

August 1958

## Let's make practical and spiritual sense—

by Bill W.

**The 1958 General Service Conference unanimously voted down a proposal for a cheap paperback edition of the Big Book. Believing that all AAs should fully understand why this was done, Bill has asked the Grapevine to reprint portions of a letter he recently wrote an old friend on this long debated topic.**

Bedford Hills, N. Y.  
March 22, 1958

DEAR \_\_\_\_\_,  
It was fine to hear from you again. We old timers are getting more and more separated. My nostalgia for the old days is often with me and letters like yours bring it back.

You raised a time-tested question, "What about a cheap edition of the AA book—maybe a fifty-cent paperback?" This question raises a considerable number of other questions, having both a practical and spiritual bearing.

First, let's take a look at the early history of the cheap-book question. The issue of a low-priced book versus a higher-priced one was seriously and heatedly debated for several years after the Big Book came

out in 1939 at \$3.50. In this era, the majority of AAs were doubtless in favor of a one-dollar job. When we announced the \$3.50 price, the reaction was very strong (and to some extent unreasonable): "Bill had let AA down," "The price is too high for the poor drunk," "Since everything in AA is free, why not a give-away book?," "Because AA is non-profit, why should the groups and the New York Headquarters make a profit?". As for royalties to Dr. Bob and me—well, some said that made us profiteers, if not racketeers.

From the point of view of many of the membership, these were powerful arguments. A give-away book was the purest kind of spiritual enterprise. But a volume decently bound and priced within the normal trade range, a volume which would

help carry the expenses of AA's Headquarters, was looked upon as a pretty fearsome evil. Consequently, I fell under the severest criticism of my whole AA life.

Yet our history proves that the sometimes idealistic majority of that day was seriously mistaken. Had there been no book earnings for the Headquarters and no royalties for Dr. Bob and me, AA would have taken a very different and probably disastrous course. Dr. Bob and Sister Ignatia could not have looked after those 5,000 drunks in their hospital pioneering at Akron. I would have had to quit full-time work fifteen years ago. Our book would have been in the hands of an outside publisher. There could have been no Twelve Traditions and no General Service Conference. Financially crippled, the Headquarters could not have spread AA around the world. Indeed, it might have folded up completely.

All of this would have come to pass had not earnings of the Big Book plugged up the often large deficits in group contributions to Headquarters. In the 1945-1950 period, for example, I saw our reserve fund of \$100,000 drop to \$40,000 in three hectic years. In these years the AA General Service Office and the AA Grapevine once reached a combined deficit of \$3,000 a month. It was the book money that kept us afloat and enabled us to re-organize the service office and put today's General Service Confer-

ence into operation. A cheap AA book would have been a practical and spiritual mistake of major proportions. The AA message would have been carried to the few instead of to the many. There is not the slightest doubt about it. Everybody who now wants a fifty-cent paperback should bear this part of our history seriously in mind.

AA's trusteeship, our General Service Board, has a reserve fund which has been slowly accumulated out of book earnings over the years. This fund is equal to one year's running expense of the Headquarters. We think it is our chief protection against hard times and the possibility of a large drop in group contributions. Even in good times, group contributions have often failed to pay Headquarters' expense by a considerable margin. If we could actually collect from every recovered AA member, the annual cost to each would be only one dollar a year. In practice, we ask for \$2.00 a member and average considerably less. The AA office ran \$15,000 in the red in 1957 and The Grapevine had an operating deficit of \$10,000. Since this is a frequent situation in good times, what would actually happen to us in hard times?

In hard times, AA members and their groups will surely look after themselves. But in such circumstances, how well would they take care of General Headquarters? Having never been through such a time, nobody can say. We can't even

make an informed guess. We simply know that our Headquarters still runs deficits. We also know that one-third of the AA groups, representing 50,000 members, send Headquarters nothing, even in boom times. We therefore have no reason to believe in Santa Claus. That is why we have insisted on building up our reserve fund. It is our primary protection against the impairment or collapse of AA's General Services; those services which have spread the good word throughout the world and which we ought to maintain in full strength under all conditions.

There are those who feel that a fifty-cent book would not seriously cut into the sales of our \$4.50 edition. But would it not? At Headquarters we are finding many able volunteer service workers. One of these is the Vice-President of a large book publishing house. He understands book markets, inside AA and out. He emphatically points out that ultra-cheap AA books, especially paperbacks, would severely damage our present sales and income. Wouldn't it therefore be wise to ask ourselves, "Can we afford those cheap books now?"

There has been some hope that the volume of fifty-cent book sales would be so huge on the public market that we would not lose much money anyhow. But this is one of those situations on which no reliable estimate can be made. As AA Publishing cannot go into news-

stand or drugstore distribution, we would have to let an outside publisher do the job for us. Such a publisher would be the sole source of supply. Even if such a paperback house sold a million copies a year, the return to AA Publishing, Inc., in royalties and profits, would not exceed \$10,000. This estimate may, of course, be far too optimistic. A preliminary investigation among publishers indicates that such a sale is to be questioned. Horse-sense suggests this, too.

The main market for cheap paperbacks is dominated by former best-sellers, murder mysteries, sex novels, science-fiction, and the like. Large and sustained volume is possible because of the huge public interest. Now the AA book has been on sale for almost twenty years, in bookstores. Alcoholics Anonymous and its Big Book have received vast advertising in all public media and this still continues. Nevertheless, our sale to the public has never been more than a dribble; it hasn't averaged 1500 copies a year. So how can we have any assurance if we put a fifty-cent AA book on newsstands and in drugstores that sales are suddenly going to jump from 1500 books to one million, or one hundred thousand, or even ten thousand? Nobody seems to be able to predict with confidence what a specialized textbook like ours would do if put on cheap sale with whodunits and science-fiction in these city outlets. If we did fail to sell a

large volume, we would have mostly failed our spiritual purpose of carrying the AA message. Compared to the vast publicity that AA already gets, the effect of a cheap book could not be very great in any case.

Next let us inquire if there is any real shortage of AA books and reading material inside AA. Let's also ponder whether our poorest members are really deprived of their chance at the AA book because we still lack a fifty-cent edition. Also, whether our excellent pamphlet literature cannot pretty well fill the need of such newcomers when necessary. We know that 350,000 AA books have already been distributed and that a half-million good pamphlets hit AA every year. Who knows anyone in AA that hasn't been given a book, who can't borrow a book, or who can't buy one from his group on partial payment, or find the Big Book in a local library? Hardly anyone need be deprived of reading the present volume if he will make even a little effort to lay hold of a copy. Of course there are some exceptions, but these are being met; we already send gift copies of the Big Book to prisons and the institutional groups.

There might be certain spiritual advantages in a cheap book literature, but there would also be definite spiritual disadvantages.

There is the question of who is best able to pay for a given service—in this case, a give-away book program. Is it the individual AAs,

the AA groups, or is it AA as a whole? Obviously, the combined wealth and income of individual AA members is the real reservoir and source of money. The combined income of all alcoholics who have recovered in AA is easily one billion dollars a year. Compared with this, the money coming into our 7,000 AA group treasuries is a trickle. Compared to the funds that flow into local treasuries, the contributions to AA Headquarters are drops in a bucket. Our international treasury and reserve fund doesn't contain even one dollar for each alcoholic who has recovered in AA. Neither do these alcoholics supply these reserve funds; the book buyers do it. Probably half of the alcoholics who have recovered in AA over the years have never, directly or indirectly, sent a cent to Headquarters. Maybe our Headquarters financial statements look like big money to some. But these monies represent only the tiniest fraction of the total wealth and earning power of the members of Alcoholics Anonymous. AA Headquarters—AA as a whole, if you like—is relatively as poor as a church mouse. Should the Headquarters, *the poorest part of AA*, now undertake to finance the richest part—the individual AAs—with a fifty-cent book?

Does this make sense—practically or spiritually?

*Gratefully,*

**Bill**