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When Skid-Row Stops Skidding



the amazing story of
**ALCOHOLICS
ANONYMOUS**

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The Amazing Story Of
Alcoholics Anonymous

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GOD makes use of the weak to confound the strong; of the ignorant to embarrass the wise. The humble are still a thorn in the side of the proud; and little children still startle their elders with a naive insight into the spiritual life which is uncanny.

The Christian world itself, it would seem, is at times the target of a sort of divine irony. Witness the natives of some of the unenlightened nations, steeped in the false religions of Mohammedanism, Buddhism and Hinduism. More than once has a delegate from one of these non-Christian countries at the U.N. put to shame the superficial spirituality of a speaker from the so-called more cultured civilizations. Even the beggars of their homelands show forth a deeper faith, a greater reverence, a clearer appreciation of the supernatural than some of the most prominent citizens of the western world.

Unorthodox as these races and peoples may be, the spiritual lives they manifest are possible only through the grace of God. Could it be that Our Father in heaven is

reading lessons of rebuke to His more favored children of light? The contrast between the moral status of these less-privileged peoples,—yes, even of the Russian populations, with that of our own country is something to think about.

There is a growing social movement here and elsewhere that might well be thought of in this light. It goes by the nondescript name of Alcoholics Anonymous.

If there ever was an organization which drew its membership from the spiritually blind, lame, dumb, deaf and deformed, this is it.

From the highways and by-ways of life they come. Men and women whose reputations have been ruined, their characters crushed, their lives a seemingly hopeless skein of twisted thoughts, irresponsible attitudes, unexplainable and anti-social actions. Each a victim of an affliction—the devastating scourge of drink—of alcoholism. Most of them have touched the bottom of social disrepute and drunk to the dregs the poisonous effects in disgrace, dishonor and defeat.

Derelicts, you would call such people, whether they had their origins on Park Avenue or on Skid Row, or the Bowery. Yet at this moment there are 120,000 of them living lives of honesty, of deep humility, in some instances of heroic effort com-

parable to any Christian group whose members have never strayed from the rigid paths of rectitude.

This social and spiritual phenomenon is one of the marvels of the age. "Miracles" of grace happen before our eyes every day as we see some sodden, befogged, utterly beaten creature gradually or quickly transformed into a reliable, responsible, God-fearing and God-loving citizen both of heaven and earth. How or why this seemingly impossible thing works, we have not yet been able to discern. That it does is an undeniable fact.

We have talked with these people; worked with them; served them in a limited spiritual capacity. We have grown not merely to admire and encourage them. We have been compelled by the very earnestness of their endeavors to look upon them as true friends and providential instruments of grace in the restoration of many human lives. The honest AA—honest with himself and honest with others—is an honest-to-God human being. We value our bond of friendship with them.

To those who do not understand, to the comfortable and self-satisfied non-alcoholic this plague of drunkenness may be but a disgraceful exhibition of human weakness. Contact with an alcoholic can be a very annoying personal experience.

To the light-hearted looking for a laugh, there is no greater source of highly amusing incident and anecdote. The "drunk joke" is a firmly established bit-part in the repertoire of the after-dinner speaker.

To the nation, however, which must pay the toll of the ill effects of alcoholism, it is a serious social problem.

To the family of the unfortunate who has fallen under its sway it is a constant drain on health, harmony and the happiness of home life.

To the victim himself it is often the difference between hell and heaven, here and hereafter.

It is not given to any man to be the judge of the soul of a fellowman. That is a prerogative of the Supreme Being Himself. If that dictum be true of ordinary humans, it is doubly true when one attempts to measure the moral responsibilities of the alcoholic. One does not have to be associated with the problem very long to recognize symptoms of physical and psychiatric disorder as well as spiritual deficiencies in the lives of those so afflicted.

Habitual alcoholism is a pathological condition as much as it is a manifestation of moral deterioration. It is for this reason that the resort to spiritual remedies alone fails so often. It is because this phase of the problem is recognized as a vital factor

in the case that Alcoholics Anonymous have been so successful in solving the enigma.

AA is neither a "treatment" in the ordinary medical sense of the term, nor is it a religion in the traditional concept of a formal religious body. It has no rites, liturgy, ceremony or service. It has, as a matter of fact, no rules or regulations. It is simply a *program* that serves as a basis for a renewed way of life.

The prospective candidate is introduced to twelve steps leading to the door of recovery. He can take them or leave them. No one has any authority to tell him to do anything. But the degree of success in conquering this problem of drink will depend upon the personal effort he is willing to put into the program.

The first and principle aim of Alcoholics Anonymous is to give each member a golden opportunity to achieve sobriety. Once that beach-head is established the triumphs of self-conquest and of self-improvement which gradually follow are such that would never be thought possible.

Men with trigger-quick tempers master the art of patience and tolerance.

Women who had lost the sense of shame in their lives became modern Magdalenes of modesty and decorum.

Resentments are changed into stepping-

stones of self-renunciation and respect for former targets of abuse.

Deceit and dishonesty give way to honesty and humility.

Selfishness is transformed into true love of self and neighbor.

The once-apathetic alcoholic finds himself stirred to an apostolic spirit which he had never before known at any period of his life. An animal appetite which had made his life unmanageable is so brought under the control of faith and reason that the AA member becomes not merely a good citizen; he develops into a better-than-average creature of God.

We pictured the alcoholic, before coming into AA, at his worst. We wished to show the contrast—from the depths to the heights. But there are many who need the AA program, who could profit by it, who could find a happy sobriety in it but hesitate because they have not yet run the full course of alcoholism to its inevitable last end.

These are the men and women who are victims of the strange disease but do not know it or are unwilling to admit it. They still cherish the hope that they can be “social” drinkers. They know they have a problem, but it is not *that* problem.

They have never done the things that they hear some alcoholics have done. There

are a hundred and one reasons why things go wrong, why their lives are unmanageable but alcohol is not at the root of it all.

Strangely enough this very unwillingness to face up to the problem is one of the *common* symptoms which is a characteristic of the real alcoholic. In his confused state of mind he thinks if he blames something else or someone else for his condition that this makes it so. Of course, it doesn't. But it helps him to shy away from the real fact.

Nor is it the amount of liquor a person drinks that marks him or her as an alcoholic. Continuous consumption sooner or later can bring on the condition that is called alcoholism. But an alcoholic does not necessarily have to be a heavy drinker. One drink does the job on the real alcoholic. He can't take the first one. If he does, it means a drunk. Liquor is not a comfort to the alcoholic; it is a compulsion. One is too much; a hundred is not enough.

The biggest road-block to his recovery from the unhappiness that plagues him is his refusal to admit the truth. Liquor has him licked but he won't admit it. There are bankers in AA who for years blamed everything and anything—except alcohol—for their sorry state. There are business executives and lawyers and clergymen and school teachers and rank-and-file workers

in it. Many never dreamed that a human being could ever enjoy the serenity and the constancy and the courage that they now possess. They found this pearl of great price in AA. But they first had to take that first step, admit they were powerless over alcohol and were ready to do something about it.

To achieve sobriety and to maintain it, one basic fact must be recognized. No one else can attain it for you. Prayer will help the alcoholic to help himself. But he, and he alone, must make that *first act of the will*—he must convince himself that he wants to quit drinking. No one else in the world can do that for him. The most devoted wife, the most loyal friend, the most zealous clergyman may hope, pray and plead—but only the victim of this disease can take the first step necessary toward a happy sobriety.

The best and easiest way to take the step is to attend a number of AA meetings. Open meetings are held for the public as well as for alcoholics. Everyone is welcome. Men and women who once were powerless to resist the lure of liquor relate their experiences before and after joining AA. The stories are as fascinating as they are informative.

The “closed” meetings are for alcoholics only. It is here that the real beginnings of

recovery are made. It is here that the AA learns to help himself in a way that is unique. He soon finds that the best way to help himself is by helping someone else. There are no "musts," "do's" or "don'ts." AA has a program to offer. It has nothing to sell. The member "sells it to himself" or he will not buy it.

Each week one of the members or an invited guest talks briefly on one of the twelve steps. An open and frank discussion follows. Objections, obstacles, difficulties, personal experiments, successes and failures are given an airing.

The AA member meets on a common ground with his fellow AA. It is the common ground of a mutually shared experience. They talk a common language. Each one understands the other because all have lived through the same or similar circumstances. They are battling a common problem—a stubborn, ugly problem. By their own efforts and the strength that comes from humble and honest cooperative action they are licking that problem. They are winning the battle of life; building a better way of life. What more can anyone ask?

Here is the program that absorbs the interest of every active AA. One hundred fifty thousand enlightened and enthusiastic human beings, in all parts of the world, are revelling in it:

The Twelve Steps

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God, *as we understood Him*.
4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. Admitted to God, to ourselves and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.
8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. Continued to take personal inventory, and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
11. Sought through prayer and medita-

tion to improve our conscious contact with God, *as we understand Him*, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.

12. 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.

Could anyone look for a simpler or a more effective basis for a new way of life than this? AA is not a religion; it is a program; but it is built on truths and actions that constitute the very foundation of human life. We non-alcoholics might well not merely stand in admiration of it. We would do well to imitate it.

Indeed there is a lesson for the Christian world hidden beneath that title "Alcoholics Anonymous." A dozen possible points come to mind. We single out but two.

Here is an organization definitely outside the framework of the established Christian order. It is accomplishing a *spiritual* work that had defied individual Christian effort. In its group spirit and action it puts to shame the less fruitful strivings of many an orthodox, sanctioned group engaged in "Catholic Action." The very least that any honest Christian should do when

faced with such a paradox is to be humble enough to ask the question—"Why?"

If we were to hazard a conjecture in reply, we would be tempted to say, "It may well be that God is again using the weak, the helpless and the confused to confound the strong, the comfortable and the wise." This tremendous social movement had its beginnings in the befogged brains of three alcoholic non-Catholics sixteen years ago.

Could it be that the modern concept of Christian charity is lacking the fullness of its pristine, apostolic vigor? Social outcasts, like alcoholics, may be fitting subjects of solicitude for the Salvation Army, but Christian "charity" must be reserved for those of our own class and social status. A comfortable Christian charity indeed that would be!

It might be too much to expect any widespread interest in the plight of unreformed bums and drunks. But we would put it down as a callous disregard of basic Christianity if any Catholic were to "look down his nose" or deliberately refuse encouragement and cooperation to any individual or group that shows forth the earnest efforts toward recovery as is evidenced by Alcoholics Anonymous.

Some there may be, too, who feel Catholics have a monopoly on spiritual perfection. They may look askance at such a

movement as this, simply because it is not under clerical supervision. If such there be, we would recall a little incident from the scriptures.

“But John answered and said, ‘Master, we saw a man casting out devils in Thy name and we forbade him because he does not follow with us.’

“And Jesus said to him, ‘Do not forbid him, for he who is not against you is for you.’”

Alcoholics Anonymous is not a religion. It is the basis for a new way of life. The member gets only as much out of it as he is willing to put into it for his own recovery. No one else can do the job for him. But if he is willing to take the first step, a new life looms up before him in lustrous colors. It is very difficult to see how any Christian can refrain from commending the movement.

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