Gresham's Law in Alcoholics Anonymous

Gresham's Law - That Bad Currency Drives out Good - Has Been Operative in the Life of Alcoholics Anonymous. Weak AA Is Tending to Drive out Strong AA.

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There are three ways to work the program of Alcoholics Anonymous. The strong, original way, proved powerfully and reliably effective over forty years. A medium way - not so strong, not so safe, not so sure, not so good, but still effective. A weak way, which turns out to be really no way at all but literally a heresy, a false teaching, a twisting corruption of what the founders of Alcoholics Anonymous clearly stated the program to be.

As an eleven year member of Alcoholics Anonymous, I am still awed by the combination of simplicity, practicality, and profundity built into the Twelve Steps; the AA recovery plan. This audacious blueprint for life change was drawn up in 1939 by a former dead-end drunk serving as spokesman for an unknown, unproven society of 100 reformed problem drinkers, many of whom were still in the relatively early stages of recovery from alcohol addiction. Yet for all their boldness of scope, the Steps are so plainly worded, and so well-explained in chapters five and following of *Alcoholics Anonymous* the – AA Big Book – that they can be done by anyone. And, therein lies their greatest genius. There is no prior requirement of purity of life or advancement of learning. Just a willingness to admit personal defeat and a sincere desire to change.

The Twelve Steps sharply contradict the secular psychological axiom that where the level of performance is low you must set a low level of aspiration in order to gain a positive result in life. By this view, the proper approach for the early AA's would have been to put together a program aimed certainly no higher than alcohol abstinence and a return to life as it had been in the pre-alcoholic days, life as ordinary men and women of the world. But these newly-sobered-up drunks set out to become totally committed men and women of God.

The authors of the Big Book knew that this radical recovery plan was apt to jar many of the newcomers they were trying to reach with their message and they made two moves to sugarcoat their pill. First, they put the following disclaimer immediately after listing the Twelve Steps in chapter five: "Many of us exclaimed, I can't go through with it. Do not be discouraged. No one among us has been able to maintain anything like perfect adherence to these principles. We are not saints. The point is that we are willing to grow along spiritual lines. The principles we have set down are guides to progress. We claim spiritual progress rather than spiritual perfection." That short paragraph was a stroke of inspiration, especially the phrase, "We are not saints." It has eased thousands of new, half-convinced AA members (myself included) past the fact that we were headed, under the guidance of the Steps, in the completely unfamiliar direction of spiritual perfection.

Most of us began practicing the Steps without realizing their full implications. Experience quickly taught us that they worked. They got us sober and enabled us to stay sober. From our intensely pragmatic standpoint, that was what mattered. We were content to enjoy our sobriety and leave all debates as to why the Steps worked to non-alcoholic theorizers - whose lives did not hang in the balance if they got themselves confused and came to some wrong conclusions.

AA's founders did something else to keep the spiritual rigor and power of the Twelve Steps from scaring off new prospects. They put the Steps forth as suggestions rather than as directives. The sentence which introduces the Steps in chapter five of the Big Book says, "Here are the steps we took, which are suggested as a program of recovery." This idea had enormous appeal throughout the AA movement from the time the Big Book was first published. We drunks hate to be told to do anything. The freedom to take the Steps at their own pace and in their own way quickly grew to be deeply cherished among AA members.

Before we explore the results of this permissive approach to the Steps, there is one oddity worth noting. AA existed for four full years before the Steps were put in their final written form. During that time there was a

program and it was sobering up alcoholics. It consisted of two parts: a Six-step word-of-mouth program, and the Four Absolutes - absolute honesty, absolute purity, absolute unselfishness, and absolute love - taken over from the Oxford Group, the evangelical Christian movement out of which AA was born. The six steps of the word-of-mouth program from the early pioneering years of Alcoholics Anonymous as given in "Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age" are:

1. We admitted that we were powerless over alcohol.
2. We made a moral inventory of our defects or sins.
3. We confessed or shared our shortcomings with another person in confidence.
4. We made restitution to all those we had harmed by our drinking.
5. We tried to help other alcoholics with no thought of reward in money or prestige.
6. We prayed to whatever God we thought there was for power to practice these precepts.

In those early days of AA there was no talk of suggestions. The basic points of the program, were regarded by all the older members as directives, as indispensable essentials, and were passed on to newcomers as such.

When Bill first formulated the Twelve Steps, he conceived of them, too, as instructions, not as suggestions. When the idea of presenting the Steps as suggestions came up, Bill for a long time flatly opposed it. Finally - and reluctantly - he agreed. In "Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age" he related how this concession enabled countless AA's to approach the fellowship who would otherwise have been turned off AA - and back to active alcoholism.

Still, Bill was a man whose watchword was prudence and who went out of his way to steer clear of destructive controversy. One cannot help wondering if his feelings on the decision to present the Twelve Steps in the form of suggestions were not a bit more ambiguous than he was willing to let on in public once the compromise had been reached. There is no denying that the paragraphs of chapter five of the Big Book which introduce the Twelve Steps are full of language that would be utterly appropriate as a preamble to a set of action directions, but is not nearly as fitting as an introduction to a group of suggestions. Here is the beginning of chapter five, with the key words and phrases underlined:

"Rarely have we seen a person fail who has thoroughly followed our path. Those who do not recover are people who cannot or will not completely give themselves to this simple program, usually men and women who are constitutionally incapable of being honest with themselves. There are such unfortunates. They are not at fault; they seem to have been born that way. They are naturally incapable of grasping and developing a manner of living which demands rigorous honesty. Their chances are less than average. There are those, too, who suffer from grave emotional and mental disorders, but many of them do recover if they have the capacity to be honest. Our stories disclose in a general way what we used to be like, what happened, and what we are like now. If you have decided you want what we have and are willing to go to any length to get it - then you are ready to take certain steps.

"At some of these we balked. We thought we could find an easier, softer way. But we could not. With all the earnestness at our command, we beg of you to be fearless and thorough from the very start. Some of us have tried to hold on to our old ideas and the result was nil until we let go absolutely.

"Remember that we deal with alcohol - cunning, baffling, powerful! Without help it is too much for us. But there is One who has all power - that One is God. May you find Him now!

"Half measures availed us nothing. We stood at the turning point. We asked His protection and care with complete abandon. Here are the steps we took. . ." Granting that Bill ended up fully reconciled to the compromise, his initial misgivings may turn out in the long run to have been prophetic. At the time, however, there were no indications whatsoever that the permissive, suggestions only approach was anything but a boon to the movement.

In 1938 and 1939 when the Big Book was being written, there were 100 members in the fellowship. By 1945 active AA membership was up to 13,000. The primary reason for this explosive increase was that the program - the Steps - were a winning formula; they worked, and there was a big need for them out there in the

population. America was boozy and was spawning a great many alcoholics.

Highly favorable press coverage of the AA story was also a major factor in the spectacular growth pattern. A series of enthusiastic articles on AA appeared in the fall of 1939 in the Cleveland "Plain Dealer. "These pieces produced a flood of new AA members in the Cleveland area. This sudden expansion was the first tangible evidence that AA had the potential to grow into a movement of major proportions.

The sequence of events during this period is significant. The Big Book was published in April of 1939, and in it the suggestions-only approach to the Steps was disseminated for the first time. A few months later the "Plain Dealer" articles ran,and Cleveland AA's found themselves relating to new prospects on an unprecedented scale. It suddenly became attractive, in away it had not been before when the fellowship was smaller and more intimate, to ease up a bit on the idea that all the principles should be practiced all the time by all the members. More and more emphasis began to be placed on the fact that the Steps were to be considered as suggestions only. At this time, and through this set of circumstances, the "cafeteria style" take-what-you-like-and-leave-the-rest approach to the Twelve Steps came into practice.

And it seemed to work. It turned out that many newcomers could get sober and stay sober without anything like the full and intensive practice of the whole program that had been considered a life-or-death necessity in the early years. In fact, alcoholics in significant numbers began to demonstrate that they could stay off booze on no more than an admission of powerlessness, some work with other alcoholics, and regular attendance at AA meetings.

This is not to say that all AA's began to take this super-permissive approach to the Twelve Steps. A great many continued to opt for the original, full program approach. But now for the first time the workability of other, less rigorous approaches was established, and a tendency had emerged which was to become more pronounced as time went on.

At first this seemed like an unmixed blessing. After all, those who chose actively to practice all of the Twelve Steps were as free as ever to do so. Those who preferred working with some, or just a couple, of the Steps were staying sober too. And AA was attracting more and more new members and more and more favorable

recognition. In 1941, Jack Alexander's article on Alcoholics Anonymous was published in the "Saturday Evening Post." AA membership at the time stood at 2,000. In the next nine months it jumped 400%.

By now it was possible to distinguish three variant practices of the AA program which we have labeled the strong-cup-of-coffee, medium-cup-of-coffee, and weak-cup-of-coffee approaches. Strong AA was the original, undiluted, dosage of the spiritual principles. Strong AA's took all twelve of the Steps - and kept on taking them. They did not stop with the admission of powerlessness over alcohol, but went on right away to turn their wills and lives over to God's care. They began to practice rigorous honesty in all their affairs. In short order they proceeded to take a moral inventory, admit all their wrongs to at least one other person, take positive and forceful action in making such restitution as was possible for those wrongs, continued taking inventory, admitting their faults, and making restitution on a regular basis, pray and meditate every day, go to two or more AA meetings weekly, and actively work the Twelfth Step, carrying the AA message to others in trouble.

The medium AA's started off with a bang, pretty much like the strong AA's, except they hedged or procrastinated a bit on parts of the program that they feared or did not like - maybe the God Steps, maybe the inventory Steps, depending on their particular nervousness or dislikes. But after they had stayed sober for a while, the medium AA's eased up and settled into a practice of the program that went something like this: an AA meeting a week; occasional Twelfth Step work (leaving more and more of that to the "newer fellows" as time went on); some work with the Steps (but not like before); less and less inventory (as they became more and more "respectable"); some prayer and meditation still, but not on a daily basis any more (not enough time, due to the encroachment of business engagements, social activities, and other baggage that went along with the return to normal life in the workaday world).

The weak AA's were a varied lot. The thing common to all of them was that they left big chunks of the

program totally and permanently out of their reckoning right from the outset - sometimes the God Steps, sometimes the inventory Steps, often both. Weak AA's tended to talk in terms like, "All you need to do to stay sober is go to meetings and stay away from the first drink. "Most of the weak AA's who were successful in staying sober were pretty faithful meeting-goers. Since they were doing so little with the principles, their sobriety and their survival depended more exclusively than did those of the strong and medium AA's on constant exposure to the people of AA.

The fact is that only the strong-cup-of-coffee-ers were practicing the program as it had been laid out in the Big Book. Granting that the medium and weak AA's had every right as AA members to practice the principles any way they wanted (including hardly any at all), since the Steps were "suggestions only" - still, the way the first members had done it, and the way the Big Book had recorded it was the strong-cup-of-coffee way. The medium approach had - and still has - a real, constructive place in the AA recovery scheme, in that it can be used as a temporary platform for reluctant beginners. The medium-cup-of-coffee option enables many who initially are not up to the strong approach to gain a foothold in the fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous.

But medium AA can, and often does, become a trap. It is no place for an AA member to try to settle out permanently. People who stick too long in medium AA pass the point where they might be encouraged to step up to strong AA and end up sliding back into weak AA.

Weak AA has none of the redeeming features of medium AA. It is clearly at odds with the program as outlined in the Big Book. It bases itself on a flat and nonnegotiable refusal to work with vital recovery principles. Weak AA's cop out and stay copped out on most of the Twelve Steps. They water down the program to the point where there really is no program in the sense that the first members of AA understood the program. A more inclusive, more accurate, and more descriptive term than "weak AA" for this practice is "copped-out and watered-down AA," or COWD AA for short. With the passage of time, a definite evolution has taken place in AA in the respective popularity and acceptability of the strong and COWD approaches.

In the first years of their existence, the COWD AA's tended to feel obligated to defend and sing the praises of their "heterodox" approaches and even to chide the strong AA's a bit for being rigid and holier-than-thou. The strong AA's, for their part, tended to be more relaxed and tolerant, less strident, less defensive. After all, their method was obviously safer since it involved taking more of the medicine. And it was obviously the original and genuine article as the Big Book eloquently attested But this juxtaposition of attitudes came to have a peculiar effect in a movement which prided itself on its good-natured inclination to let all kinds of maverick opinions and practices have their say and their way. The loudest voices came to be the voices of heterodoxy, and these came in time to have the greatest impact on newcomers. Copped-out and watered-down AA came to be the "in" thing, the wave of the future; strong AA came to be regarded - not universally, but widely - as a bit stodgy and a bit pass.

The COWD AA's had in a sense proven Bill and the first hundred AA's wrong. In the introduction to the Twelve Steps, the statement: ". . . we thought we could find an easier, softer way, but we could not. . . " was an unequivocal assertion that it was necessary to practice all the Steps. But the COWD AA's did not practice all the Steps, and they were staying sober. They had found an easier, softer way. Human nature being what it is, it was inevitable that the less demanding, medium-to-weak approach would grow in popularity while the older, more rigorous approach would decline. Who wants to do things the hard way when they do not have to? Who wants to drive a car with standard shift when the model with automatic is a hundred dollars cheaper?

AA has been in existence now more than forty years. There is still widespread lip service in the movement to the importance of working all the Steps and practicing rigorous honesty in all one's affairs. But as a matter of fact, precious few AA's continue to attempt seriously and consistently to DO these things on a daily basis - not after their first months of sobriety in the fellowship.

Reversion to a lower, more "normal" level of aspiration is the order of the day. Those who do continue to practice strong AA have to be careful how they talk about what they are doing in AA meetings. In many places, too much or too serious talk about God is considered bad form. The same is true about talk on the subjects of confession, restitution, and rigorous honesty-especially where they affect such difficult and sensitive

life areas as job applications, tax returns, business dealings, and sex relations.

But if weak AA works - if it produces recovery - what fault is there to find with it? Maybe this is a case where heterodoxy turns out to be superior to orthodoxy. Why should anyone go to the extra bother of practicing strong AA? For one very good reason. Weak AA brings about a far less profound life alteration than strong AA does. In many cases that relatively superficial change is not enough to crack the alcoholic pattern. In many other cases, it results in an apparent recovery which does not last, but sooner or later eventuates in a relapse into drinking.

What the original AAs were shooting for - and what they aimed their program at - was not mere sobriety. That would have been the "common-sense" approach, the way of worldly wisdom, the reasonable-level-of-aspiration gambit. But the founders of AA were men moved by inspiration. They were coming at the problem with the uncommon sense of men under guidance.

The common-sense approach had already been tried and it had failed. If you set a drunk's level of aspiration at mere abstinence - "'Why don't you be a good fellow, use your will power; and give the stuff up"- it did not work. The poor candidate for reform was back drinking again in short order. The discovery that launched AA in the first place was that if an alcoholic were somehow to be rocketed into a state way beyond abstinence, if he were to achieve a real spiritual conversion, an utterly new relationship with God, then permanent abstinence would automatically occur as a blessed and life-saving by-product. That was how it happened with Bill. That was how it happened with Dr. Bob. That was how it happened with most of the first hundred members. That was how the authors of the Big Book thought it would have to happen with everyone. Originally, the Twelfth Step read: "Having had a spiritual experience as the result of these Steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs" . Two key phrases were "spiritual experience" and "as the result of these Steps" . The assumption was: no spiritual experience - no recovery. It was also assumed that there were not a number of different results from working the Steps; there was one result -"the" result - and that was spiritual experience. To the first members, spiritual experience meant that God had touched your life - directly, tangibly - and turned it around.

Sometime between 1939, when the "Plain Dealer" article was published, and 1941, when the Alexander piece ran in the" Post", a major shift in philosophy occurred. No one in AA was much aware that it was taking place at the time, and to this day the process that went on remains almost totally unacknowledged throughout the fellowship. What changed was the importance of the roles assigned respectively to the recovery principles and the recovery fellowship in AA. Up until 1939, AA was a small, unknown organization whose success record, though excellent, applied only over a tiny group of cases, and had not yet stood the test of time. Recovering alcoholics in the young movement relied upon each other and worked closely with one another. But the principles were the primary life transformers. The movement as such was not large enough or well enough established that it could be leaned on in lieu of faithful work with the Steps.

After AA became big, after it gained national recognition as a success, a new relationship became possible with it, one which had not previously been an option, and which the founders had not really foreseen. It became possible for an alcoholic to come to meetings and get sober without undergoing a real spiritual conversion, simply by the process of mimesis, or imitation- by the practice of something no more spiritual than the principle of when-in-Rome-do-as-the-Romans-do.

Here is how AA-by-mimesis worked. The newcomer was joining himself to a big, successful organization, like the Elks or the Kiwanis. One of the customs of this particular club was that you did not drink; so if the newcomer liked the people he had met in AA and wanted to stay associated with them, he gave up drinking. He made AA meetings and AA people the focus of his social life and his leisure-time activities and stayed sober, more off the power of the pack than anything else.

The true nature of this quite other, and quite non-spiritual, recovery option was never clearly faced and admitted within the fellowship. Instead, an attempt was made to broaden the meaning of the term "spiritual" to include both kinds of recovered alcoholics: the sober-by-conversion alcoholics - those who as the result of working the Steps had had a spiritual experience and become transformed human beings, seriously involved with

regenerative life and ideas - and the sober-by-imitation alcoholics - those who had remained essentially the same type of people they had been before coming into AA, except that they had joined a new organization, made a new set of friends, and given up drinking in conformity to their new social setup. There is only one term in the Twelve Steps that has been changed since the Big Book was first published in 1939. That term is "spiritual experience" in the Twelfth Step. A member of my home AA group, who first came into the fellowship in 1941, tells it this way: "When I first came in, they were still talking about 'spiritual experience'. A year or two later they started calling it's spiritual awakening'." It was at this time that the official version of the Twelfth Step was changed to read:

"Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps . . . "The term spiritual experience, which had been perfectly acceptable in the early years when the fellowship was small and explicitly conversion-oriented, came to be viewed as too narrow and prejudicial against the less-profound life changes resulting from mimesis-oriented AA, which were coming to be the majority recovery pattern in AA. An explanatory note was added to the Big Book, as follows: "The terms "spiritual experience" and "spiritual awakening" are used many times in this book, which upon careful reading, shows that the personality change sufficient to bring about recovery from alcoholism has manifested itself among us in many different forms.

"Yet it is true that our first printing gave many readers the impression that these personality changes, or religious experiences, must be in the nature of sudden and spectacular upheavals. Happily for everyone, this conclusion is erroneous.

"In the first few chapters a number of sudden revolutionary changes are described. Though it was not our intention to create such an impression many alcoholics have nevertheless concluded that in order to recover they must acquire an immediate and overwhelming "God-consciousness" followed at once by a vast change in feeling and outlook.

"Among our rapidly growing membership of thousands of alcoholics such transformations, though frequent, are by no means the rule. Most of our experiences are what the psychologist William James calls the "educational variety" because they develop slowly over a period of time. Quite often friends of the newcomer are aware of the difference long before he is imself. He finally realizes that he has undergone a profound alteration in his reaction to life; that such a change could hardly have been brought about by himself alone. What often takes place in a few months could seldom have been accomplished by years of self-discipline. With few exceptions our members find that they have tapped an unsuspected inner resource which they presently identify with their own conception of a Power greater than themselves.

"Most of us think this awareness of a Power greater than ourselves is the essence of spiritual experience. Our more religious members call it "God consciousness."

"Most emphatically we wish to say that any alcoholic capable of honestly facing his problems in the light of our experience can recover, provided he does not close his mind to all spiritual concepts. He can only be defeated by an attitude of intolerance or belligerent denial.

"We find that no one need have difficulty with the spirituality of the program. Willingness, honesty and open mindedness are the essentials of recovery. But these are indispensable."

When you compare this statement to that which introduced the Twelve Steps in chapter five, the difference in tone is astonishing. Chapter five rings with a series of booming affirmations that the goal of the program is a life given to God and the way is an uncompromisingly spiritual one. In the later-added appendix there is virtually a full retreat from the earlier vigor and un-self-conscious joy in God-commitment. The stated purpose of this appendix is to reassure people that the spiritual change accompanying an AA recovery need not be in the form of a sudden upheaval. The point needed making and was well made.

But a further point was also made - not directly, but by implication - in the defensive, back-pedaling, almost apologetic treatment of the whole subject of religious experience. That point was the following: the authors and publishers of the Big Book, unofficial spokesmen for the movement, were responding to a change in the AA recovery pattern by lowering the spiritual level of aspiration of the society, a move they would not have dared to make in the early days but could, and even felt they must, make now that the society had become large

and gained a reputation for respectability and reasonableness. The facts of the situation in AA which prompted the rewording of the Twelfth Step and the adding of the explanatory appendix to the Big Book could have been summarized in this way:

"It is now possible to recover in one of two ways in AA. Option one is the original, spiritual experience way which follows from working all of the Steps. Option two is the way of partial practice of the Steps, and primary dependence on the social, fellowship-related aspects of life in AA. This second approach generally does not produce a spiritual experience as strong, full-program AA practice does. It also violates our tradition that we should always place principles before personalities. But in its favor, it requires less commitment and less work; it involves less in the way of life rearrangement; and it has proven itself sufficient in many cases to produce lasting abstinence from drinking. "But no such statement was ever made, and the switch in terms from spiritual experience to spiritual awakening had the net effect of clouding in everyone's mind the real nature of the change which had come about.

It was not a matter of conscious deception on anyone's part. It was just a failure to see a dividing into two camps when it had occurred. This would have been an easy mistake in any case for those living through that period in AA's history, a quite understandable failure to see a trend developing, comparable to a mother's inability to notice growth changes in her own child. But in a movement committed almost before all else to the avoidance of controversy, blindness to this split was all but inevitable.

The drawback to the original, rigorous, strong-cup-of-coffee approach to the AA program was that it required new members to plunge into a drastic program of spiritual transformation, a course which has never in history had appeal with large masses of people. Had the original approach remained the only approach, it is doubtful that AA would have reached anything like its present size of 850,000 members. (1976)

But the weak-cup-of-coffee practice had even more serious flaws built into it. The relatively superficial life change which it produces is sufficient to get some alcoholics sober. It is not adequate — it is not effective — it simply doesn't work — for a very large number of others. This is particularly evident with the "hard" cases - the alcoholics who have been badly beat up physically and mentally before they arrive at their first AA meeting; the people whose alcoholism is complicated with drug abuse, perversion, criminal or psychotic tendencies, or a streak of psychopathology; and the "slippers," those who have developed a pattern of hanging around AA, staying sober for periods, but relapsing repeatedly into drinking. (Generally, the slippers are alcoholics with psychopathic tendencies who keep coming back to AA but are unwilling or unable to work with root principles, notably rigorous honesty.) Weak AA does not touch most of these people. They cannot stay sober that way.

Yet if these hard cases find their way into an environment where strong AA, and nothing but strong AA, is being practiced, many of them are able to achieve lasting sobriety. The East Ridge Community in upstate New York has worked with hundreds of these tough drunks over the past twelve years. Strong AA is the standard fare at East Ridge, and they have a recovery rate of over seventy percent with these so-called AA failures. No success turns to success for the lion's share of them when weak AA is replaced with strong AA.

There is another, more insidious, danger built into weak AA. In many cases the "recovery" produced by watered-down approaches to the Twelve Steps fails to hold up over the long haul. What looked in the beginning like an easier, softer way to maintain happy sobriety yields progressively less and less contentment, finally ending in a complete reversal of momentum and a relapse into serious personal misery. The end result may be a return to active alcoholism; or, short of that total disaster, it may be a sinking out into a life of discontented abstinence, marred by some combination of tension, resentment, depression, compulsive sick sex, and an overall sense of meaninglessness. Either way, it is a final failure to reap the benefits of the AA program; it is, in the last analysis, a failure to recover.

Two disturbing tendencies are noticeable in contemporary AA. One is toward a lower recovery rate overall. For the first twenty years, the standard AA recovery estimate was seventy-five percent. AA experience was that fifty percent of the alcoholics who came to AA got sober right away and stayed sober. Another twenty-five percent had trouble for a while but eventually got sober for good, and the remaining twenty-five percent never made a recovery. Then there was a period of some years when AA headquarters stopped making

the seventy-five percent recovery claim in their official literature. In 1968, AA's General Service Organization published a survey indicating an overall recovery rate of about sixty-seven percent. The net of all this seems to be that as AA has gotten bigger and older, its effectiveness has dropped from about three in four to about two in three. (Note: two in three was in 1976 - our data shows numbers much LESS in 1997 - 1 in 15)

The second unhealthy trend movement-wise is not backed by figures, but it is clear enough to any careful observer of the AA scene. As the fellowship grows older in time, its class of old-timers, alcoholics sober ten years and longer, grows. And the question of the staying power of an AA recovery looms even larger. It is an unhappy fact that growing numbers of these old-timers find the joy going out of their sobriety, that many of them search around frantically for ways to recapture the old zest for booze-free living, often ending up in such blind alleys as lunatic religions, dangerous pop psychological fads, or chemical alternatives like acid, pot, tranquilizers, and mood elevators. And far too many end up either back drinking or, what is almost as sad, sunk in despondency, hostility, bizarre acting-out patterns of one sort or another, or just plain, devastating boredom.

All of this is unnecessary. The gradually shrinking recovery rate and the old-timer blues do not require a complex or an innovative solution. The answer lies in a return to original, strong AA. The men who wrote the Big Book were, as it turns out, right after all. There is no easier, softer way. The extra work and commitment required by the full program approach pay enormous dividends. They make sobriety fun because they do not make sobriety an end in itself. Mere non-drinking is a very negative kind of life goal. Even the power of a world-scale society of non-drinkers can be in and of itself only a temporary and limited deterrent for most alcoholics.

The majority of those who become addicted are people with a mystical streak, an appetite for inexhaustible bliss. We sought in bottles what can only be found in spiritual experience. AA worked in the first place because its Twelve Steps were a workable set of guidelines to spiritual experience. Growth of the movement made possible for a time a kind of parasitism in which partial practitioners and non-practitioners of the spiritual principles were able to feed off the strength of those who had undergone real spiritual experiences. But at this point in time, (1976) the parasites have already drained the host organism of a considerable portion of its life force.

It is late in the day to be sounding a call for a return to the original way, the way of faithful practice of the full program. Still, a great deal of life is left in the fellowship, and a major revival is possible if enough of us see our dangerous situation, personally and as a fellowship, in time. What we need to do is clear enough. It is spelled out in the first seven chapters of the Big Book. What it all boils down to — especially for us old-timers — is a willingness to continue practicing all the principles in all our affairs today, rather than resting on our laurels, taking our stand on what we did way back when, in our first weeks and months of sobriety.

But we must not fail to face squarely the need for change, the need for re-dedication. Complacency, smugness in our record of success, is our greatest enemy. If we, as a recovered-addict society, are unwilling to reverse our present course, the outlook Is clear enough. We stand to recapitulate in less than a century what the Christian church has spent the last two thousand years demonstrating: that even the best of human institutions tend to deteriorate in time; and that size in spiritual organizations is all too often achieved at the expense of compromise of basic principles and the progressive abandonment of original goals and practices.

I owe my life to AA. I hope we have the vision, and the humility, to change. I know we can if we will. This much is certain: the Twelve Steps are as inspired, as effective, as un-compromised, and as practicable now as they were when they were first put in writing thirty-seven years ago.