides For our Future

The future of Alcoholics Anonymous, to a great extent, rests upon our willingness to learn from the past. Not only our own past, but that of other societies and fellowships who also have attempted to live according to spiritual principles. Many, if not all, of these principles have been within the view of humanity since the beginning of time. As I mentioned in my previous sharing, the problem is how to continue to operate on the basic principles through which our fellowship was born.

Perhaps the best way to make this effort toward our future survival is to find a way to see the journey along our path through the eyes of those who have traveled it – our founders. The advantage of this approach is two-fold.

First, it requires us to begin with the understanding that we do not have any way by which we can find the proper course on our own – either individually or as a whole society. The spiritual principle here is humility. So long as we maintain any small amount of our ego or false pride, we are not able to see the full range of possibilities. This has the sad effect of reducing the number of actions God can use to guide us toward His destiny. Our personal histories have shown that even the smallest gain of false pride can act as a roadblock on our divine journey. However, once we are open to ALL possibilities – the path we must travel becomes very clear to us. I should also be very clear to point out that even though we may clearly see the action we are to take, it is doubtful that we will be given a view of the journey's end.

The second benefit of this method is that we will recognize, through our humility, that the full range of possibilities can only be viewed through the eyes, minds, and hearts of our whole fellowship. This is the combining of humility with an attitude of love. For if we indeed love our fellows, we will certainly want to learn their view of our situation and the actions they see as the best application of spiritual principle. It will create in us a desire to always consult with those who will be affected by any decision we might make. To the extent that we include the many hearts and minds of our fellows, to just that extent do we come within view of God's vision for us. And it is this vision that we must always seek out, regardless of the time or trouble it causes us to do so. Anything less than this will only result in our eventual destruction or dissolution.

It is my understanding that the greatest asset Bill W. held for our society, as its co-founder, was that he was willing to learn from the experience of other societies. This was coupled with an understanding, on his part, that we had not received any kind of special divine power which would mean that we would not fall victim to all the sufferings and failures of the societies who had gone before us. He knew that even though the miracle of sobriety had taken place in us, we were still a society of human beings with all the failings and self-centered desires of other human beings.

With this attitude in place, he was able to see the difficulties before us and able to be receptive to God's guidance in those matters. It was in this respect that both our founders were in complete agreement. While Bill pointed to the principle which would help our society guard against self-centered false pride – Dr. Bob warned against any exhibition of it in each of us individually. Our

movement, after all, is the sum of us all. What we will not do individually, we cannot do collectively.

The people that Bill and Bob drew much of their wisdom from were also men and women who considered themselves students. They all seemed to feel that it was their God-given task to learn about God through the practice of living their lives according to principle. They became leaders for us, not because they were willing to teach but, because they were willing to learn. They included such people as:

Dr. Carl Jung.....A world famous psychiatrist
Henry Drummond.....A biologist and pastor
William James.....A psychologist and philosopher
Louis Browne.....A Jewish Rabbi
Sam ShoemakerA Episcopal priest
Sister Ignitia.....A Catholic Nun and nurse
Ed Dowling.....A Catholic priest
Alexis DeToqueville.....A French Statesman

and many more whom I do not have the time to list or discuss.

It was our dear friend, Dr. Carl Jung, who gave us two very important gifts which eventually resulted in the creation of our fellowship. By example he showed us the humility necessary to become part of God's work. He told Rowland H. that he (Dr. Jung) could not cure his alcoholism. A very humble statement from a world famous psychiatrist. By this example we ought to clearly see that any successful recovery is not the possession of Alcoholics Anonymous. Our society is simply the fortunate tool of God's will. Therefore, we must always remain aware that this is a gift that is not ours to grant or withhold. The craftsman's saw does not decide what is to be cut, nor does the hammer decide what is to be nailed. These are the decisions which must come from the Master Carpenter alone. The tools cannot see the grand design, they can only at best see their own part in it.

Dr. Jung's second gift to us is the understanding that our solution, as individuals, lies deep within each of us. He showed us that it is at the center of our being that we must develop a contact with a Power Greater than ourselves. A contact that will result in this newfound Divine Force reshaping our ideas and desires. This reshaping will form within us the desire to follow principles rather than achieving results – to create harmony rather than reaching for self-determined goals. Our actions, individually or collectively, cannot change unless there is a profound change in our understanding of our own power – or better said, our powerlessness.

And so, from the most unlikely source we have received the suggestion to follow the Guiding Light. The men and women of medicine and science are often seen to point toward the creation rather than the Creator. And yet, THIS man of science led us to look beyond our world and its illusionary power. By some strange paradox, it is through our willingness to look beyond our own worldly plans and desire that we begin to see more clearly how to live by God's direction.

Henry Drummond was a man who also followed this course. It is my understanding that Dr. Bob gave each of the men he sponsored a copy of a little book by this man. He would tell the new man to read the book every day for 30 days. He would also predict that if the man would do this, his life would change. It was through this practice that we received Drummond's gift of respectful

love. Drummond believed that the spiritual life was a simple one. It did not require fancy or complicated actions or ceremonies. But that it was composed of a collection of small acts. Each act acknowledging the responsibility of the person taking the action, and the dignity of the person toward whom the action was taken.

The very best reflection of Drummond's influence lies in a particular phrase in our Big Book. This phrase is repeated twice. Once with respect to working with others, and once in relation to our own family. The suggestion is made to "place the kit of spiritual tools at their feet."

By taking this action we must humbly bend down and thereby accept our own responsibility to offer the gift of, along with the powerlessness to achieve, sobriety. The person before whom we lay the spiritual kit, in bending down to pick them up, acknowledges both their responsibility to participate in their own recovery and the simple fact that their life has sufficient value for recovery to be possible.

Adding to these lesions from Jung and Drummond were the gifts given to us by William James. Of course the best known gift from this fellow student is noted in the Appendix on spiritual experience in our Big Book. There Bill makes note of the various forms a spiritual awakening might take. As a reference he offers the book called "Varieties of Religious Experience" by William James.

Like those preceding him, James gave us his gifts by both example and suggestion. In his personal life this man was often troubled. He would feel uncertain, unfocused, and adrift. Certainly these are states of mind which we alcoholics know only too well. His solution came when he read a paper by a French philosopher discussing free will. William James decided he would accept free will as a fact – and that his first act of free will was going to be to believe in it. For many people in the world this would make little sense. However, for you and I it stands as a guiding light out of the darkness we have created in our own minds. We have been past masters at self-centered and self-created horrors, both as world citizens and AA members.

For most of us these monsters of the mind have crept into our waking lives and the lives of our loved ones. So much so that it became almost impossible to tell which were real and which were not. We know, then, the difficulty of making the choice to follow another path – not knowing its outcome. And so we learned about faith from another man of science.

James, however, also had another lesson for us as a society. In his book he points out how organizations can become a roadblock to the spiritual life, rather than an agent for it. He explains that it is a spiritual experience that creates a society of religion, but that the "organization" of it often becomes its greatest roadblock. Truly a lesson for our times.

Perhaps this is the question which must always be before us: "Toward what experience do our actions point?" Can what we say be seen in our actions, or only heard in our voice? I believe James made a very important contribution to our Ninth Tradition. To avoid having an organization in the usual sense is very possibly the best safeguard against the kind of righteous certainty that would destroy us.

It appears James felt that the organization, like the individual, must follow a path determined by a force outside itself. Self-determined certainty would lead to the wrong path for the society, and destruction for the individual. Our Tradition Four is possibly the best assurance that individuals can survive, even though the society as a whole follows the wrong path for a time. It

carefully provides for the still small voice of a loving God to survive, by protecting it against a wave of emotionalism sweeping toward a self-appointed destination.

Our dear and very anonymous friend, Rabbi Louis Browne, underscores this point made by James. In the book, "This Believing World" the Rabbi reviews the major religions of the World. He charts their course from infancy and comments on where the actions and activities of the different religions follow the same path.

As James did before him, Browne cautions against the development of an organization in the usual sense. The studies of Browne pointed to an extremely interesting fact. It was his belief that religion often came to oppose the very thing they were originally intended to propose. This change to an opposite course comes about through small, seemingly insignificant, deviations from the spiritual path in favor of self-determined goals.

Another point, made by James and reaffirmed by Browne, was the danger of hierarchy. The beginnings of this lie, not in people accepting responsibility to the greater society but, in the establishment of a "standard" for the spiritual experience or its expression. This is the creation of dogma or creed. Once this creation has taken place, a hierarchy must follow to defend, enforce, and propagate the dogma. This almost completely closes the door of opportunity for a loving God to provide steady, patient guidance. Again the point is made about self-determined certainty. Both writers also note that it is at this point that literature becomes a tool of domination rather than a vehicle for individual salvation.

Along these lines it was Sam Shoemaker, Sister Ignatia, and Father Ed Dowling who were the walking examples for us. While each of them certainly had a particular view of religious life that they encouraged their congregations and patients to follow, none of them attempted to bring Alcoholics Anonymous under the wing of their religious organization. All three are without doubt the best examples that a faith in a Greater Power will serve all who follow it well.

Father Ed was especially diligent in this matter. Bill told the story that when he was taking his Fifth Step with Father Ed he asked a question that had always troubled him. He wanted to know why it was that even when things worked out well, he could not be content. Father Ed replied that this was to be both his worst defect and his greatest asset. The defect meant that he could not fully accept things as they were, and the asset meant that he would always strive to make improvements. Having learned this from Father Ed, Bill then passed it on to our whole movement. It was, perhaps, his most persistent admonition to future servants – continue to seek out the flaws and gaps in our fellowship and work towards their improvement.

I want to be careful to note here, that Bill's encouragement was in the realm of applying spiritual principle and not in following self-determined goals. Father Ed's advice was most prevalent in Bill's 1962 attempt to make several changes in the structure of the US/Canada service structure. The long view of history has made evident the need to continue striving for spiritual improvement. Here, again lies a paradox. From the men and women of religion we have received our organizational legacy – continued review and improvements of our practice of placing the kit of spiritual tools at the feet of our future brothers and sisters.

The final lesson I will comment on came from a man of government – Alexis DeToqueville, a French statesman. His gift is found in Bill's comment on Concept Five – the Right of Petition and Appeal. Here the focus is also on insuring that the small, still voice can be heard. As noted time

and time again, what applies to the individual also applies to the collective group. Each of us has to learn through struggle after struggle how to listen to this voice within our own spirit. We must also do this as a society.

DeToqueville's point was that "tyranny of the majority" ought to be carefully weighed against the future of a whole movement or people. As Bill so simply put it in his writings; "Whole societies have gone on benders too." The challenge of Concept Five, and the legacy of DeToqueville left for us, is to find the truth regardless of whether it is in the voice of many, or in the whisper of a few.

The greater lesson learned by these men and women, and the one left for us as a legacy of love is simply this: *a society based on freedom is one which stands in God's light, all else stands in the shadow of darkness.* I have come to understand that in order for our "one world" to exist, it must be one of freedom. The freedom to be, the freedom to believe, the freedom to live according to that belief must all be part of our society. Because, you see, freedoms are what *give* to one another – rights are what we *demand* from one another. Once a demand is made, the action of meeting it can never be a gift.

These are the truths I have learned and have now shared with you. Before AA began we had the Oxford Groups in my country. What they learned, and passed on to us, was that when we talk of our experience no person can argue with us. And so I am well aware that there may be those here or at home who find the lessons of a different nature. However, all I can share is what I have found along the way.

I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart for your kind patience in allowing me to share.

Now, if there is time left I will be happy to answer questions or simply finish my part – whichever the chairperson feels is best

Dennis Bauer
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Cuernavaca, Mexico