

# 70 Years and Counting: A.A.'s 'Basic Text' Hits Another Milestone

The year was 1939. Hedy Lamarr, Rita Hayworth, Lana Turner and Greta Garbo were the country's pin-up queens. "There's no place like home" and "Frankly my dear, I don't give a damn" were the most popular quotes from the most popular films released that year, *The Wizard of Oz* and *Gone With the Wind*, which won the Oscar for Best Film. Germany invaded Poland, signaling the official beginning of World War II. The World's Fair opened in New York City with the theme, "Building for the World of Tomorrow," and a time capsule was buried which is not to be opened until the year 6939. Robert May, an employee of Montgomery Ward, created the story of Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer as a Christmas promotional gimmick. Batman made his comic book debut. *The Grapes of Wrath*, by John Steinbeck, was published. And the Yankees won the World Series.

But, to a hardy band of 100 or so alcoholics, trying against all odds to hold onto their sobriety, doubtless the most important thing to happen in 1939, for them and for the countless alcoholics to come, was the appearance, in print, of *Alcoholics Anonymous*, the book that bore the name of the society of recovering drunks it represented.

"We of Alcoholics Anonymous," says the foreword to the first edition, "are more than one hundred men and women who have recovered from a seemingly hopeless state of mind and body. To show other alcoholics precisely how we have recovered is the main purpose of this book."

Plagued by high expectations, foundering with dissension, chronically under funded and dashed by one mishap after another, it is truly a wonder that the book was ever published; a miraculous event, according to some, dependent on a perfect storm of people, places and things.

The story of A.A.'s basic text—how it was written, published and promoted—is a story too long to recount in detail here.

Yet, like the story of the Fellowship it represents, it is a story of how, through many failures, the seeds of success were sown. The story, told in detail by Bill W. in *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age* and *The Language of the Heart*, is the story of a truly alcoholic venture—a plan so crazy and improbable, as some would say, "it might just work."

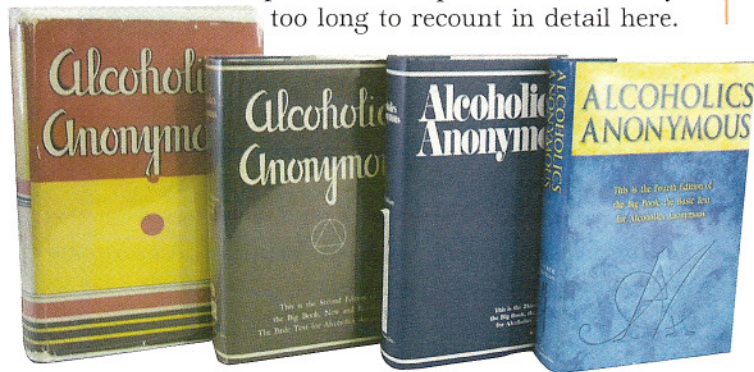
As Bill W. wrote in a July 1947 article titled "Book Publication Proved Discouraging Venture," reprinted in *The Language of the Heart*, describing the dilemma the fledgling Fellowship found itself in once the book had been printed, but had no takers, "What were we to do with those other thousands of books? What could we say to the printer, whose bill wasn't half paid? What about that little loan of \$2,500 and those forty-nine subscribers who had invested \$4,500 in Works Publishing stock? How could we break the awful news to them? How could we tell them that since we had no publicity we could sell no books? Yes, that A.A. book venture was, I fear, very alcoholic!"

The desire to write and publish a book of their own experiences in the adventure of getting—and staying—sober came out of a recognition by Bill and co-founder Dr. Bob, that in order to keep the message intact and pass it on to the countless alcoholics out there who were waiting for some kind of help, they needed to codify what they and the early members had done and to explain the program in specific terms.

In a talk he gave at a banquet in Fort Worth, Texas, in June 1954, Bill W. recalled how it all came about:

"On a late fall afternoon in 1937, Smithy [Dr. Bob] and I were talking together in his living room." By then, the groups in Akron and New York were firmly established, "and the thing had leaked a little over into Cleveland and it began to move south from New York. But it was still flying blind—a flickering candle indeed, because it might at any minute be snuffed out. So we began counting noses. How many people had stayed dry in Akron, in New York, maybe a few in Cleveland? And when we added up that score, it was a handful, 35 to 40 maybe. But enough time had elapsed on enough really fatal cases of alcoholism that Bob and I foresaw for the first time that this thing was going to succeed.

"I can never forget the elation and ecstasy that seized



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us both. It had taken three years to sober up the handful, and there had been an immense amount of failure. How could this handful carry its message to all those who still didn't know? Not all the drunks in the world could come to Akron or to New York. How could we transmit our message to them?" The two began mulling over the possibilities. Bill, always the entrepreneur, had big ideas. He wanted to create a chain of hospitals to sober up thousands of drunks and to send out missionaries to spread the word.

"And, we reflected, we'd have to get some kind of literature. Up to this moment, not a syllable of this program was in writing. It was a kind of word-of-mouth deal, with variations according to each man's or woman's understanding....

"How could we unify this thing? Could we, out of our experience, describe certain methods that had done the trick for us? Obviously, if this movement was to propagate, it had to have literature so its message would not be garbled, either by the drunk or by the general public."

The first step in this plan was, of course, to actually write the book. Yet, in prime alcoholic fashion, Bill got the cart before the horse and set into motion a series of intricate promotional plans to raise money to finance the vast recovery empire he envisioned. Once financing had been secured, the book would be published, and they would all sit back with the "money rolling in."

"These reflections led us straight into a typical alcoholic fantasy!" wrote Bill in 1947. "Why not publish the book ourselves? Though told by almost everybody who knew anything of publishing that amateurs seldom produced anything but flops, we were not dismayed. This time, we said, it would be different."

After convincing a number of the early members to buy stock certificates in the "hastily organized" Works Publishing Company—the company formed to receive the untold millions Bill and his friend Henry P., another alcoholic promoter, expected would roll in—confidence was high. "Not only were we selling common stock on a book

to cure drunks—the book itself hadn't yet been written. Amazingly enough, we did sell that stock, \$4,500 worth, to alcoholics in New York, New Jersey, and to their friends. No one of the original 49 subscribers put up over \$300. Almost everybody paid on monthly installment, being too broke to do otherwise...."

In May 1938, when Bill finally began work on the first draft, he had been sober about three and a half years. Dr. Bob was sober a few months less than three years, and the other 100 early members who contributed in one way or another to the writing of the book had been sober for periods ranging from a couple of years to a couple of months.

They were a contentious, cantankerous bunch of newly dry drunks, clinging together desperately to preserve their hard-won sobriety, and still figuring it out by a process of trial and error. Yet, this shaky, often fearful group of men and women somehow brought to publication, in April 1939, a book that provided a blueprint for recovery from alcoholism that has been followed successfully for seventy years by millions of sober alcoholics in over 180 countries around the world.

How did they manage to set forth a clear description of their experience that would stand the test of time? Bill tells the story in *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*. Early on, he had written a few chapters of a possible book to use in raising money, and after *Reader's Digest* expressed interest in an article on A.A. and its (as yet unwritten) book—interest, by the way, that would ultimately never come to fruition—Bill set out to complete the manuscript. "Each morning I traveled all the way from Brooklyn to Newark where, pacing up and down in Henry's office, I began to dictate rough drafts of the chapters of the coming book."

Throughout, he consulted the group conscience, reading each chapter as it was finished to the New York group at its weekly meeting and sending copies to Dr. Bob to share with the Akron group. From Akron, he reported receiving good support, but the chapters "got a real mauling" from the New York bunch. "I redictated them and Ruth [Hock, Henry P.'s nonalcoholic secretary] retyped them over and over." In spite of all this, the first few chapters went easily, until he got to Chapter 5, when the alcoholics realized that "at this point we would have to tell how our program for recovery from alcoholism really worked. The backbone of the book would have to be fitted in right here.

"This problem had secretly worried the life out of me," wrote Bill. "I had never written anything before and neither had any other member of the New York group.... The hassling over the four chapters already finished had really been terrific. I was exhausted. On many a day I felt like throwing the book out the window.

"I was in this anything-but-spiritual mood on the night when the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous were written. I was sore and tired clear through. I lay in

bed... with pencil in hand and with a tablet of scratch paper on my knee. I could not get my mind on the job, much less put my heart into it. But here was one of those things that had to be done. Slowly my mind came into some kind of focus.”

Up to that time, the A.A. program had been strictly word of mouth, using basic ideas evolved from the Oxford Groups, William James, and Dr. Silkworth, “the little doctor who loved drunks.” It came down, essentially, to six steps: admitting powerlessness over alcohol, taking a moral inventory, sharing shortcomings with another person, making restitution, helping other alcoholics, and praying to God for power to practice these ideas. There were considerable variations on this general procedure, however, and at that point, nothing in writing.

“As my mind ran over these developments, it seemed to me that the program was still not definite enough. It might be a long time before readers of the book in distant places and lands could be personally contacted. Therefore our literature would have to be as clear and comprehensive as possible. Our steps would have to be more explicit....

“Finally I started to write. I set out to draft more than six steps; how many more I did not know. I relaxed and asked for guidance. With a speed that was astonishing, considering my jangling emotions, I completed the first draft. It took perhaps half an hour. The words kept right on coming. When I reached a stopping point, I numbered the new steps. They added up to twelve. Somehow this number seemed significant.”

Then began the grueling process of refining and calibrating these twelve new steps to the point where they would pass muster with the rest of the alcoholics Bill had brought into the process, those in Akron and New York. On the whole, the Akronites liked the new steps and supported the remainder of the text based on them. “But in New York the hot debate about the Twelve Steps and the book’s contents was doubled and redoubled. There were conservative, liberal, and radical viewpoints.”

Bill, as the writer, was “caught squarely in the middle of all this arguing.... For a while it looked as if we would bog down into permanent disagreement....”

Yet, just before the manuscript was finished, “an event of great significance took place.... We were still arguing about the Twelve Steps. All this time I had refused to... change a word of the original draft, in which... I had consistently used the word ‘God,’ and in one place the expression ‘on our knees’ was used. Praying to God on one’s knees was still a big affront to [several of the alcoholics]... we finally began to talk about the possibility of compromise. Who first suggested the actual compromise words I do not know, but they are words well known throughout the length and breadth of A.A. today: In Step Two we decided to describe God as a ‘Power greater than ourselves.’ In Steps Three and Eleven we inserted the words ‘God as we understood Him.’ From Step Seven we deleted

the expression ‘on our knees.’ And, as a lead-in sentence to all the steps we wrote these words: ‘Here are the steps we took which are suggested as a program of recovery.’ A.A.’s Twelve Steps were to be *suggestions* only....

“God was certainly there in our Steps, but He was now expressed in terms that anybody—*anybody at all*—could accept and try. Countless A.A.s have since testified that without this great evidence of liberality they could never have set foot on any path of spiritual progress or even approached us in the first place. It was another one of those providential ten-strikes.”

Concluding his description of the book-writing process in *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, Bill made it clear that all the hassles had been worth it. “It should here be emphasized that the creation of A.A.’s book brought forth much more than disputes about its contents. As the volume grew so did the conviction that we were on the right track. We saw tremendous vistas of what this book might become and might do. High expectation based on a confident faith was the steady and sustaining overtone of feeling that finally prevailed among us. Like the sound of a receding thunderstorm, the din of our earlier battles was now only a rumble. The air cleared and the sky was bright. We all felt good.”

Sometime in 2009, in its fourth edition and 70th year of continuous publication, it is expected that the 30 millionth copy of *Alcoholics Anonymous* will be sold. Available in 58 languages, including American Sign Language and Braille, multiple print and audio formats, A.A.’s basic text has carried the message of hope and recovery literally around the world.

Quite a record of success for a book whose seeds were sown of failure.