

Bill Wilson & The 12 Steps

by

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Introduction

I suppose anyone who has been to more than a couple of AA meetings will know what I'm talking about when I say that there are at least one or two people in every AA group (perhaps many more in large groups) who love to talk as if they are experts on AA and AA history but in reality they don't know half as much as they pretend to know. A book could be written on all the wrong things these people say but in this essay I'm only going to address one myth some of these people like to talk about - the myth that Bill Wilson (co-founder of AA) didn't work the 12 steps until he had been sober for many years.

I'm sure there will be some who read this essay who don't even understand why it's important enough to discuss, let alone write about. Well, it is important because if Bill did not work the steps then he was a big fraud and everything he taught us in the Big Book and the Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions are just things he made up. To take it a step further, if Bill was a fraud and he only wrote those things to sell books then we are all putting our lives on the line when we follow the program of recovery that he claimed saved his life. That is about as important as it gets. This is a huge matter.

In the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous it tells us how Bill Wilson was introduced to the program of action that later came to be known as the 12 steps. It can be read in the very first chapter called Bill's Story. I'm going to give you page numbers and excerpts from the Big Book. You will not even have to research it. I will lay it all out for you in black and white. Let us lay to rest the lie that Bill Wilson did not work the steps.

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Bill's Friend

We are told in Bill's Story of an old friend coming to see him and making the claim that he had "gotten religion". That old friend was Ebby Thacher. Though we are not given his name in Bill's Story we are definitely told of the program of action that Ebby had learned from some members of the Oxford Group.

There is a lot of information about Bill's 12 step work in various AA history books but I'm going to stick with the information in chapter one of the Big Book just to keep it simple. I don't want anyone having to do research or buy extra books to see what I'm talking about. I want you to know it is right there in the Big Book so the next time you hear some misguided wannabe historian saying Bill Wilson didn't work the steps or waited years to do so you can show him very easily in a few minutes that he does not know what he is talking about. Now let's get down to business.

The Essence Of Step One

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.

Look at the paragraph below. Bill admits that alcohol is his master. He mentions his loneliness and despair and bitter morass of self-pity. He says he has met his match and that he is overwhelmed.

Page 8 - No words can tell of the loneliness and despair I found in that bitter morass of self-pity. Quicksand stretched around me in all directions. I had met my match. I had been overwhelmed. Alcohol was my master.

The Essence Of Step Two

2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.

In the paragraph below Bill comes to believe that God would help him.

Page 12 - Thus was I convinced that God is concerned with us humans when we want Him enough. At long last I saw, I felt, I believed. Scales of pride and prejudice fell from my eyes.

The Essence Of Steps Three, Six & Seven

3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.
6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.

In the paragraph below Bill clearly turns his will and life over to God, and states that he is willing to allow God take away his sins.

Page 13 - There I humbly offered myself to God, as I then understood Him, to do with me as He would. I placed myself unreservedly under His care and direction. I admitted for the first time that of myself I was nothing; that without Him I was lost. I ruthlessly faced my sins and became willing to have my new-found Friend take them away, root and branch.

The Essence Of Steps Four, Five, Eight & Nine

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.
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.

In the next paragraph Bill talks about sharing his problems and deficiencies with his schoolmate (step five). Of course he had to take his moral inventory (step four) before he could share it with his friend. He also mentions his step eight list of people he had harmed and his willingness to approach them to make the amends, as mentioned in step nine.

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Page 13 - *My schoolmate visited me, and I fully acquainted him with my problems and deficiencies. We made a list of people I had hurt or toward whom I felt resentment. I expressed my entire willingness to approach these individuals, admitting my wrong. Never was I to be critical of them. I was to right all such matters to the utmost of my ability.*

Living Step Ten

10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.

Since step ten deals with continuing to take personal inventory, that implies a way of life, as opposed to an event. Bill has already taken his initial inventory in step four. He would continue to do that for the rest of his life.

The Essence Of Step Eleven

11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.

The essence of step eleven is clear in the paragraph below. He mentions prayer and meditation and praying for direction and strength.

Page 13 - *I was to test my thinking by the new God-consciousness within. Common sense would thus become uncommon sense. I was to sit quietly when in doubt, asking only for direction and strength to meet my problems as He would have me. Never was I to pray for myself, except as my requests bore on my usefulness to others. Then only might I expect to receive. But that would be in great measure.*

The Essence Of Step Twelve

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.

The next paragraph details the essence of a spiritual awakening. Bill spent the remainder of his life practicing the principles and carrying the message to other alcoholics.

Page 13,14 - My friend promised when these things were done I would enter upon a new relationship with my Creator; that I would have the elements of a way of living which answered all my problems. Belief in the power of God, plus enough willingness, honesty and humility to establish and maintain the new order of things, were the essential requirements.

Is It Clear Enough?

I hope it is clear to everyone that Bill Wilson worked the 12 steps at the *beginning* of his recovery. *That is why he was able to stay sober.*

Bill took the first step when he was in Towns Hospital drying out and getting treatment for his alcoholism. This was either the first or second time he was hospitalized for his drinking. After his friend, Ebby, visited him in his home he took the second step. Not too long after that, Bill was hospitalized again. His friend, Ebby, came to visit a couple of days later and Bill asked Ebby to repeat the program of action he had spoke to him about earlier at Bill's home. After Ebby carefully explained the program of action again Bill said his prayer offering himself to God. Bill shared his moral inventory with him and made his amends list. Obviously he had been giving this a lot of thought before Ebby came to the hospital.

Ebby went on to explain the essence of steps eleven and twelve ...

Page 13- I was to test my thinking by the new God-consciousness within. Common sense would thus become uncommon sense. I was to sit quietly when in doubt, asking only for direction and strength to meet my problems as He would have me. Never was I to pray for myself, except as my requests bore on my usefulness to others. Then only might I expect to receive. But that would be in great measure.

My friend promised when these things were done I would enter upon a new relationship with my Creator; that I would have the elements of a way of living which answered all my problems.

Can it be any clearer? Bill did not get sober on meetings and coffee and then decide some time off in the future to work the steps. His spiritual awakening is what saved his life and allowed him to stay sober.

As for me, I never could stay sober on meetings and coffee. For me it took working the 12 steps. Anyone who has a sponsor that tells him to take his time on working the steps needs to get another sponsor. ***Sick sponsors give sick advice and those who follow their advice may not get over the desire to drink.*** They just learn to white-knuckle it one day at a time. If that's good enough for you then you may want to choose that option, but that is not the AA program of recovery. That is an easier, softer, way that does not bring

true freedom from alcohol. It is, however, the most popular path in AA today.

Bill Wilson was a hopeless alcoholic. His wife, Lois, was already shopping around for a good sanitarium to put him in. Everyone had given up on Bill. Even the doctors had said that he had gone too far and that he would be dead soon or in a sanitarium.

Ebby told him that God could save him from his alcoholism if he was willing to turn his life over to Him and start living a new way – a spiritual life dedicated to helping others and harming as few as possible, and making amends when we did. That is the AA I was taught. That is the way it has always worked. That is the true AA way of life.

On the title page of the Big Book it says...

The Story of How Many Thousands of Men and Women Have Recovered from Alcoholism

That is not a lie. People really do recover – if they have the capacity to be honest with themselves and are willing to go to any lengths. The 12-step program of recovery is tested and proven. It really works. It really does. It worked for Bill. It worked for the many thousands of men and women the Big Book is talking about, and it worked for me. Will you allow it to work for you?

<http://sobersteveh.blogspot.com>

You can read my blog at

<http://www.sobersteveh.blogspot.com>

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