



Rebellion Dogs Blog

Founders' Day and other AA myths ... busted!

June 10, 2017

AA's birthday - June 10 - was chosen in hindsight as the start of AA. Happy 82nd anniversary (with an asterisk) everyone!

Fact-checking shows this "Founders' Day" celebration to be inaccurate. Bob S's last drink would have been about 10 or 11 days later. It wasn't a fraud or a conspiracy. Nor is this blog a fault-finding mission. Yet, to set the record straight, June 10th is a *symbolic* date that signifies AA's second member sobering up with the help of AA's first alcoholic. Because one sober alcoholic does not a fellowship make. Technical accuracy, isn't that important. But it is important to take periodic inventory. Fact-checking is good for our collective integrity and credibility.

First, if you or I were there, back in the day, witnesses to Dr. Bob's relapsing ways, who would have been confident that Bob S would not have drank again after Bill gave Bob—what turned out to be—his last beer before surgery to steady our proctologist-co-founder's shaky hands? There was an inside joke with local professionals in Akron for the unfortunate souls whose asses were in the (alcoholic) doctor Bob Smith's hands.

Only later, after it seemed that, Bob S, AA #2 was sober for good, and other had joined them, that they worked backwards to pick an AA start-date. They didn't have google or internet to see what the Dr. was posting on Facebook June 10th, to corroborate their guess and, as history recalls, they got it wrong. For those who care, AA history lovers have pieced the facts together. You can google search some of the facts yourself and you'll come up with June 20th or 21st as the good doctor's sobriety date.

Here's how you and I first heard about AA's birthday; it was from "Dr. Bob's Nightmare," a story he written or dictated from memory, three or four years later:

“I went to Atlantic City to attend several days’ meeting of a national society of which I was a member. I drank all the scotch they had on the train and bought several quarts on my way to the hotel. This was on Sunday. I got tight that night, stayed sober Monday till after the dinner and then proceeded to get tight again. I drank all I dared in the bar, and then went to my room to finish the job. Tuesday, I started in the morning, getting well organized by noon.

I did not want to disgrace myself so I then checked out. I bought some more liquor on the way to the depot. I had to wait some time for the train. I remember nothing from then on until I woke up at a friend’s house, in a town near home. These good people notified my wife, who sent my newly made friend over to get me. He came and got me home and to bed, gave me a few drinks that night, and one bottle of beer the next morning.

That was June,10, 1935, and that was my last drink. As I write nearly four years have passed.” (*Alcoholics Anonymous*, pp. 179-180)

As mentioned, AA’s birthday - June 10 - was chosen in hindsight as the start of AA. Who would have been confident that Bob S would not have drank again, as was his habit, on June 11th? Who would have known that anything called Alcoholics Anonymous had been born from that turning-point? It was a few years later, as Bill and Hank’s dream of a book was being realized that we looked back nostalgically and picked that date as a best-guess.



The “national society” that Bob mentions attending was the American Medical Association annual conference in Atlantic City. History books tell us that the 1935 gathering started on June 10th, 1935ⁱ and continued through the week, as did Bob’s drinking. We read about Bill nursing Bob from his drunken stupor back in Akron. Days later, Bill would give a shaky Dr. Bob a beer before surgery approximately 11 days after our June 10th anniversary date. That beer before performing surgery would be Dr. Bob’s last drink. That marks the birth of Alcoholics Anonymous, June 20th or 21th would be accurate.

Here's an account from *Silkworth.net* called, "Dr. Bob's Last Drink" based on the research of Mitchell K.:

... Dr. Bob kept his promise to Anne. That is, until he boarded the train to Atlantic City. Once on the train Dr. Bob began to drink in earnest. He drank all the way to Atlantic City, purchased more bottles prior to checking in to the hotel. That was on a Sunday evening.

Dr. Bob stayed sober on Monday [June 10, 1935] until after dinner. He then resumed his drinking. Upon awakening Tuesday morning [June 11, 1935] ... Dr. Bob's blackout lasted over 24 hours. There was a five-day period from when Dr. Bob left for the convention to when the nurse called Anne and Bill. They took Dr. Bob home and put him to bed. The detoxification process began once again. That process usually lasted three days according to Bill. They tapered Dr. Bob off of alcohol and fed him a diet of sauerkraut, tomato juice and Karo Syrup [approx. June 18, 1935]. ... Bill had remembered that in three days, Dr. Bob was scheduled to perform surgery. On the day of the surgery, Dr. Bob had recovered sufficiently to go to work. In order to insure the steadiness of Dr. Bob's hands during the operation Bill gave him a bottle of beer [approx. June 20 or 21, 1935].ⁱⁱ

So, it's not like Bill or Bob were thinking "Hey, we just created Alcoholics Anonymous—write this date down!" As Melvin B (1925-2017) recorded, as author of *Pass It On: The Story of Bill Wilson and How the A.A. Message Reached the World*:

"Of all the plans Bill and Dr. Bob had discussed in 1937, the proposal to publish a book about the program was the most realistic."ⁱⁱⁱ

When did Bob write his story down? When did we know we were AA? Maybe the first time our fellowship was publicly referred to as "Alcoholics Anonymous" was on the program of the infamous Rockefeller fund-raiser dinner. Of course, the book's title would have many incarnations including:

- *The Dry Way,*
- *One Hundred Men,*
- *The Way Out,*
- *Dry Frontiers* and
- *The Empty Glass.*

The favorite was *The Way Out* and it was voted on. Too many books were already called *Way Out* or *The Way Out* and none were called *Alcoholics Anonymous* so group conscience saw the wisdom of caving on the previous vote and going with the alternative name. The book was published in April 1939 and the following month, Clarence S started the first group named Alcoholics Anonymous in Cleveland.^{iv}

Whenever it came time for Bob's story to be written and edited a lot of time had passed since our foggy beginnings and an innocent mistake has been reified into annual Founders' Day rituals and false memory.

I am understanding and forgiving based on my own history. I celebrate November 27th as my sobriety date. The truth is I don't remember exactly. My last drink might have been at the Kon Tiki bar in Alexis Nihon Plaza in Montreal just before I went to a Friday night meeting (November 26, 1976).

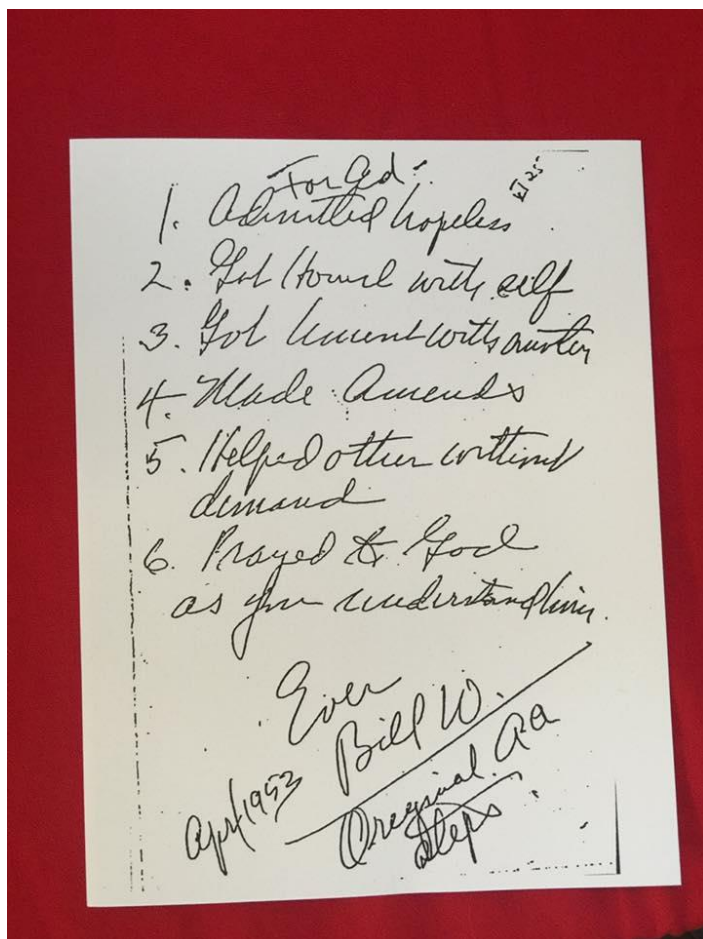
Or it's possible, the Saturday afternoon before the Sharenity AA Group in Ste. Anne de Bellevue, Quebec. I was jamming at a friend's house. Someone passed a joint around which I remember smoking. I remember we were jamming Paul McCartney's song "[Bip Bop \(1971\)](#)"^v and I was on the Xylophone (generally a guitar player but I love to experiment). I imagine that McCartney was smoking some weed when he wrote the song, too; it is very much groove-based. The thing is, I don't remember if that weekend music jam was the weekend before (November 20th) or November 27th so November 27th is either my first clean and sober day or the date of my last mind-altering substance as I took a few tokes and folk-rocked out with my friends.

So, Dr. Bob, I understand how fuzzy the head can be at a time when recording milestones seems so important. Dr. Bob didn't know he was having his last drink when he had that one beer and I had no idea that my finale was the end for me, either. Some have dramatic finishes. Co-founder Bob and I – not so much.

There you have it; AA's anniversary is off a few days. We're absolutely bang-on with the year. Why sweat the small stuff, right?

While we're myth-busting and I have my First-edition *Pass It On* open, let's look at some other AA history that gets distorted by fundamentalists and others.

The Twelve Steps—exactly as written—is how AAs found a 75% success rate before the program was watered down... truth or fiction?



There is this folklore about the Twelve Steps: The hand of God, upon Bill's shoulder, guided the co-founder a-la Moses and the ten commandments. Another favorite back-to-basics myth is that the Twelve Steps, exactly as written and in the order that they appear, is how the founding members all got sober. In this good-ol-days, every newcomer got sober, every group was in harmony with all others. The good-ol-days were before AA got so "watered down."

Fact check: Let's count them—exactly zero is the number of the founding members who worked these (Twelve) Steps exactly as currently recorded. Early AA's—those who worked a small-p-

program with sponsors or on their own had multiple variations of six-step programs. Pictured is one version Bill W. wrote down from memory for Father Ed Dowling:

1. Admitted hopeless
2. Got Honest with self
3. Got honest with others
4. Made Amends
5. Helped others without demand
6. Prayed to God as you understand him.

Other versions of the six-step program had God in #2. I expect there were other versions that were never preserved for posterity. I expect any steps—six, ten, twelve or twenty—sincerely applied, worked for some, not for others.

What we call Twelfth Step work was an oral tradition before it was codified in a text; one alcoholic would talk with another. Did it work? Did we need Twelve Steps because six was ineffective? The original 28 stories of alcoholics in the first *Alcoholics Anonymous* speak to this question.

As I've mentioned before, their stories were being collected around the same time as versions of our present-day Twelve Steps were being massaged into "How It Works." I don't know how random or controlled this first 28 list of story-writers is. I can't imagine how anyone could cherry-pick future winners from a random group of AA members. With 40-years sobriety today, I couldn't go to my home group and pick out members with six-months to three years sobriety and identify the future winners. I have found no way of looking someone in the eye and knowing if they have taken their last drink or not. People fool me who I think have it made. People fool me who I think are doing it all wrong. Chaos points a fickle finger.

If you've been a loyal blog follower, you've seen these numbers before and you can chant them with me. Of the 28 First-edition *Big Book* AA stories, 14 never drank after they wrote the stories. Seven returned to drinking. Seven relapsed but regained sobriety and died sober. All 28 are dead now and some historian knows where everyone is buried so while unscientific, in measurement, this is a better sample than any member's anecdotal memory of AA's they've worked with over the years. This sample bears out the oft quoted 75% success rate; the first 50% never drank again, 25% didn't stay sober and another 25% relapsed but returned to AA to find lasting sobriety.

Here's how Mel B tells the story of the Twelve Steps journey from rough draft to *Big Book* reification.

He [Bill] completed the first draft in about half an hour, then kept on writing until he felt he should stop and review what he had written. Numbering the new steps, he found that they added up to twelve—as symbolic number; he though

the Twelve Apostles, and soon became convinced that the Society should have twelve steps.

The very first draft of the Twelve Steps, as Bill wrote them that night, had been lost. This is an approximate reconstruction of the way he first set them down:

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. Came to believe that God could restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn our wills and our lives over to the care and direction of God.
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 willing that God remove all these defects of character.
7. Humbly on our knees asked Him to remove these shortcomings—holding nothing back.
8. Made a complete list of all persons we had harmed; 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 meditation to improve our contact with God, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.
12. Having had a spiritual experience as the result of this course of action, we tried to carry this message to others, especially alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs. ...

Ruth Hock said that Bill appeared in the office one day with the steps practically complete. But when he showed the manuscript to local members, there were heated discussions and many other suggestions. Jimmy B. opposed the strong reference to God, in both the steps and the rest of the early chapters; Hank wanted to soft-pedal them; but Fitz insisted that the book should express Christian doctrines and use Biblical terms and expression. Ruth [Hock] remembered: ‘Fitz was for going all the way with ‘God’ you [Bill] were in the

middle; Hank was for very little and I—trying to reflect the reaction of the nonalcoholic—was for very little. The result of this was the phrase ‘God as we understood Him,’ which I don’t think ever had much of a negative reaction anywhere.’

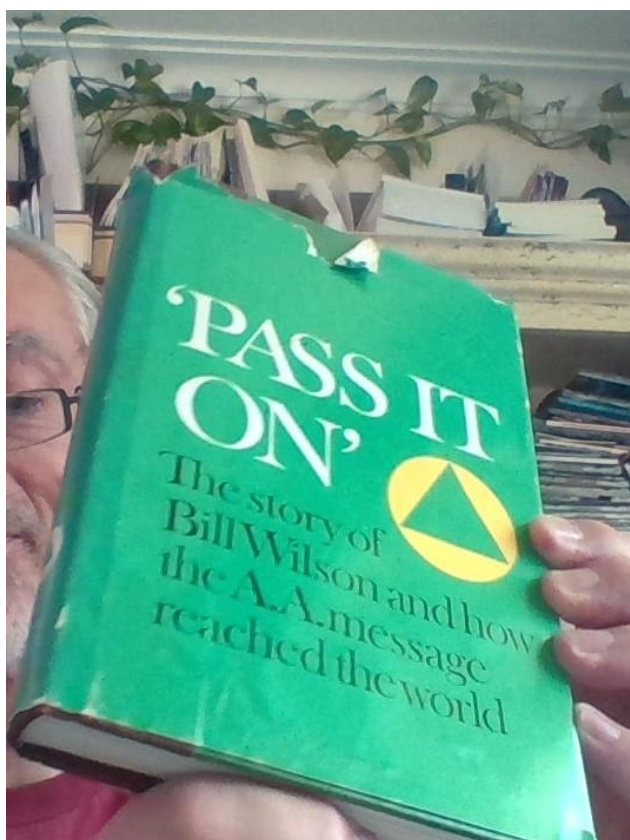
Bill regarded these changes as ‘concessions to those of little or no faith’ and called them ‘the great contribution of our atheists and agnostics. They had widened our gateway so that all who suffered might pass through, regardless of their belief or *lack of belief.*’ ...

Dr. Howard, a psychiatrist in Montclair, New Jersey, made a vitally important contribution. He suggested that there were too many ‘you musts.’ Bill said the psychiatrist’s ‘idea was to remove all forms of coercion, to put Fellowship on a *we ought* basis instead of a *you must* basis.’

Jimmy B. had a colorful description of this interchange: ‘Dr. Howard read [the manuscript] and brought it back the next day,’ he recalled. ‘He said Bill was making a damn big mistake. ‘This is the Oxford Group,’ he said, ‘You have to change the whole damn thing.’

‘We asked, ‘Why? What is the matter with it? It’s is perfect’

‘He said, ‘You have to take out the must. You have to take out the God.’ Did Bill go into a tizzy then! He almost blew his top. Here was this baby being torn apart by a screwball psychiatrist.”^{vi}



So, while there are those who profess the-hand-of-God attribution to our first text, if it was an act of God, it was less flash-of-light inspiration, and more the works in mysterious ways scenario. The hand of *God* expressed him-her-their-it-self in our group conscience, twisted and changed from iteration to iteration.

Not one single word in the first 164 pages has ever been changed—true or false?

Another favorite historical fabrication is the myth that “not a word has changed in the first 164 pages.” A striking change, for me was the addition of the “Spiritual Experience” Appendix which reframes a lot of words in a lot of ways. I’ve heard a podcast with someone who has identified 200 grammatical changes and alterations between the First and Fourth edition. Significantly, I think, is the replacement of the First-printing word “ex-alcoholic” as we once described ourselves in our Big Book and replacing this with “ex-problem drinker” (Big Book, pg. 19 and 151).

Otherwise, you would have been programmed to start every contribution at an AA meeting, with, “My name is _____ and I’m an ex-alcoholic.”

So, happy Founders’ Day, happy anniversary, AA! Our Akron mecca hosts AA pilgrims June 9, 10 & 11, to ring in the 82nd anniversary^{vii}. We are okay with partying it up on June 10th, June 21st, 22nd, or any day this year you want to celebrate.

AA is stagnant—true or false?

AA is evolving, in my opinion. We are more than a book or a program. This January, resulting from discussions at Area Assemblies, Regional Forums and the General Service Conference, an AA-guideline was released on Group and Member Safety.

"[Safety and A.A.: Our Common Welfare \(SMF-209\)](#)^{viii}" aims to make AA gatherings a safe place for everyone, regardless of race, creed, sexual-orientation, socioeconomic status, gender, age or personal position on medication, recovery or lifestyle. Here are some highlights:

While most groups operate with a healthy balance of spontaneity and structure, there are a number of situations that can threaten group unity and challenge the safety of the group and its members. Often this can center on disruptive individuals, those who are confrontational, aggressive, or those who are simply

unwilling to put the needs of the group first. Such behavior can hijack the focus of a meeting and frighten members, new and old...

Alcoholics Anonymous is a microcosm of the larger society within which we exist. Problems found in the outside world can also make their way into the rooms of A.A. As we strive to share in a spirit of trust, both at meetings and individually with sponsors and friends, it is reasonable for each member to expect a meaningful level of safety. ... Some people, however, come into A.A. without an understanding of the type of behavior that is appropriate in meetings or in the company of other members. A person can be sober in A.A., yet still not understand what is acceptable...

Situations that groups have addressed through group conscience include, sexual harassment or stalking; threats of violence; bullying; financial coercion; racial or lifestyle intolerance; pressuring A.A. members into a particular point of view or belief relating to medical treatments and/or medications, politics, religion, or other outside issues. In addition, there may be other behaviors that go on outside of typical meeting times that may affect whether someone feels safe to return to the group. ...

A.A. membership does not grant immunity from local regulations and being at an A.A. meeting does not put anyone beyond the jurisdiction of law enforcement officers. As individuals, A.A. members are also “citizens of the world,” and as citizens we are not above the law. ...

Safety, however, is important to the functioning of the group. By maintaining order and safety in meetings, the group as a whole will benefit and members will be able to focus on recovery from alcoholism and a life of sobriety...

If you're looking for something new to talk about in your AA meeting, if you'd rather think about the future than canonize our founders and glorify our past, then grab a copy of this new document—SMF-209—and share it with your peeps at coffee after the meeting or bring it up during the business meeting.

Thanks for participating. We blather on a lot, it's true. But Rebellion Dogs is always listening. We've posted some of these ideas on Facebook and other social-media

outlets. We're stoked to hear your take. Call "Bullshit" or agree or share your own story. We're all in this together.

As AA kicks off our 83rd year, one thing's true that I remember from my local newspaper, 40-years ago. "If you want to drink and can—that's your business. If you want to quit, but can't—that's our business.... Call AA."

Peace out!

ⁱ <http://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/article-abstract/260319>

ⁱⁱ http://www.silkworth.net/mitchellk/copyrighted/drb_lastdrink.html

ⁱⁱⁱ Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, *Pass It On: The Story of Bill Wilson and How the A.A. Message Reached the World*, New York: AAWS, 1984, p 190

^{iv} Ibid, pp. 202-203

^v <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DLrF0QjOhDU>

^{vi} *Pass It On*, pp 198 - 204

^{vii} <https://foundersdayregistration.akronaa.org/>

^{viii} http://www.aa.org/assets/en_US/smf-209_en.pdf