

“The Story of Bill and Lois”
By Rev. Kim D. Wilson
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Poconos
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In 1925, Bill and Lois Wilson decided to leave their home in New York City for a year as “motorcycle hobos.” Bill’s intention was to make business connections. Lois wrote, “My reasons for wishing to take time off were quite different...I wanted to get [Bill] away from New York, with...bars on many corners, and away from his buddies, which I considered contributed greatly to his excessive drinking. A year in the open, which we both loved, would give me a chance to straighten him out.”

Bill found ways to get alcohol and get drunk several times that year. Once they had returned to New York, Lois still believed that the trip had helped Bill with his drinking problem. She still believed that eventually she would be able to “straighten him out.” Over the next 10 years, though, in spite of all her efforts, Bill’s drinking got worse, even though he tried a number of times to quit. He was hospitalized several times, and his doctor had counseled both Bill and Lois to prepare for the inevitable end within a year.

Bill kept drinking and entered into a deep depression. Then, one day, his old school friend and drinking buddy, Ebby Thacher, called. Bill invited Ebby to come over, figuring they could have a few drinks together. But when Bill offered, Ebby declined. Bill said, “Ebby! What’s gotten into you?”

Ebby explained that he had been working on some simple principles. He told Bill how he had gotten honest with himself and his shortcomings, how he’d been making restitution where it was owed and how he had begun trying a form of giving that demanded no return for himself. He also spoke about his discovery of a personal God.

What most people don’t know is that the source of Ebby’s inspiration was an organization called the Oxford Group. It did not define itself as a religious group; its members sought to bring the teachings of Jesus into people’s daily lives.

Its founder, Frank Buchman, said in many of his speeches that international problems were caused by personal problems of selfishness and fear. “Lives must

be changed if problems are to be solved,” he said. And, “Peace in the world can only spring from the hearts of men.” Frank Buchman believed that the answer to war, economic depression and racial conflict was “a dynamic experience of God’s free spirit.” He also said that, “The only sane people in an insane world are those controlled by God.” To paraphrase, it’s the people who are able to set aside their fears, their egos and selfish desires, and instead, to listen for that still, small voice –those are the sane ones.

Bill recalled later that [Ebby] “was radiant of something which soothed my troubled spirit as though the fresh clean wind of a mountain top was blowing through...me.” Bill experienced a great surge of joy and he felt a “great presence” which he recalled having felt only once before, as a scared young soldier in Europe preparing to go into battle.

Ebby and Bill continued to meet and discuss the principles of the Oxford Group. It took another stay in the hospital to get Bill to quit drinking again. Five months later, he was in Akron, Ohio on a business trip and was struggling to maintain his sobriety. Instead of turning to drink this time, he reached out to another alcoholic struggling for sobriety –Dr. Bob Smith. For several weeks, Bill and Bob talked about the Oxford Group’s ideas and how they might help alcoholics, including themselves. Bob had his last drink on June 10, 1935, the date they later designated as the start of Alcoholics Anonymous.

With other early members, the two men developed AA's Twelve Step program of spiritual and character development, drawing heavily from the Oxford Group’s ideas. In a few minutes, I’ll come back to the Twelve Steps.

The early Alcoholics Anonymous meetings were designed to help men support each other in their sobriety, but wives and sometimes families often attended as well. Lois said,

Families went to meetings out of interest and to help the alcoholic. We did try to live by the same program, but often only in a superficial way. I can only speak for myself, but I think most of the families felt as I had at first –that I didn’t need further spiritual development. We had gone through such ordeals at the hands of the alcoholics that we thought this, in itself, set us above them spiritually. By degrees, however, we

recognized that we could not handle our own affairs...Some of us began to recognize that we had better do something more about our own lives, and seriously strive to live by AA's wonderful principles.

Wives of the alcoholics began to gather in informal groups and to discuss the problems in their families and how to help each other. With encouragement from Bill, Lois and another friend, Anne B. helped the groups become more organized. One member of AA reported attending a "wives' meeting," as they were called. "If I came to sneer, I stayed to pray," he said. "As these wives' stories unfolded I...was expecting to hear a long list of complaints about how they were put upon by the old man's boozing. There was none of that. These ladies were examining *themselves*—not us! ...They were seeking self-improvement in character, in the art of living, and in a closer contact with the same loving God who had brought sobriety into their homes."

Eventually, these groups became known as Al-Anon and they opened their doors to anyone affected by someone's drinking, male or female, whether their loved one was drinking or not. AA also welcomed alcoholic women as they heard about the program.

I could be wrong about this, but after my years of counseling and talking with many, many people, I'm convinced that the majority of us in this country have been affected by alcohol in one way or another. Maybe we ourselves have struggled or struggle with an addiction to alcohol. Many more of us love or have loved an alcoholic. Most people who find themselves involved with an alcoholic are also part of an alcoholic family.

Having an alcoholic spouse or growing up in an alcoholic family has profound effects on everyone in the family. Because in many cases no one talks about the problem, children learn coping behaviors that they take into their adult relationships without realizing that they are not normal or healthy. Even if no one in their future families is alcoholic, the behavior patterns continue. Some common traits include:

- Denial: If something is too overwhelming to deal with, sometimes we don't let ourselves see the truth. If we don't admit that it exists, maybe it will go away.

If we don't talk about it, maybe the alcoholic won't get drunk tonight. Or angry. Or violent.

- Secrets: Somehow we get the message that what happens in this house stays in this house. We don't invite our friends over. We don't talk about the shameful things that go on here.
- Enabling: They can't help themselves so we have to help him or her. We may even lie or cover up for the alcoholic.
- Fear: We have to tiptoe around; otherwise he might get angry, upset and even violent.
- Silence: We don't talk about anything important because the alcoholic will use it against us.
- Repressed anger: They love us, so we shouldn't feel angry with them.
- Feeling responsible: It must be my fault they drink.
- Shame: Alcoholics usually feel a lot of shame, and they transfer that shame to other family members.
- Co-dependence: We have to focus on the alcoholic, the kids, the crisis at hand, etc. or everything will fall apart. The family's life revolves around the alcoholic.

It takes courage to make changes to our familiar ways of thinking and acting, even if we know they are not healthy. If anyone here needs help or support, I encourage you to seek it. You can start by talking to me, if you'd like.

Since the early days of Alcoholics Anonymous and Al-Anon, many other methods and models of recovery have been developed, for alcoholics and their families. A twelve-step program is not for everyone and is not the only path to recovery.

We don't have a lot of time, but I would like to take a brief look at the Twelve Steps. Is there wisdom within these steps that might be useful to us as Unitarian Universalists, whether or not we have been affected by alcohol? Or are they too God-oriented and therefore only of use to people who believe in God?

Personally, I think that they form a sound program for personal and spiritual growth. As with anything in life, can take what we like and leave the rest. It definitely takes some re-interpretation to be able to understand the steps from an atheistic or agnostic viewpoint, or without a concept of a personal higher

power. I do think it's too bad if people reject the Twelve Steps because of the "God," though.

AA and Al-Anon groups encourage people to consider the group as their higher power if they're not comfortable with the concept of God. But if someone who doesn't use God language wants to adapt these steps for use in their daily lives, something like "our inner wisdom" or "higher self" might work.

These steps are about changing our relationship with ourselves, with the people around us, and with something larger than ourselves. They are about facing reality.

The reality is that we cannot control other people, things or events. We can control ourselves and our thoughts, attitudes and actions, but.

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol, that our lives had become unmanageable. (The reality is that we can't control another person's decisions or behavior.)
2. Step 2 basically says that we are not alone; we don't exist as isolated beings: "Came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity." This could be the Spirit of Life, or a religious community like our Fellowship.
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him. (The reality is that our fear-based and reaction-based way of life isn't working for us; we're willing to give up and allow new insights—our inner wisdom—to guide us.)
4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves. (The reality is that we have both positive qualities and shortcomings, AND that we probably have never taken a completely honest look at all of our characteristics.)
5. Admitted to God, to ourselves and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs. (The reality is that we're not perfect, nor are we a complete mess. It's healthy to be honest with ourselves; and to speak about our shortcomings with someone we trust. It forces us to acknowledge another reality--that we're human like everyone else. Sharing our list with a nonjudgmental, loving higher power—if we believe in one—can help us learn to accept ourselves.)

Facing reality means we accept responsibility for our actions and their consequences.

6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character. (This is where the courage to trust comes in. We set aside our fear and have faith that we can change for the better.)
7. Humbly asked him to remove our shortcomings. (We can have a mini-conference with our Inner Wisdom.)
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. (I believe these two steps can go a long way toward eliminating the shame many of us feel, the belief that we're bad people.)
10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it. (I practice this and I find that when I apologize for a mistake I've made or something I said or whatever, I immediately feel better and usually, so does the other person.)

The last two steps speak to the idea that we can change the way we think.

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. (It's been said that praying is speaking to God; meditation is listening. We could think of God's will as the voice of our inner wisdom; it's the voice that is peaceful and serene, and not based on fear.)
12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these Steps, we tried to carry this message to others, and to practice these principles in all our affairs. (By living our lives according to what we are learning is spiritually and emotionally healthy, we become an example to others around us.)

Bill and Lois Wilson spent the rest of their lives devoted to Alcoholics Anonymous and Al-Anon. Bill died in 1971, and Lois, in 1988.

Whatever your circumstances, whatever sources of wisdom speak to you, may you live with faith and not fear. May you find peace and serenity. Amen.