

The South Bend Beginners Classes

Early South Bend A.A. gave beginners lessons, but unfortunately no notes or handouts have survived. According to Nick's List, it started out as a set of three classes, then went briefly to four classes, but ended up as a set of five classes, where Ken Merrill did the fifth class. According to Ellen Lantz however, it was a three class series in the mid 1950's, each one lasting two or three hours, and Ken taught all three classes. However it was done, the early South Bend beginners lessons do not seem to have been simply duplicates of the four-class format used in the Detroit Pamphlet.

The A.A. Tools of Recovery

A good old-timer named Don Helvey in Elkhart put together a short piece called the A.A. Tools of Recovery, which is still read at the beginning of many A.A. meetings in Elkhart, Mishawaka, South Bend, and other parts of the St. Joseph river valley region along with reading the twelve steps:

ABSTINENCE: We commit ourselves to stay away from the first drink, one day at a time.

MEETINGS: We attend A.A. meetings to learn how the program works, to share our experience, strength and hope with each other, and because through the support of the fellowship, we can do what we could never do alone.

SPONSOR: A sponsor is a person in the A.A. program who has what we want and is continually sober. A sponsor is someone you can relate to, have access to and can confide in.

TELEPHONE: The telephone is our lifeline -- our meetings between meetings. Call before you take the first drink. The more numbers you have, the more insurance you have.

LITERATURE: The Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous is our basic tool and text. The Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions and A.A. pamphlets are recommended reading, and are available at this meeting.

SERVICE: Service helps our personal program grow. Service is giving in A.A. Service is leading a meeting, making coffee, moving chairs, being a sponsor, or emptying ashtrays. Service is action, and action is the magic word in this program.

ANONYMITY: Whom you see here, what you hear here, when you leave here, let it stay here. Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of our program.

Many of the good old-timers, like Submarine Bill and Raymond I., believed that it was important to repeat these basic principles over and over, until newcomers had them instinctively drilled into their heads, and could repeat them almost like a litany. The first principle made it clear that the way an alcoholic kept from getting drunk was not to take even the first drink. The next five were the things that not only got people sober but kept them sober. Good sponsors like Bill and Raymond noted that those who relapsed and returned to drinking had almost invariably failed to do one or more of these five things in any serious and dedicated way. And the seventh principle was a constant reminder that A.A. meetings could not function properly unless members could talk about all of their feelings and anything that was bothering them, in an accepting and shame-free atmosphere, without worrying about whether it was going to be repeated outside of the group. That was a solemn pledge which the members of the group had to make to one another.

If we want to ask what was the basic foundation of A.A. in the St. Joseph river valley, it was the Twelve Steps and the Seven Tools of Recovery. Everything else was based on these.

The Grapevine and Bar-less

In the 1950's, according to Ellen Lantz's reminiscences, they always read from something at the Elkhart closed discussion meetings, and frequently used this reading to provide the discussion topic. She said that it had become very common during this period to use an article from the Grapevine, the magazine which was published by the New York A.A. office (it first began coming out in 1944, under the editorial guidance of Marty Mann and some of her friends). (Note 5) But Ellen said that they would also sometimes use an article from Bar-less, the little magazine which was published by the A.A. prison group. Some of these articles were written by people who were not prisoners. Ken Merrill, for example, the founder of A.A. in South Bend, wrote a very good article for the magazine once, about the way alcoholics get locked into behavior patterns during their childhood years, and because of a traumatic event or a general dysfunctional family situation, are unable to grow past that stage, and continue to throw two-year-old temper tantrums, or become lost in ten-year-old daydreaming fantasies of romance and heroism, or whatever, even after they are adults.

The First Principle

When I asked Brooklyn Bob, one of the South Bend old-timers, whether there were any rules in good old-time A.A. about what books A.A. people could and could not read, he just laughed and snorted, and said, "We read anything we could get our hands on that might get us sober!" Good old-time A.A. was a totally pragmatic program, not an authoritarian system of doctrines and dogmas and endless rules which had to be followed blindly, and were imposed upon the membership by self-important people who thought they had the right to boss other people around ("for their own good" was these arrogant people's standard alibi).

In early A.A., people simply experimented and tried various things, and if they worked, they recommended them to other members. As is always the case in A.A., the recommendations of people who had a good deal of time in the program were taken more seriously. Pragmatically, if they had that many years of sobriety, they must have been doing something right! So on matters of what sorts of books and writings should be read in meetings and made available for loan or purchase by groups and intergroup offices, people looked to the wisdom and experience of those who had time in the program and quality sobriety.

The Central Service Offices in South Bend and in Elkhart both still follow that principle. They have a variety of books on spirituality, recovery, and A.A. history available for loan or purchase -- books printed by various publishing houses and usually (but not always necessarily) authored by A.A. members. There are AI-Anon books as well. But the selection of books which are provided is made on the recommendation of responsible people who have a good deal of quality time in the program.

They do not have the sort of pop recovery books that can lead newcomers seriously astray or involve them in psychologically dangerous schemes (like one notorious book encouraging people to "get in contact with their inner child" in a way which actually produced in some cases total psychotic breakdowns requiring long hospitalization in mental facilities). But the South Bend office has carried some materials which were purely psychological, such as offprints (distributed by the National Council on Alcoholism) of scholarly papers written by Dr. Harry M. Tiebout for psychiatric journals and journals on alcoholism studies. Tiebout was not an alcoholic, but he was one of the most important of the handful of psychiatrists in the early days who appreciated and understood and backed the new

Alcoholics Anonymous movement, and his statements about how A.A. works are still extremely insightful today.

The commercial bookstore chains do not have good material for A.A. people on their shelves, and the small commercial operations which sell "recovery materials" such as t-shirts and coffee mugs cannot be totally depended upon to have quality literature for sale either. If groups and intergroups do not make good books available for A.A. members, no outside commercial venture is going to take over that responsibility. Learning that we have to be responsible for ourselves, instead of just depending on others and demanding "to be taken care of," is a vital part of recovery from alcoholism.

The Second Principle

The first principle was that A.A. groups and intergroups, as well as individual members, have to make their own responsible decisions about which books and writings are going to be helpful for recovering alcoholics. However, there was a generally assumed principle that seems to have been followed, not only in the St. Joseph river valley, but in early A.A. all across the United States and Canada: It was usually assumed that any piece that was authored or sponsored by one A.A. group could automatically be used to read from in meetings by any other A.A. group which chose to do so.

That was also a guiding principle followed at New York A.A. headquarters. On November 11, 1944, for example, Bobby Burger, the secretary at the Alcoholic Foundation in New York (what is today called the General Service Office) wrote a letter to Barry Collins, who had helped Ed Webster in assembling and publishing the Little Red Book: (Note 6)

Dear Barry,

. . . The Washington D.C. pamphlet [a.k.a. the Detroit Pamphlet] and the new Cleveland "Sponsorship" pamphlet and a host of others are all local projects, as is Nicollette's "An Interpretation of the Twelve Steps" [the Little Red Book]. We do not actually approve or disapprove of these local pieces; by that I mean that the Foundation feels that each Group is entitled to write up its own "can opener" and let it stand on its merits. All of them have good points and very few have caused any controversy. But as in all things of a local nature, we keep hands off, either pro or con. I think there must be at least 25 local pamphlets now being used and I've yet to see one that hasn't some good points. I think it is up to each individual Group whether it wants to use and buy these pamphlets from the Group that puts them out.

Sincerely, Bobby
(Margaret R. Burger)

Bill Wilson felt the same way. In November 1950, he wrote a note to Barry Collins about The Little Red Book making the same basic point, only even more strongly. Such locally sponsored works "fill a definite need" and their "usefulness is unquestioned." Most importantly of all, Bill went on to say in that letter: "Here at the Foundation we are not policemen; we're a service and AAs are free to read any book they choose." (Note 7)

In other words, based on the principle of group autonomy, an A.A. group can in fact choose to read anything at its meetings which it wants to, if a group conscience has been held. Even if there are other A.A. groups which are convinced that they are wrong, a long-standing principle in the New York A.A. office, repeated over and over, is "the right of a group to be wrong." This is an extremely important principle which has even further ramifications: even if 51% of the A.A. groups in a particular area are convinced that the other 49% are wrong, they cannot force them to read what they want that minority group to read. Too many A.A. people came out of religious traditions where the leadership tried to stuff

things down their throats in this fashion -- "you will read only what we order you to read" -- and they will not tolerate A.A. organizations trying to operate that same way.

But if the book or pamphlet or reading was sponsored by some other A.A. group, it was especially true that any other A.A. groups in the country could borrow and use that piece without having to go into any long debate about its appropriateness. So the Twenty-Four Hour book, The Little Red Book, the Detroit Pamphlet, the Tools of Recovery, and Bar-less (the little magazine produced by the prison A.A. group) were sort of automatically considered as appropriate for reading at meetings if a particular group chose to do so.

The Upper Room and Fulton J. Sheen's talks and other heavily Christian-oriented materials (such as God Calling by Two Listeners, the prayers of the Rosary, and so on) have continued to be employed by numerous A.A. people in the St. Joseph river valley for their own personal use. In fact nearly all of the most deeply spiritual members regularly use traditional religious materials in their private devotions and in their studies of spiritual issues. But things which were too obviously totally Christian, particularly if they spoke of salvation as only being possible through accepting Jesus Christ as one's Lord and Savior, stopped being used in meetings on the simple pragmatic grounds that it drove an excessive number of newcomers away, did not in fact prove to be necessary for getting people sober and leading them into the paths of true serenity and the greatest depths of love, and seemed to ultimately involve the group in too much pointless debate and endless hostile disputing over narrow Christian theological issues that did not help anyone get sober.

The last time someone tried to set up an A.A. meeting in the St. Joseph river valley on an explicitly Christian basis, with Bible readings and scripture verses studied at the meeting, was around ten years ago, and the group did not even last a year. This was in spite of the fact that Indiana is often regarded as part of the American "Bible Belt." Everyone except the old-timer who started it finally quit or went out and got drunk. That is why I am skeptical about trying to run A.A. meetings that way today. But everybody agreed that the good old-timer who tried this experiment had a perfect right to do so. There may be places in America or elsewhere where it would work. It certainly did not violate any A.A. "rule," and if it had actually worked, we would now have additional meetings in northern Indiana, I am sure, organized in this way. A.A. is pragmatic, not doctrinaire.

The St. Francis Prayer and the Lord's Prayer are still heavily used however, even though they were originally Christian prayers, because it is felt that they set out universal spiritual truths that any recovering alcoholic is in need of. A few people do not like the use of the Lord's Prayer at the close of meetings (an almost universal practice in the St. Joseph river valley), but some suspect that part of their objection is to the line which says "forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." It may be a very hard and uncomfortable teaching indeed, to be reminded constantly of this universal spiritual truth, but if we refuse to forgive, resentment will continue to fester in our hearts, and we will eventually end up going back out and drinking again. All the great spiritual traditions of the world -- Judaism, Buddhism, Islam, Native American religion, and so on -- make clear that forgiveness and compassion and mercy and the restoration of harmony (different religions use different technical terms here) are necessary to living a good spiritual life.

The Golden Books

Ralph Pfau, who wrote under the pen name of Father John Doe, was one of the four most published A.A. authors. He was a Roman Catholic priest who got sober in Indianapolis on November 10, 1943. He conducted a weekend spiritual retreat for A.A. members on June 6–8, 1947 at St. Joseph's College in Rensselaer, Indiana. Eleven people from the South Bend A.A. group attended the retreat, a very large contingent: Harry Stevens (who sponsored the A.A. prison group at the Indiana state penitentiary),

Johnnie Morgan the barber, Ray G., Jack [Q?], Jim McNeil (who was extremely active in all sorts of A.A. service work), Art O. [A?!?], Russ S., Fred Clements, Joe R., Ed Young the newspaperman, and Les Beatty the electrician. Father Ralph gave everyone who attended, as a souvenir of the retreat, a 56-page pamphlet with a shiny gold foil cover, called *The Spiritual Side*, where he talked about how all of the twelve steps (except for perhaps the first step) were essentially spiritual in their nature.

People who had not been at the retreat began asking for copies, Father Ralph had to do another printing, and over the years that followed, produced thirteen other pamphlets of this sort on different spiritual topics. They came to be called the Golden Books because of the gold foil covered cardboard covers which most of them had. He traveled all over the United States and Canada, giving talks and conducting weekend spiritual retreats, all the way down to his death on February 19, 1967, which caught him on the road in Owensboro, Kentucky. (Note 8)

One good old-timer, Larry W., told me that, in his early days in the program, those A.A. people in Michigan and Indiana whose serenity and sobriety most impressed him were invariably great fans of Father Ralph's books.