

From The Language Of The Heart

An Excerpt from the **July 1953 Grapevine Article** titled “A Fragment of History: Origin of the Twelve Steps” found in The Language Of The Heart. Pages 195 to 202

From Page 200 in the book The Language Of The Heart

During the next three years after Dr. Bob’s recovery our growing groups at Akron, New York and Cleveland evolved the so-called word-of-mouth program of our pioneering time. As we commenced to form a society separate from the Oxford Group, we began to state our principles something like this:

1. We admitted that we were powerless over alcohol
2. We got honest with ourselves
3. We got honest with another person, in confidence
4. We made amends for harms done others
5. We worked with other alcoholics without demand for prestige or money
6. We prayed to God to help us to do these things as best we could

Though these principles were advocated according to the whim or liking of each of us, and though in Akron and Cleveland they still stuck by the O.G. absolutes of honesty, purity, unselfishness and love, this was the gist of our message to incoming alcoholics up to 1939, when our present Twelve Steps were put to paper.

I well remember the evening on which the Twelve Steps was written. I was lying in bed quite dejected and suffering from one of my imaginary ulcer attacks. Four chapters of the book, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, had been roughed out and read in meetings at Akron and New York. We quickly found that everybody wanted to be an author. The hassles as to what should go into our new book were terrific. For example, some wanted a purely psychological book which would draw in alcoholics without scaring them. We could tell them about the “God business” afterwards. A few, led by our wonderful southern friend, Fitz M., wanted a fairly religious book infused with some of the dogma we had picked up from the churches and missions which had tried to help us. The louder the arguments, the more I felt in the middle. It appeared that I wasn’t going to be the author at all. I was only going to be an umpire who would decide the contents of the book. This didn’t mean, though, that there wasn’t terrific enthusiasm for the undertaking. Every one of us was wildly excited at the possibility of getting our message before all those countless alcoholics who still didn’t know.

An excerpt from Big Book Story: "He Sold Himself Short"

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I stayed in Akron two or three weeks on my initial trip trying to absorb as much of the program and philosophy as possible. I spent a great deal of time with Dr. Bob, whenever he had the time to spare, and in the homes of two or three other people, trying to see how the family lived the program. Every evening we would meet at the home of one of the members and have coffee and doughnuts and spend a social evening.

The day before I was due to go back to Chicago, a Wednesday and Dr. Bob's afternoon off, he had me down to the office and we spent three or four hours formally going through the Six-Step program as it was at that time. The six steps were:

1. Complete deflation.
2. Dependence and guidance from a Higher Power.
3. Moral inventory.
4. Confession.
5. Restitution.
6. Continued work with other alcoholics.

Dr. Bob led me through all of these steps. At the moral inventory, he brought up some of my bad personality traits or character defects, such as selfishness, conceit, jealousy, carelessness, intolerance, ill-temper, sarcasm and resentments. We went over these at great length and then he finally asked me if I wanted these defects of character removed. When I said yes, we both knelt at his desk and prayed, each of us asking to have these defects taken away.

Since Ebby's visit to me in the fall of 1934 we had gradually evolved what we called "the word-of-mouth program." Most of the basic ideas had come from the Oxford Groups, William James, and Dr. Silkworth. Though subject to considerable variation, it all boiled down into a pretty consistent procedure which comprised six steps. These were approximately as follows:

1. We admitted that we were licked, that we were powerless over alcohol.
2. We made a moral inventory of our defects or sins.
3. We confessed or shared our shortcomings with another person in confidence.
4. We made restitution to all those we had harmed by our drinking.
5. We tried to help other alcoholics, with no thought of reward in money or prestige.
6. We prayed to whatever God we thought there was for power to practice these precepts.

This was the substance of what, by the fall of 1938, we were telling newcomers. Several of the Oxford Groups' other ideas and attitudes had been definitely rejected, including any which could involve us in theological controversy. In important matters there was still considerable disagreement between the Eastern and the Midwestern viewpoints. Our people out there were still active Oxford Group members, while we in New York had withdrawn a year before. In Akron and vicinity they still talked about the Oxford Groups' absolutes: absolute honesty, absolute purity, absolute unselfishness, and absolute love. This dose was found to be too rich for New Yorkers, and we had abandoned the expressions. But all of us, East and West, were placing increasing emphasis on Dr. Silkworth's expression describing the alcoholic's dilemma: the obsession plus the allergy. By now we knew from experience that the new prospect had to accept Step One or get no place.

This particular evening, as my mind ran over these developments, it seemed to me that the program was still not definite enough. It might be a long time before readers of the book in distant places and lands could be personally contacted. Therefore our literature would have to be as clear and comprehensive as possible. Our steps would have to be more explicit. There must not be a single loophole through which the rationalizing alcoholic could wiggle out. Maybe our six chunks of truth should be broken up into smaller pieces. Thus we could better get the distant reader over the barrel, and at the same time we might be able to broaden and deepen the spiritual implications of our whole presentation. So far as I can remember this was all I had in mind when the writing began.

Finally I started to write. I set out to draft more than six steps; how many more I did not know. I relaxed and asked for guidance. With a speed that was astonishing, considering my jangling emotions, I completed the first draft. It took perhaps half an hour. The words kept right on coming. When I reached a stopping point, I numbered the new steps. They added up to twelve. Somehow this number seemed significant. Without any special rhyme or reason I connected them with the twelve apostles. Feeling greatly relieved now, I commenced to reread the draft.

The basic material for the chapter was the word-of-mouth program that Bill had been talking ever since his own recovery. It was heavy with Oxford Group principles, and had in addition some of the ideas Bill had gleaned from William James and from Dr. Silkworth. Moreover, Bill had worked with Dr. Bob and other alcoholics in testing and sifting the workability and effectiveness of the early program. While he would be the nominal author of the fifth chapter, he was in fact serving as spokesman for all the others.

According to Bill, their word-of-mouth program had thus far been a pretty consistent procedure, containing six steps to achieve and maintain their sobriety. There is no evidence that the Oxford Group had such a specific program; yet the Oxford Group ideas prevail in these original six steps, as listed by Bill:

1. We admitted that we were licked, that we were powerless over alcohol.
2. We made a moral inventory of our defects or sins.
3. We confessed or shared our shortcomings with another person in confidence.
4. We made restitution to all those we had harmed by our drinking.
5. We tried to help other alcoholics, with no thought of reward in money or prestige.
6. We prayed to whatever God we thought there was for power to practice these precepts.

Although those steps had helped in the recovery of New York and Akron alcoholics, Bill felt that the program still was not definitive. “Maybe our six chunks of truth should be broken up into smaller pieces,” he said. “Thus we could better get the distant reader over the barrel, and at the same time we might be able to broaden and deepen the spiritual implications of our whole presentation.”

Bill wrote the Twelve Steps, he said, while lying in bed at 182 Clinton Street with pencil in hand and pad of yellow scratch paper on his knee. He wrote them in bed, said Lois, not because he was really sick, but he wasn’t feeling well, and if he could lie down, he did: “He got into bed, that being the best place to think.”

As he started to write, he asked for guidance. And he relaxed. The words began tumbling out with astonishing speed. He completed the first draft in about half an hour, then kept on writing until he felt he should stop and review what he had written. Numbering the new steps, he found that they added up to twelve—a symbolic number; he thought of the Twelve Apostles, and soon became convinced that the Society should have twelve steps.

The very first draft of the Twelve Steps, as Bill wrote them that night, has been lost. This is an approximate reconstruction of the way he first set them down:

- “1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.
- “2. Came to believe that God could restore us to sanity.
- “3. Made a decision to turn our wills and our lives over to the care and direction of God.
- “4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
- “5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
- “6. Were entirely willing that God remove all these defects of character.
- “7. Humbly on our knees asked Him to remove these shortcomings—holding nothing back.
- “8. Made a complete 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.
- “10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
- “11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our contact with God, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.
- “12. Having had a spiritual experience as the result of this course of action, we tried to carry this message to others, especially alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.”

Bill’s first three steps were culled from his reading of James, the teachings of Sam Shoemaker, and those of the Oxford Group. The first step had to do with calamity and disaster; the second was an admission of defeat—that one could not go on living on the strength of one’s own resources; and the third was an appeal to a Higher Power for help.

As Bill remembered it, he had two late callers that evening: his close friend Horace C. and with him a “newcomer, dry barely three months.” The two men had some objections: to the frequent use of the word “God” and to asking on one’s knees to have one’s shortcomings removed. Ruth Hock said that Bill appeared in the

office one day with the steps practically complete. But when he showed the manuscript to local members, there were heated discussions and many other suggestions. Jimmy B. opposed the strong references to God, in both the steps and the rest of the early chapters; Hank wanted to soft-pedal them; but Fitz insisted that the book should express Christian doctrines and use Biblical terms and expressions. Ruth remembered: “Fitz was for going all the way with ‘God’; you [Bill] were in the middle; Hank was for very little; and I—trying to reflect the reaction of the nonalcoholic— was for very little. The result of this was the phrase ‘God as we understood Him,’ which I don’t think ever had much of a negative reaction anywhere.”