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AA Tomorrow

by Bill W.

*Our co-founder sums up after 25 years of AA
and looks into the future we are now living*

WE HAVE some wonderful glimpses of the panorama of AA at work in the twenty-fifth year of its founding. We marvel and rejoice that the near impossible has really happened. All this has indeed depended on our many channels of communication and our singular ability to use them.

Now comes the question: Where do we go from here and what is our responsibility for today and for tomorrow?

Clearly, our first duty to AA's future is to maintain in full strength what we now have. Only the most vigilant caretaking can assure this. Never should we be lulled into com-

placent self-satisfaction by the wide acclaim and success that are everywhere ours. This is the subtle temptation which could stagnate us today, perchance disintegrate us tomorrow. We have always rallied to meet and transcend failure and crisis. Problems have been our stimulants. How well, though, shall we be able to meet the problems of success?

Will we continue to search out the ever-present flaws and gaps in our communications? With enough imagination, courage, and dedication, will we resolutely address ourselves to those many tasks of repair and improvement which even now the future is calling upon us to under-



take? Still clearer vision and an ever-mounting sense of responsibility can be the only answers to these questions.

What, then, is the real size and reach of our foreseeable responsibilities? During the last twenty-five years, it is quite certain that twenty-five million men and women throughout the world have suffered alcoholism. Nearly all of these are now sick, mad, or dead. AA has brought recovery to something like two hundred and fifty thousand.¹

The rest are still out of reach or else gone beyond recall. An even larger generation of drunks is right now in the making. Facing the

1. In 1973, the estimate is 650,000.

enormity of this situation, shall any of us sit comfortably and say, "Well, people, here we are. We hope you hear about us and come around. Then maybe we can give you a hand."

Of course, we shall do nothing of the sort. We know that we are going to open, wider and wider, every conceivable means and channel through which these kinsfolk of ours may be reached. We shall remember Dr. Bob and his marvelous co-worker Sister Ignatia — how they worked at Akron. We shall remember the many years of Silky's² unstinted labor for us. Ten thousand AAs still around will remember how they literally owe their lives to these three people. Each of us will remember his own sponsor, the one who cared enough. As the inheritors of such a tradition of service, how many could ever say, "Let George do that Twelfth Step job; he likes to work with drunks anyhow. Besides, I'm busy"? Surely there could not be many! Complacency would be impossible.

Our next great area of future responsibility may be this one: I'm thinking about the total problem of alcohol and about all of those who still must suffer the appalling conse-

2. Dr. William D. Silkworth



quences of alcoholism. Their number is astronomical; it runs into hundreds of millions. Here's just a sampling of that problem:

Because of our drinking, most of us damaged our kids. Their emotional scars should have made them naturals for alcoholism. Yet it is startlingly true that teen-age children of good AA members show almost no sign of becoming drunks. They drink moderately or not at all. If a few of the vulnerable do hit the bottle, and the telltale symptoms and episodes show up, most can stop — and they do. Now why is this?

The answer is "alcohol education" — AA-style. Of course, we have never told our kids not to drink. But for years, around the house and at meetings, they have heard what the score really is, what alcoholism can do to people. They have seen the old man in action, first as an alcoholic, then as an AA member. This is the kind of education that has no doubt already saved a hundred thousand of our children.

But what about other people's kids — have we no concern for them?

Of course, we do have concern. While we appreciate that AA itself cannot very well get into alcohol education or into any of the related activities that touch the total problem, we do know that, as peculiarly well-informed citizens, there is plenty we can and should do in these fields.

Enterprises of this sort — governmental, state, and private — have been springing up everywhere in recognition of the fact that alcoholism is a top-priority problem of health. Nearly every one of these agencies tells us it has been inspired to work on by the example we AAs have set them. They now take their turn as pioneers. Naturally, they are bound to make some mistakes. Certainly, we can understand this. In fact, we like to say that we ourselves have progressed mostly by trial and error. A good number of these undertakings are now going places, and their promise is very large.

Nevertheless, I gather the impression that many of us are so intent on their few errors, especially the errors of those AAs associated with them,

that we often fail to give these dedicated people the encouragement they much need. Now that we AAs have so amazingly unified around our single purpose and the Twelve Traditions, the risk that we could be much hurt by anything done in these outside ventures is virtually nonexistent.

Let's instead keep focused on the fact that there are some twenty-four million, seven hundred and fifty thousand drunks left in the world. Could not still more friendly and widespread cooperation with outside agencies finally lead us to countless alcoholics who will otherwise be lost? Maybe we are beginning to stand in our own light. Perhaps we are blocking a communication that has a tremendous potential. Shouldn't we therefore have a fresh look at this?

Inside AA ... well, how do we stand?

It is a fact, and a perfectly explicable one, that the number of Al-Anon Family Groups has jumped from a handful to 1,300³ of them in the last ten years. They are tackling one of the toughest problems that an alcoholic and his family can have, inside AA or out. This is the terrific distortion that we alcoholics force upon our wives (and husbands) through destructive drinking — drinking that has led us into a highly abnormal dependency upon them. Active drunks frequently turn themselves into rebellious and wayward children, thereby compelling their

marriage partners to become their protective custodians — their "mamas" and "papas." This has often resulted in a built-in pattern, one most difficult to erase. The coming of sobriety in AA is seldom a remedy. Indeed, sobriety sometimes aggravates this often intolerable condition.

The Al-Anon Family Groups, comprising wives and husbands of alcoholics, now see this picture clearly — far more clearly, in fact, than do most of us AAs. In their own groups, they are now working to repair that damage — along with their other defects — by the practice of AA's Twelve Steps. More than some of us, these life partners of ours are trying hard to practice AA principles in all their affairs. The Family Groups have already made a big dent in this mighty tough problem, and there is evidence of far more to come. Can't we, therefore, give this remarkable project our greatest possible understanding and encouragement? And let each of us do his full share of that repair job at home!

Then there is among us AAs the ever-present need for further spiritual growth. Here most of us show a heavy deficit, and I'm a notable example. The simplest self-questioning can reveal such deficiencies. For instance: "Am I trying to 'practice these principles' in all my own affairs? Or am I simply complacent and quite content with just enough spiritual nourishment to keep me sober? Do I really possess the spiri-

4. In 1973, about 6,200 — plus about 1,050 Alateen groups (for teen-aged children of alcoholics.)

tual resources to see me through some rough going? Or do I think pretty well of my spiritual demonstration because (a) things are pretty good at home, (b) I got a big raise, and (c) they made me vice-president of my lodge? Or if things go badly and I begin to be jittery, depressed, anxious, or resentful, do I then justify my resulting self-pity and guilt by blaming my 'bad breaks' or, more usually, the behavior of other people? Or do I fall back on the old refrain that I'm a 'sick alcoholic' and therefore not responsible?"

Nearly all of us, when we think about it, agree that we are a long, long way from being anywhere near grown-up, from almost any point of view. We can clearly see that our job as individuals and as a fellowship is to keep right on growing by the constant use of our Twelve Steps.

Of course, we may be certain that this will be a slow business. But we also know we can never take our plodding progress as the slightest alibi for setting ourselves second-rate goals. Our high aim can be emotional sobriety, full emotional maturity — and that's good. However, I think most of us may prefer a still larger definition, one with a still broader and higher reach. Perhaps there can be no "relative" in the universe unless somewhere there is an "absolute." To most of us, this "absolute" is "God as we understand Him." We feel that we were born to this life to grow — if only a little —

toward that likeness and image. However small and prudent our next immediate step on the path of progress may be, we of AA can never set any hampering limitation upon the ultimate destiny of ourselves and our Fellowship, nor any whatever upon God's love for us all. Individually and collectively, structurally and spiritually, we shall ever need to build for the future. We are still laying down the foundation on which all coming generations of AAs will have to stand, perhaps for centuries.

Our Fellowship has been permitted to achieve — though still in miniature — the "one world" dream of philosophers. Ours is a world in which we can hotly differ, yet never think of schism or conflict as a solution. As a fellowship, we ask nothing of wealth or power. As we better use "the language of the heart," our communications grow apace: Already, we find ourselves in safe passage through all those barriers of distance and language, of social distinction, nationality, and creed, that so divide the world of our times.

For so long as we remain sure that our "one world of AA" is God's gift, rather than any virtue earned or created by ourselves; and for so long as our "one world" continues to be ever more inclusive of those in need; and for so long as we speak and try to perfect the language of love — for just so long may we count upon making whatever rendezvous with destiny that God would have us make.