



Fourth in a series of articles
on authors of Big Book stories

Interview

with the author of

"Physician, Heal Thyself!"

DR. EARLE

Dr. Earle's story "Physician, Heal Thyself!" appeared in the Second and Third Editions of the Big Book. Dr. Earle was interviewed by telephone at his home in California by a Grapevine staff member.



GV: What is the background of your Big Book story?

Dr. Earle: I'd met Bill, and he and I had become very friendly because we had the same kind of a hot-flash story — Bill sobered up with a big hot flash and so did I. Physical sobriety came to both of us on a golden platter. He got

hold of the tape of a talk I'd made at Folsom Prison, and he said he wanted to put my story in the Big Book, and I said, "Sure." So that's the way it happened. It was typed from the tape recording. I think I helped with some of the editing of it.

GV: Have you had occasion to reread it lately?

Dr. Earle: Not for some time. Why?

GV: I was just curious to know what you thought of it now.

Dr. Earle: I would say again what I said there, and that is that I lost nothing materially, that I was on the "skid row of success." As a matter of fact, I

made more money the last year of my drinking than I'd made in my whole life. (More than I've made since, too!) But the skid row of success is just as uncomfortable as the actual skid row in a down-and-out area of a city.

When I came to AA, we had a lot of low-bottom snobs who would look at everybody else and say, "What do you know about drinking? I've spilled more on my tie than you've ever seen." Then pretty soon we got some high-bottom snobs who said, "At least I didn't have to go as far down as you did before I came to AA." I think these comparisons between high and low bottoms make no sense because alcoholism is like pregnancy — either you are or you aren't. A woman can be in early pregnancy and not show, but she's still pregnant. With alcoholism, there may be degrees but it's all the same disease.

GV: And unmanageability can manifest in a variety of ways.

Dr. Earle: Yes. I don't know how many dozens of times I tried to stop drinking, and I could do it— but I couldn't stay stopped. I remember one time, a Sunday, that I was looking in the bathroom mirror, and I looked terrible. I said to myself as I had said many times before, "I'm going to stop drinking for good. I'm going to go on the wagon forever" — a very dangerous statement. And I was pretty good on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday, but on Friday I came home and went to the kitchen and poured a

big glass of vodka and drank it down. And as I drank it, I said, "Earle, you said you weren't going to ever drink again." Somehow, I just could not stay stopped. But the last day of my drinking I had a tremendous flash of awareness about what addiction was and what had happened to me and then the craving to take a drink disappeared and has never returned.

GV: What happened?

Dr. Earle: I talk about it some in my Big Book story. The only thing I knew about AA was what I'd read in Jack Alexander's article [Saturday Evening Post, March 1941]. It said that one of the founders, Dr. Bob, was a doctor, and I'm a doctor — I'm a gynecologist and I'm also a psychiatrist — so I identified with that. On the last day of my drinking, I talked to a friend of mine about AA. My friend gave me a piece of paper and there were twenty-four or twenty-five statements on it directed toward the drinker who's planning on stopping. Now that wasn't me. I didn't plan on stopping. In fact, I thought I had the problem licked — once again. I had gotten a concoction that I thought wouldn't get me drunk — vodka over ice. Plus, I hadn't ever considered myself alcoholic. I hadn't used that phrase. A drunk — yes. I couldn't stop drinking and stay stopped — yes. But in those days we used the word alcoholic to mean somebody on skid row, and I wasn't on skid row.

I don't recall leaving my friend's

house (I wasn't totally blacked-out that day — I was kind of browned-out), but I do recall being on my deck in Mill Valley trying to make out what this piece of paper said. I was just so drunk I couldn't read it. So I asked my wife to read it to me and she did. And she read one thing that said, "Don't stop drinking for anybody else except yourself." That made a very deep impression on me; to this day I've no idea why. And the next thing she read was, "Don't consider yourself a martyr because you stopped drinking." I've forgotten what the other statements were, but those two just hit me across the face like a baseball bat. I broke down and cried. Of course crying was par for the course in those days. Bing Crosby was popular then and I'd listen to his songs and I'd cry, or I'd be driving along and I'd look up at the sky and I'd see a lovely cloud and I'd cry. I'd look at my wife and daughter and cry, and I suspect they looked at me and cried too.

Well, that evening my wife patted me on the back and went into the house, and I sat there and I'd never felt so depressed in my life. Now, I'm a reasonably happy guy. I have my downs, like everybody does, but in general I kind of radiate above the line. But this was the deepest I'd ever felt. I was feeling just terrible. I don't know how long I sat there — for a long time. Finally I looked at my watch and I realized it was time to ascend my stairs — we lived on the side of a mountain — and go up to the barbeque area and make

the fire for dinner. I remember going up those stairs and being so drunk I was afraid I'd fall. There were no handrails on those stairs. I got to the top stair and I looked at my drink and I had just a little bit left in the bottom of the glass, and I thought, "This small amount won't do any good, I'd better go down to the kitchen and make a big drink and bring it back up." So I turned around, just feeling terrible, down and depressed, and all of a sudden a very remarkable thing happened to me. It was as though an explosion occurred inside of me. I felt pain in every segment of my body. I have no idea why this happened. At that instant I heard the words, "This is your last drink." Well, I certainly hadn't planned on this. This is *your last drink!*

I looked at my glass and poured out what was there. I'd already had my last drink. I never felt so relieved in my life. God, I felt good. I felt just tremendous. It suddenly occurred to me: "Earle, your trouble is that you call yourself a drunk; you're not, you're an alcoholic." At that instant the craving to take another drink evaporated from me and believe it or not, it has never returned once.

I saw my friend the next day and I went to AA and I got turned on by AA and I've been turned on ever since.

GV: When was that?

Dr. Earle: I came into the Fellowship on the fifteenth of June, 1953. So by

the time this article is published, it'll be forty-two years and I'll be eighty-four years old. I still go to AA meetings several times a week. I think it's the greatest. I have a lot of fun there.

GV: In the Big Book, you talk about operating on a woman with a tumor and how that brought you a sense of the Higher Power. Can you tell us any more about that experience?

Dr. Earle: When I came into AA I knew all about psychological things but I had never thought of a power greater than myself — that really hadn't crossed my consciousness. So in AA they said you needed to find a power greater than you were. Jimmy B. and Hank P. were the guys responsible for the phrase "as you understand Him" and I talked to Jimmy and Hank, I talked to Bill, I talked to Chuck C. — I kept asking, "What's all this Higher Power stuff?"

When I was about nine or ten months sober, I operated on a woman and took out a large uterine tumor. I took out the sutures on the sixth day, and the wound was tightly healed together. How come? As I was pondering this, the woman's husband called me. He said, "I want to thank you for curing my wife. We are deeply appreciative." And she got on the phone and said the same thing. I said, "Well, I'm glad to be of service," but when we hung up, I asked myself, "Did you cure her?" And I thought about the wound and how it had healed, and while I

didn't underestimate my diagnostic ability or my surgical ability, I wondered if I really could say I'd cured her. Well, I couldn't account for it. I thought, Well, maybe the nurses at the hospital cured her, because after all they had spent more time with her than I did. I spent many hours in surgery with her, but after that I just spent a few minutes twice a day making rounds. But I realized that as valuable as the nurses were and as lovely as they were, even they could not bring about a cure. And then it finally became perfectly clear to me that inside of every human being there is a healing power. I had cut my finger and it had gotten well; I'd broken a bone and it had gotten well; I'd operated on this woman and she had gotten well. How come? That to me, in its simplest form, is a concept of a power greater than I am.

GV: What was your impression of Bill W?

Dr. Earle: I thought he was a hell of a great guy. I went back to New York and I met Nell Wing [Bill's nonalcoholic secretary], and some others, and they took me in and introduced me to Bill. He was a great big tall, long, lanky guy. And he and I took to each other just like a duck takes to water. We sat and talked for an hour or two, I think, and we just talked back and forth — what had happened to him, what had happened to me — and we became fast friends almost instantly. He



was a guy who felt very deeply about things, and he'd had a remarkable experience that had brought him to the conclusion that he might sober up the world. And to begin with, he went off to do just that — to sober up the world. But pretty soon he quieted down and just sobered up those around him. I went back to New York many, many times and spent time with him. He had a room in a hotel under the name William Griffith. He didn't use his last name because people could find him. He and I would spend all day long talking about things, talking about one

thing or another — we shared all kinds of stuff.

Let me tell you about one of my trips back to New York. I looked at Bill and he just looked terrible. And I said, "Bill, how do you feel?" And he said, "I don't feel well at all." I found out that whenever guests came to AA headquarters, Bill would take them down to a little ice cream shop around the corner and he'd buy them ice cream and cake and coffee. He was doing nothing day after day but drinking coffee and eating ice cream and cake. And I said, "Bill, you know, this isn't the best diet." He said, "I guess it's not. What shall I do?" So I put him on a high protein diet and he went on that diet and got to feeling just great. And people said,

"Bill, you look so good — what happened?" And Bill said, "My gynecologist put me on a high protein diet."

GV: Have you had periods in sobriety that were emotionally difficult?

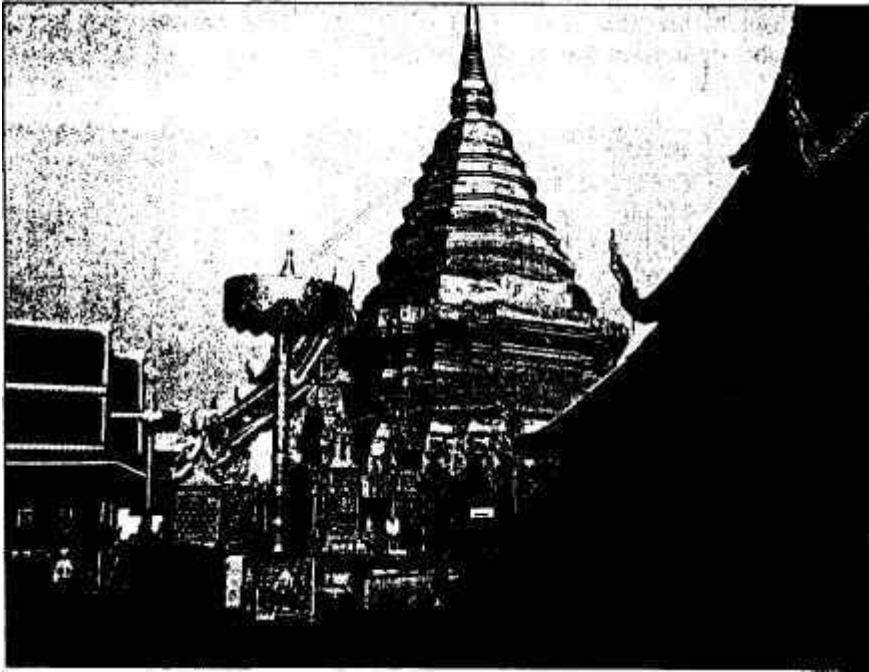
Dr. Earle: Oh my, yes. So did Bill — you know Bill had a long depression. Let me tell you how I got at some emotional rest. Years ago, a medical college in the South asked me to go to Saigon as a visiting professor to help the Vietnamese set up a new department in gynecology and obstetrics. Before I left, I went back to see Bill and Lois and

Marty M. and some others, and I spent about eight or nine days back in New York before I went to Asia. Bill took me to the airport and on the way there he said, "You know, Earle, I've been sober longer than anyone else in our organization. After all I was sober six months when I met Bob. But," he said, "I don't have too much peace of mind." He said, "I feel down in the dumps a hell of a lot." So I said, "So do I, Bill. I don't have much serenity either." I was sober by this time maybe sixteen, seventeen years. He said, "Do me a favor. When you get over to Asia, see if you can investigate, firsthand, the various religions in Asia. That means Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism, and Confucianism and ancestral worship and the whole shebang." And I said, "All right, I'll do it." And he said, "Stay in contact with me and maybe we can find something in those religions. After all, we've taken from William James, we've taken from all the Christian religions. Let's see what these others have."

So I hugged Bill and got on the plane and went to Asia. I had three or four rest and relaxation periods a year but I didn't rest and relax. I was determined to find something that would bring peace and serenity to me. I spent a lot of time in Nepal and in Indonesia. I spent time in India. I went into these places looking, looking, looking for serenity. I spent two or three years just driving to find out something. I tried meditation, I read the Bhagavad

Gita, the Vedas — everything. I went to an ashram on the southeast coast of India, run by a very famous guru and saint. There were about a hundred and fifty East Indians there. I was the only Westerner and they welcomed me. I wore a dhoti — that's a white skirt that men wear — and I wore one like the rest of them did. We all ate on the ground on great big banana leaves over a yard long. There would be food on the banana leaves and you'd make it into a ball with your right hand and throw it into your mouth. There were no knives or forks at all, so I did what they did. I didn't like the taste very much but I did it.

I happened to be there at the time of the Feast of Dewali. Dewali is like our time of Easter; it's the time of renewal. We were awakened on the early morning of Dewali around two o'clock. This ashram was located at the base of a mountain known as Arunachal. Now Arunachal in Hindi means sun, and the myth goes that one of the gods, Rama, lives inside of this mountain. We were told we had to walk around the base of this mountain — which was a ten mile walk — and as we walked, we were yelling to Rama. If you do it in a very firm and believing way, it's said that Rama will come up and wave at you and bless you. I was there, and I did it. We walked around and we were yelling "Rama, Rama, Rama" hoping that Rama would come up and bless us all. They all walked in their bare feet. I didn't, I wore my



shoes. Gosh, I was tired. But I walked all night long, the whole distance.

After that event, I came back to my little apartment in Saigon, ready to return to my medical work. I was so beaten because I'd been driving and searching and clenching my fists for almost three years (and I kept writing to Bill about all this, you know). And I came into my apartment and I suddenly collapsed down onto the floor. I lay there breathing kind of heavily and I said to myself, "Oh, to hell with serenity, I don't care if it ever comes." And I meant it. And do you know what happened? All of a sudden the craving to find serenity utterly evaporated — and

there it was. Serenity. The trouble was the search ... looking out *there* for what was right *here*.

You know, we only have this given second. There's always now. Once I realized that, serenity became mine. Now — I'm speaking about emotions — I haven't sought one single thing since that day because it's all right here. I often say to people at meetings, "You're trying to find peace of mind out there. I don't blame you, but it isn't out there. It's here. Right here."

Now, do I think there is a supreme being, a God? Sure I do. Of course. But do I have any religious beliefs? No. Religion demands that you do certain

things and my life in AA isn't like that. AA is a very loose-jointed organization. People say there is only one way to work the program. That's crazy. We talk about the "suggested" Steps, which are guides to recovery, not absolutes. Chapter five of the Big Book says "no one among us has been able to maintain anything like perfect adherence to these principles." If we had all the members of AA standing here, everyone would have a different idea what AA is all about. Bill's idea was different from Dr. Bob's, yours will be different from mine. And yet they're all based on one thing and that is: don't drink, and use the Twelve Steps in your own way.

GV: Do you sponsor people differently now than you did years ago?

Dr. Earle: I don't think I do. Maybe these days sponsees tend to talk about not only their drinking but a little more about the relationship problems, and so we get into conversations about their wives or sweethearts and some emotional problems.

GV: So whatever changes you find in AA, you're not uncomfortable with them?

Dr. Earle: Well, some AA groups have turned into kind of psychological forums and that isn't AA to me. Maybe it is, I don't know. But here's the way I feel about it, correct or incorrect: AA is my family, and every family has a mix of people in it. Every

family has people who are braggarts who think they know everything — every family does. Every family has people who whine all the time — every family. And every family has people who go out and do very well and succeed at the art of living. So when I hear the whiners — well, they're kind of a bore, but on the other hand, a family always has boring whiners in it.

GV: Did your marriage change after you got sober?

Dr. Earle: Oh my God, yes — I've been married four times. I was sober about fifteen years before I got divorced the first time. I'd been married thirty years. It was a marriage that was not very successful. My wife and I went on different paths, but we were victims of the idea that good boys and girls don't get divorced. Finally I said to Mary, "You know, I think we ought to get divorced," and she said, "I think so too. We don't have much in common." So we had a very sensible, quiet, straightforward divorce. But you can't hang from the rope for thirty years and not miss it when it's cut down. So, after that I got married twice for very short times to two very fine women, good friends of mine today. Then I had a long time when I wasn't married and then I met my current wife and we've been married fifteen years. She's sitting right here, by the way, working on the computer.

GV: Is there any Step that is a particular help to you?

Dr. Earle: I like that Tenth Step pretty well. When you make a mistake — stomp on somebody's toes — you can straighten it out right away. I think that's a pretty valuable Step.

GV: What is your view of the Eleventh Step?

Dr. Earle: Let me say something which might be heretical to many people. I think that God's will and my will are identical. I think that it was God's will that I become addicted to alcohol and amphetamines so that I could find AA and get sober. And so I feel that the greatest thing that ever happened to me were the alcohol and drugs that I took, because that brought me to where I am, and I need to be here. If the casting director who runs this whole universe were to come to me and say, "Earle, you're going to live your life over again," I would say, "All right, but I want to live it exactly the same way — all the misery, all the drinks, all the amphetamines." All the stuff I took, I'd do it exactly the same way. Why? If I didn't do it exactly the same way, you and I wouldn't be having this conversation and I live on such things. So, the Eleventh Step is great but I don't need to pray for God's guidance. It's here all the time.

GV: So God's will for you is to be sober.

Dr. Earle: That's right, but he had to get me drunk first.

GV: Is there anything you'd like to say in conclusion?

Dr. Earle: I think AA is the greatest thing alive. And I think that we do need to check on what's happening in AA, and I think we need to look at AA as a family. AA cannot be the same way it was when Dr. Bob and Bill were here. So I think that we need to go along with changes in AA but let's not forget the Twelve Steps. Let's not forget those suggested Steps that we can use to make ourselves more aware of what's going on. Because to me the greatest thing in life is to be aware of what's happening all the time.

I'm not a church-goer — I'm in church all the time. To me, prayer is utter awareness. I don't know if that makes sense to you but it does to me. It's being aware of things, of what's going on around me all the time, in a given second. That to me is a form of prayer, that to me is a form of righteousness, if you want to use that religious word.

GV: A Buddhist might call that awareness "mindfulness."

Dr. Earle: Christians call it a state of grace. We in AA have a bit of a state of grace.



This concludes the Grapevine's series of interviews with writers whose stories have appeared in the Big Book, Alcoholics Anonymous.