

Two years ago, I reached the decision to step down as Chairman of AA's General Service Board after this year's Conference, though I was eligible to serve another year. I did so for personal reasons. A year and a half ago, I made my decision known to the trustees. They and others asked that I reconsider and stay until next year. I reconsidered but I did not change my mind mainly because I knew there were many well-qualified candidates who could succeed me.

My five-year term has been deeply rewarding to me spiritually. I will sorely miss the excitement, challenge and satisfaction that comes with the office of Chairman. Most of all, I will miss the almost boundless opportunity to share views with members of AA at all levels of service.

When Bob H. retired as general manager eighteen years ago, he said

in his farewell remarks, "This is a very poignant time and it is particularly poignant because on this occasion I am a part of the exercise." I feel the same way today. It is indeed a poignant time and there are many emotions welling up in me. Of those emotions, gratitude is the most dominant and assertive; and I believe, in my case, rightly so.

Gratitude and I are old companions. We have marched side by side in the service of AA. When I pause to reflect on that service, as I do now, gratitude is by my side nudging me to recognize those who so richly deserve recognition.

Gratitude draws me into kinship with every man, woman and child who has ever been a member of AA. Each of them is

part of the fabric of fellowship that is the essence of AA. It is said that a butterfly fluttering its wings in Beijing may by that action initiate cur-

A Butterfly in Beijing

by
Michael Alexander



rents that will ultimately affect the weather of New York. So it is that the word or deed of any member of AA may, if persuasive or appealing, initiate currents that affect the Fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous.

The reverse is surely true: Without a doubt, AA will in time shape the character and life of its members and friends. I am a different person because of AA; and, I believe, a better one.

Gratitude reminds me that as a trustee I enjoy a degree of intellectual intimacy with the other trustees seldom attained in other pursuits. So often the trustees are the court of last resort of difficult and demanding issues put before them - issues that have no easy answers and that cannot be ignored.

Gratitude prompts special recognition and affection for the staff members and other paid servants of AA.

Their familiarity with the needs of the Fellowship provides a reservoir of wisdom to which all have access. In the countless times I have drawn upon it, the help I have received has been given to me swiftly, accurately, and with unflinching good cheer.

Bill W. and nonalcoholic lawyer Bernard Smith met in New York fifty years ago. It was a fateful meeting for them, for AA and, as it turned

out, for me as well. They became fast friends and their friendship endured so long as they lived.

Bernard Smith was quickly and deeply impressed by Bill and, through him, with AA. He became a trustee of the Alcoholic Foundation shortly after his meeting with Bill. As a corporate lawyer, Smith brought to the Foundation Board the skills and expertise of his profession. Bill drew on Smith's talents freely from the beginning of their association. Early on, Smith became Bill's legal adviser and also the legal adviser of the Foundation.

There came a time in the late 1940s when the Alcoholic Foundation was nearly pulled apart. Bill and Dr. Bob dearly wanted a General Service Conference. The trustees of the Foundation did not, except for one - Bernard Smith.

Leonard Harrison was then the nonalcoholic Chairman of the Foundation Board. He opposed the idea of a Conference but appointed Bernard Smith, whose views were diametrically opposed to his own, to chair a committee to examine the

need for a Conference.

In choosing Bernard Smith to chair that committee, Leonard Harrison rose above politics and personal pref-

The closing address to the 43rd General Service Conference in April 1993, by a long-time friend of AA who served 14 years as a nonalcoholic trustee

erences. Of this, Bill said: "Considering their differences of opinion, this was a most magnanimous and generous act on Leonard's part. The recollection of it never fails to inspire me." Leonard Harrison's act also inspires me and I have tried to emulate it in my time as Chairman of the General Service Board.

In the early 1950s Bill W. and Bernard Smith, who was then Chairman of the Board of Trustees, were deeply involved with the newly organized General Service Conference and the Charter which was to make the Conference a permanent fixture. It was then that I joined Bernard Smith's law firm and was assigned some routine corporate work for the Alcoholic Foundation. As I watched those two gifted and devoted men put finishing touches on the AA structure, I sensed I was a witness to history and perhaps, in a small way, a participant in it. Their prodigious efforts led to the Conference Charter and the transfer of functions from the AA founders to the AA Conference in 1955.

Bernard Smith introduced me to Bill W. and it is fair to say that Bill introduced me to AA. What I saw when I looked at Alcoholics Anonymous in those early days was to me a most unusual sight: I saw a Conference that had responsibilities but no legal authority; a Foundation that had legal authority but no one against whom it could be enforced (the AA groups were autonomous); a Fellowship whose members, not the Fellowship, decided whether they were

eligible for membership; a membership in which members were not required to pay dues or register or abide by what anybody in authority had to say; and, finally, I saw a charity organized for noble purposes but without any money to speak of and a tradition that would not permit it to

accept money from the general public.

Nothing I had learned at law school prepared me for my first encounter with AA. Nothing. But Bill and Bernard Smith believed in AA and had given their lives over to AA; and that was good enough for me, in view of the high esteem in which I held them.



Bernard Smith, an early and great friend of AA

One of them gave me a copy of the Big Book. I do not recall which one. What I got was the real McCoy - the one printed in 1939. It had a leaflet in it advising where other copies of the book could be bought. That suggests to me that Bill brought it from his office upon one of his visits to Smith, but I can't be sure.

The Big Book and other AA literature that came my way contain profound expressions of gratitude. Bill and Bernard Smith often spoke of the need for gratitude in AA; and they practiced what they preached, publicly and privately. To amplify this point I would like to quote a letter Bill sent to Smith at Christmas time in 1951:

"Dear Bern,

This year, 1951, has brought us AAs a very special sense of relief and gratitude for the completion of the structure of our society. From floor to spire, our Cathedral of the Spirit may be seen in fullness by all who look.

What is not so easily seen is the truly passionate devotion of the many who labored, nor the wisdom of those few, who under a watchful Providence, were able to mold its design.

You, my friend, will always be reckoned among those few and, by those who know, you will be seen in their very forefront. And who should know better than I?

To you, and yours, the best cheer this Season can bring; may deserved and abiding satisfaction ever be yours

for what you have done for Alcoholics Anonymous - and for me.

In gratitude,
Bill"

When Bernard Smith died in 1970, Bill wrote a touching tribute to him that included the following passage:

really. He not only understood our Fellowship, he believed in it as well."

Bill himself died six months later. I'm sure that Bernard Smith would have paid an even greater tribute to him.

Upon Bernard Smith's death, I became the general counsel to the

AA's General Service Conference

We may not need a General Service Conference to insure our own recovery. But we do need it to insure the recovery of the alcoholic who still stumbles in the darkness, seeking the light. We need it to insure the recovery of some newborn child, inexplicably destined to alcoholism. We need it to provide, in keeping with the Twelfth Step, a permanent haven for all alcoholics who in the ages ahead can find in AA that rebirth which brought its first members back to life.

We need it because we are conscious of the devastating effect of the human urge for power and prestige which must never be permitted to invade AA. We need a Conference to insure AA against government while insulating it against anarchy; we need it to protect the Fellowship against disintegration while preventing overintegration. We need it so that Alcoholics Anonymous and Alcoholics Anonymous alone may be the ultimate repository of its own Twelve Steps, its Twelve Traditions, and all of its Services.

We need a Conference to insure that changes within AA come only as a response to the needs and wants of all AA, and not of any few. We need it to insure that the doors of the halls of AA shall never have locks on them, so that all people with an alcoholic problem for all time to come may enter these halls unmasked and feel welcome. We need it to help insure that Alcoholics Anonymous never asks of anyone who needs help what his or her race is, what his or her creed is, or what his or her social position is.

- Bernard B. Smith, *AA Comes of Age*, p. 281

"From the very beginning, Bernard Smith understood the spiritual basis upon which the Society of Alcoholics Anonymous rests. Such an understanding is rare among 'outsiders.' But Bernard was never an outsider - not

General Service Board, succeeding Bernard Smith in that capacity. In 1976, I was invited to become a trustee of the General Service Board. Five years ago I was invited to become Chairman of the Board. Between us, Bernard

Smith and I have served as trustees during forty years of the 50 years in which there has been an Alcoholic Foundation or the General Service Board. In eleven of those years Bernard Smith or I served as Chairman of the Board.

In my time with AA, I met and worked with every general manager of the General Service Office. I have also met and worked with all of the paid editors of the Grapevine. Finally, I met and worked with all of the chairmen of the Alcoholic Foundation or General Service Board.

Each of these trusted servants of Alcoholics Anonymous exerted welcome influence on my life. From them I learned that nonalcoholics as well as alcoholics can be and are deeply grateful for the opportunity to serve AA.

It was my great privilege to be a friend and adviser to Lois W. Like Bill, Lois was a person of great magnitude. In my view, there would have been no AA but for her, at least not the way we know it today.

Lois died in 1988 and rests beside Bill in the modest little cemetery in East Dorset, Vermont. By her wish, only a handful of people attended the brief service at the cemetery. While there, I looked at the plain stone that marked Bill's grave. Only his name, year of birth and year of death appear on the stone. An equally plain stone marks the place where Lois lies. Even in death Bill and Lois drew attention to anonymity and humility, so essential to AA.

Every now and then I encounter a phenomenon that the airline industry calls "clear air turbulence." One moment I am gliding serenely on an airplane through clear blue skies. The next moment, without warning, I am being buffeted as though on a bucking bronco. The only sensible thing to do when unwanted and unexpected turbulence strikes is to sit down, buckle up and hang on to the coffee cup. I let the crew handle the problem. They have as much interest in the safety of the airplane as I do. And I have faith in the structural integrity of the airplane. It is built to withstand a lot of turbulence.

So it is in AA. Every now and then turbulence comes from nowhere, has its moment and then is gone. On those occasions I buckle up, sit tight and let the crew do its job. I have learned that AA has an exceptionally good crew at all levels and is built to handle a lot of turbulence.

As I said, I am a different person because of Alcoholics Anonymous and I believe a better person. I am not an alcoholic. No member of my family is an alcoholic. My wife is not an alcoholic. No member of her family is an alcoholic. Until I came to AA, I had no friends who were alcoholics. It has seemed to me that destiny had to work very hard to bring AA and me together. But it happened and because of it I am a lucky man. I am a very lucky man. God bless Alcoholics Anonymous for all it does for humanity and for what it does for me spiritually.