

A Brief History of the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous



Northeast Texas Area 65 (NETA) Archives

Foreword

This history combines sources of AAWS literature to describe how the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous evolved. This document is meant solely for AA Members and for use solely within the Fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous.

Reference sources:

Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age, © AAWS Inc.

Pass It On, © AAWS Inc.

Three talks to Medical Societies by Bill W co-founder of AA, © AAWS Inc.

Language of the Heart, © AA Grapevine Inc.

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Arthur S.,
Northeast Texas Area (NETA) Archives

Preface

The definitive history of how the Twelve Steps came to be is recorded in the books *AA Comes of Age* and *Language of the Heart*. Although influenced by a number of sources and age-old principles, the Twelve Steps, and their predecessor Six Steps, were a product of the early members of Alcoholics Anonymous.

Bill's Story in the Big Book also contains an elegantly concise picture of the origin of the Steps based on Ebby T's visiting Bill in Towns Hospital, discussing the Oxford Group principles and providing Bill with the book *The Varieties of Religious Experience* by William James.

Bill W clearly authored the Twelve Steps; however, he also graciously acknowledged that a prominent part of his role, in both the Big Book and Twelve Steps, was to function more as umpire rather than author. Bill, sober for four years, had the challenging role of reconciling the viewpoints of a small but very determined membership in the fledgling AA Fellowship.

There is a popular interpretation today within AA (based on a statement in the Foreword to the First Edition of the Big Book) that the early AA pioneers had the recovery program all figured out procedurally and defined in a precise, exact form of practice. That was hardly the case and it is well documented to the contrary in Conference-approved historical literature authored by Bill W and others.

The Big Book does not define precisely (in the mathematical sense of exactness) the program of recovery used prior to the writing of the book. It does define precisely (in the literary sense of being short and to the point) how the AA program of recovery was changed and expanded in 1939 from a Six Step word of mouth program to a Twelve Step program backed up by a literature source based on demonstrated experience.

When the Big Book was published in April 1939, there were two AA Groups in existence with about 100 members. The Twelve Steps came into being in December 1938. The draft of the Big Book 'basic text' and personal stories were completed (but not fully edited) in January 1939. The Big Book gave birth to the Twelve Steps. The Twelve Steps did not give birth to the Big Book.

Even after the initial publication of the Big Book, the work of refining the Twelve Steps was not complete. The wording of Step Twelve was changed twice (once in the First Edition and again the Second Edition). To do something like that today would require written approval of 75% of the Groups in AA worldwide.

The seed of the book and the Steps was planted in November 1937. Bill W. and Dr. Bob met in Akron, OH and compared notes. 40 cases were staying sober (more than 20 for over a year). All had been diagnosed as hopeless. In a meeting at T. Henry Williams' home, Bill's ideas, for a book, hospitals and how to expand the movement with paid missionaries, narrowly passed by 2 votes among 18 members. The NY group was more enthusiastic.

The idea of hospitals and paid missionaries eventually (and thankfully) faded. The book was intended chiefly for prospective members who were not in the vicinity of Akron, OH or NYC. It produced something remarkable defined by its title: the Fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous. In 1990, Life magazine named Bill W among the 100 most important figures of the 20th century.

Perhaps, the most insightful guidance on how to interpret the Twelve Steps, occurred in 1950 at the first International Convention in Cleveland, OH. On July 3, Dr. Bob made a brief appearance for his last talk. Part of his now famous short statement was "There are two or three things that flashed into my mind on which it would be fitting to lay a little emphasis. One is the simplicity of our program. Let's not louse it all up with Freudian complexes and things that are interesting to the scientific mind but have very little to do with our actual AA work. Our Twelve Steps, when simmered down to the last, resolve themselves into the words love and service."

The remainder of this paper attempts to bring together previously published information describing the origin and evolution of the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous.

A Fragment of History: Origin of the Twelve Steps

By Bill W. from the July 1953 AA Grapevine¹

AAs are always asking: "Where did the Twelve Steps come from?" In the last analysis, perhaps nobody knows. Yet some of the events which led to their formulation are as clear to me as though they took place yesterday.

So far as people were concerned, the main channels of inspiration for our Steps were three in number - the Oxford Groups, Dr. William D. Silkworth of Towns Hospital and the famed psychologist, William James, called by some the father of modern psychology. The story of how these streams of influence were brought together and how they led to the writing of our Twelve Steps is exciting and in spots downright incredible.



Bill W

Oxford Groups (the 1st influence)



Frank Buchman

Many of us will remember the Oxford Groups² as a modern evangelical movement, which flourished in the 1920's and early 30's, led by a one-time Lutheran minister, Dr. Frank Buchman. The Oxford Groups of that day threw heavy emphasis on personal work, one member with another. AA's Twelfth Step had its origin in that vital practice.

The moral backbone of the "OG" was absolute honesty, absolute purity, absolute unselfishness and absolute love. They also practiced a type of confession, which they called "sharing"; the making of amends for harms done they called "restitution." They believed deeply in their "quiet time," a meditation practiced by groups and individuals alike, in which the guidance of God was sought for every detail of living, great or small.

These basic ideas were not new; they could have been found elsewhere. But the saving thing for us first alcoholics who contacted the Oxford Groupers was that they laid great stress on these particular principles. And fortunate for us was the fact that the Groupers took special pains not to interfere with one's personal religious views. Their society, like ours later on, saw the need to be strictly non-denominational.

In the late summer of 1934, my well-loved alcoholic friend and schoolmate "Ebbie"³ had fallen in with these good folks and had promptly sobered up. Being an alcoholic, and rather on the obstinate side, he hadn't been able to "buy" all the Oxford Group ideas and attitudes. Nevertheless, he was moved by their deep sincerity and felt mighty grateful for the fact that their ministrations had, for the time being, lifted his obsession to drink.

When he arrived in New York in the late fall of 1934, Ebbie thought at once of me. On a bleak November day he rang up. Soon he was looking at me across our kitchen table at 182 Clinton Street, Brooklyn, New York. As I remember that conversation, he constantly used phrases like these: "I found I couldn't run my own life;" "I had to get honest with myself and somebody else;" "I had to make restitution for the damage I had done;" "I had to pray to God for guidance and strength, even though I wasn't sure there was any God;" "And after I'd tried hard to do these things I found that my craving for alcohol left."

Then over and over Ebbie would say something like this: "Bill, it isn't a bit like being on the water wagon. You don't fight the desire to drink -- you get released from it. I never had such a feeling before."

Such was the sum of what Ebbie had extracted from his Oxford Group friends and had transmitted to me that day. While these simple ideas were not new, they certainly hit me like tons of brick. Today we understand just why that was one alcoholic was talking to another as no one else can.

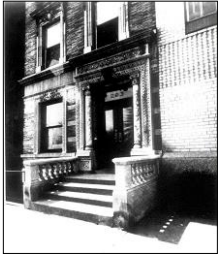
¹ This article is preserved in the book *Language of the Heart*, starting at page 195. © AA Grapevine Inc.

² Founded by Frank Buchman and originally named the *First Century Christian Fellowship* - in 1938 they took the name *Moral Rearmament*.

³ His name was usually spelled "Ebbby." His actual first name was Edwin.

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Dr. Silkworth (the 2nd influence)



Towns
Hospital

Two or three weeks later, December 11th to be exact, I staggered into the Charles B. Towns hospital, that famous drying-out emporium on Central Park West, New York City. I'd been there before,⁴ so I knew and already loved the doctor in charge -- Dr. Silkworth. It was he who was soon to contribute a very great idea without which AA could never have succeeded. For years he had been proclaiming alcoholism an illness⁵, an obsession of the mind coupled with an allergy of the body. By now I knew this meant me. I also understood what a fatal combination these twin ogres could be.

Of course, I'd once hoped to be among the small percentage of victims who now and then escape their vengeance. But this outside hope was now gone. I was about to hit bottom. That verdict of science -- the obsession that condemned me to drink and the allergy that condemned me to die -- was about to do the trick. That's where the medical science, personified by this benign little doctor, began to fit it in. Held in the hands of one alcoholic talking to the next, this double-edged truth was a sledgehammer which could shatter the tough alcoholic's ego at depth and lay him wide open to the grace of God.

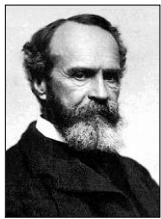
In my case it was of course Dr. Silkworth who swung the sledge while my friend Ebbie carried to me the spiritual principles and the grace which brought on my sudden spiritual awakening at the hospital three days later [Dec. 14, 1934].



Dr Silkworth

I immediately knew that I was a free man. And with this astonishing experience came a feeling of wonderful certainty that great numbers of alcoholics might one day enjoy the priceless gift which had been bestowed upon me.

William James (the 3rd influence)



William
James

At this point a third stream of influence entered my life through the pages of William James' book, "Varieties of Religious Experience."

Somebody⁶ had brought it to my hospital room.

Following my sudden experience, Dr. Silkworth had taken great pains to convince me that I was not hallucinated.⁷ But William James did even more. Not only, he said, could spiritual experiences make people saner, they could transform men and women so that they could do, feel and believe what had hitherto been impossible to them. It mattered little whether these awakenings were sudden or gradual, their variety could be almost infinite.

But the biggest payoff of that noted book was this: in most of the cases described, those who had been transformed were hopeless people. In some controlling area of their lives they had met absolute defeat. Well, that was me all right. In complete defeat, with no hope or faith whatever, I had made an appeal to a Higher Power. I had taken Step One of today's AA program - "admitted we were powerless over alcohol, that our lives had become unmanageable." I'd also taken Step Three - "made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to God as we understood him." Thus was I set free. It was just as simple, yet just as mysterious, as that.

These realizations were so exciting that I instantly joined up with the Oxford Groups. But to their consternation I insisted on devoting myself exclusively to drunks. This was disturbing to the OG's on two counts.

Firstly, they wanted to help save the whole world.

Secondly, their luck with drunks had been poor.

⁴ This was Bill's fourth admission to Towns hospital. On his previous admission Dr. Silkworth advised Lois that Bill's situation looked hopeless.

⁵ Neither Dr. Silkworth nor Bill W called alcoholism a "disease". E. M. Jellinek was the proponent of that concept.

⁶ It is not known for sure whether the "someone" was Ebby T. or Rowland H.

⁷ Although attributed to Dr Carl Jung and Rowland H, Dr. Silkworth was also a strong advocate of a spiritual experience being vital to recovery.

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Just as I joined, they had been working over a batch of alcoholics who had proved disappointing indeed. One of them, it was rumored, had flippantly cast his shoe through a valuable stained glass window of an Episcopal church across the alley from OG headquarters. Neither did they take kindly to my repeated declaration that it shouldn't take long to sober up all the drunks in the world. They rightly declared that my conceit was still immense.

The Medical Side of Our Malady

After some six months of violent exertion with scores of alcoholics, which I found at a nearby mission⁸ and Towns Hospital, it began to look like the Groupers were right. I hadn't sobered up anybody.

In Brooklyn, we always had a houseful of drinkers living with us, sometimes as many as five.⁹ My valiant wife, Lois, once arrived home from work to find three of them fairly tight. They were whaling each other with two-by-fours. Though events like these slowed me down somewhat, the persistent conviction that a way to sobriety could be found never seemed to leave me. There was, though, one bright spot. My sponsor, Ebbie, still clung precariously to his new-found sobriety.

What was the reason for all these fiascoes? If Ebbie and I could achieve sobriety, why couldn't all the rest find it too? Some of those we'd worked on certainly wanted to get well. We speculated day and night, why nothing much had happened to them. Maybe they couldn't stand the spiritual pace of the Oxford Group's four absolutes of honesty, purity, unselfishness, and love. In fact, some of the alcoholics declared that this was the trouble. The aggressive pressure upon them to get good overnight would make them fly high as geese for a few weeks and then flop dismally.



121 Clinton St.
Brooklyn, NY

They complained, too, about another form of coercion -- something the Oxford Groupers called "guidance for others." A "team" composed of non-alcoholic Groupers would sit down with an alcoholic and after a "quiet time" would come up with precise instructions as to how the alcoholic should run his own life. As grateful as we were to our OG friends, this was sometimes tough to take. It obviously had something to do with the wholesale skidding that went on.

But this wasn't the entire reason for failure. After months, I saw the trouble was mainly in me. I had become very aggressive, very cocksure. I talked a lot about my sudden spiritual experience, as though it was something very special. I had been playing the double role of teacher and preacher. In my exhortations, I'd forgotten all about the medical side of our malady, and that need for deflation at depth so emphasized by William James had been neglected.

We weren't using that medical sledgehammer that Dr. Silkworth had so providentially given us.

Finally, one day, Dr. Silkworth took me back down to my right size. Said he, "Bill, why don't you quit talking so much about that bright light experience of yours, it sounds too crazy. Though I'm convinced that nothing but better morals will make alcoholics really well, I do think you have got the cart before the horse. The point is that alcoholics won't buy all this moral exhortation until they convince themselves that they must.

If I were you, I'd go after them on the medical basis first. While it has never done any good for me to tell them how fatal their malady is, it might be a very different story if you, a formerly hopeless alcoholic, gave them the bad news. Because of this identification you naturally have with alcoholics, you might be able to penetrate where I can't. Give them the medical business first, and give it to them hard. This might soften them up so they will accept the principles that will really get them well."

⁸ This was the Calvary Mission where Ebby received help from Rowland H in sobering up. Bill had visited the Mission to examine the Oxford Group after Ebby had been to his home several times. Prior to Bill entering Towns Hospital, he arrived at the Mission drunk and was almost ejected from the services for his constant interruptions wanting to speak. Ebby arrived and fed Bill a plate of beans. Bill later drunkenly testified before the penitents.

⁹ Sadly, two of these residents would later commit suicide. One is mentioned in the Big Book in *Bill's Story*. His name was Bill C. The other was Florence R. the author of the Big Book story *A Feminine Victory*.

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Akron, Ohio

Shortly after this history-making conversation, I found myself in Akron, Ohio, on a business venture, which promptly collapsed. Alone in the town, I was scared to death of getting drunk. I was no longer a teacher or a preacher; I was an alcoholic who knew that he needed another alcoholic as much as that one could possibly need me.



Dr. Bob

Driven by that urge, I was soon face to face with Dr. Bob. It was at once evident that Dr. Bob knew more of the spiritual things than I did. He also had been in touch with the Oxford Groupers at Akron. But somehow he simply couldn't get sober. Following Dr. Silkworth's advice, I used the medical sledgehammer. I told him what alcoholism was and just how fatal it could be.

Apparently, this did something to Dr. Bob. On June 10, 1935¹⁰, he sobered up, never to drink again. When, in 1939, Dr. Bob's story first appeared in the book, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, he put one paragraph of it in italics. Speaking of me, he said: *"Of far more importance was the fact that he was the first living human with whom I had ever talked, who knew what he was talking about in regard to alcoholism from actual experience."*¹¹

Missing Link

Dr. Silkworth had indeed supplied us the missing link without which the chain of principles now forged into our Twelve Steps could never have been complete. Then and there, the spark that was to become Alcoholics Anonymous had been struck. During the next three years after Dr. Bob's recovery, our growing groups at Akron, New York and Cleveland¹² 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 OG 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.

¹⁰ Dr. Bob's sobriety date is more likely June 17 rather than June 10, 1935. The AMA Convention in Atlantic City, NJ, which centered around Dr. Bob's last multi-day binge, was held from Monday to Friday, June 10 to 14, 1935 (confirmed with AMA Archives in Chicago, IL).

¹¹ Dr. Bob also later stated that an important point Bill brought to him was the principle of service to others.

¹² Cleveland members remained allied with Akron until shortly after the Big Book was published.

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Having arrived at Chapter Five, it seemed high time to state what our program really was. I remember running over in my mind the word-of-mouth phrases then in current use. Jotting these down, they added up to the six named above. Then came the idea that our program ought to be more accurately and clearly stated.

Distant readers would have to have precise set of principles. Knowing the alcoholic's ability to rationalize, something airtight would have to be written. We couldn't let the reader wiggle out anywhere. Besides, a more complete statement would help in the chapters to come where we would need to show exactly how the recovery program ought to be worked.

Half an Hour

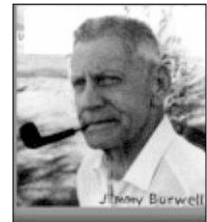
At length I began to write on a cheap yellow tablet. I split the word-of-mouth program up into smaller pieces, meanwhile enlarging its scope considerably. Uninspired as I felt, I was surprised that in a short time, perhaps half an hour, I had set down certain principles which, on being counted, turned out to be twelve in number. And for some unaccountable reason, I had moved the idea of God into the Second Step, right up front. Besides, I had named God very liberally throughout the other steps. In one of the steps, I had even suggested that the newcomer get down on his knees.

When this document was shown to our New York meeting, the protests were many and loud. Our agnostic friends didn't go at all for the idea of kneeling. Others said we were talking altogether too much about God. And anyhow, why should there be twelve steps when we had done fine on six? Let's keep it simple, they said.



Hank P.

This sort of heated discussion went on for days and nights. But out of it all there came a ten-strike for Alcoholics Anonymous. Our agnostic contingent, spearheaded by Hank P and Jim B, finally convinced us that we must make it easier for people like themselves by using such terms as "a Higher Power" or "God as we understand Him!"



Jim B.

Those expressions, as we so well know today, have proved lifesavers for many an alcoholic. They have enabled thousands of us to make a beginning where none could have been made had we left the steps just as I originally wrote them. Happily, for us there were no other changes in the original draft and the number of steps stood at twelve.

Little did we then guess that our Twelve Steps would soon be widely approved by clergymen of all denominations and even by our latter-day friends, the psychiatrists.

This little fragment of history ought to convince the most skeptical that nobody invented Alcoholics Anonymous.

It just grew -- by the grace of God.

December 1938

Bill W drafted the Twelve Steps in December 1938 (only a few weeks prior to the January 1939 printing of the multilith manuscript for *Alcoholics Anonymous* – our “Big Book”). He was in the process of writing Chapter 5 *How It Works*. At this time, there were two Groups: Akron, OH and New York. Membership was around 100 and there was approximately four and a half years of collective trial-and-error Fellowship experience in sobering up drunks.

Bill recalled that:¹³ *I was anything but in a spiritual mood on the night when the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous were written. I was sore and tired clear through. I lay in bed at 182 Clinton Street with pencil in hand and with a tablet of scratch paper on my knee. I could not get my mind on the job; much less put my heart in it. But here was one of those things that had to be done. Slowly my mind came into some kind of focus.*

¹³ AA Comes of Age, page 160

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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".

In April 1953, a member asked Bill W to write down what he remembered as the original Six Steps. Bill's note is shown opposite.

Compare it with the version above that was defined in *AA Comes of Age*, and the version below by Bill in an April 1958 talk to the NYC Medical Society on Alcoholism.¹⁴ This may help illustrate some of the ways variances can enter into a "word-of-mouth" program.

In describing the visit made by Ebby T., Bill stated:

Next Ebby enumerated the principles he had learned from the Oxford Group. In substance here they are as my friend applied them to himself in 1934:

1. Ebby admitted that he was powerless to manage his own life.
2. He became honest with himself as never before; made an "examination of conscience."
3. He made a rigorous confession of his personal defects and thus quit living alone with his problems.
4. He surveyed his distorted relations with other people, visiting them to make what amends he could.
5. By meditation, he sought God's direction for his life and the help to practice these principles of conduct at all times.

For God -
1. Admitted hopeless
2. Got honest with self
3. Got honest with another
4. Made amends
5. Helped other without demand
6. Prayed to God as you understand him.
Ever
Bill W.
April 1953
Original 6 Steps

AA's group number one, in Akron, OH was more closely aligned with the Oxford Group movement and stayed a part of the OG until 1939 (the NY group left the Oxford Group in 1937).

In his Big Book story, *He Sold Himself Short*, Earl T (pioneer AA in Chicago)¹⁵ records a version of the program as was used in Akron at that time. Dr. Bob was his sponsor. The description of the program by Earl varies from the version used in New York and is a much more orthodox description of the Oxford Group's influence:

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

Although semantic variances exist, the substance of the principles is the same.

Sometimes reference is made to the "Six Steps of the Oxford Group". This is not accurate. The Oxford Group did not have any Steps. The alcoholic members of both the Akron and New York groups (sometimes called the "alcoholic squad") developed the "word-of-mouth" versions of the early Six Steps.

¹⁴ Three Talks to Medical Societies by Bill W co-founder of AA (AAWS pamphlet P-6).

¹⁵ Earl T later had a very prominent role in the development of the long and short form of the Twelve Traditions and served as a board Trustee.

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Key principles of the Oxford Group consisted of:

- a. The *four absolutes* of honesty, unselfishness, purity and love.
- b. The *five C's*: confidence, confession, conviction, conversion and continuance.
- c. The *five procedures*: 1. Give in to God, 2. Listen to God's direction, 3. Check guidance, 4. Restitution and 5. Sharing - for witness and confession.

Many practices and principles from the Oxford Group had a strong influence on AA practices today. For example, one of the sayings of the Oxford Group was "In order to keep it you have to give it away."

December 1938: the First Draft of the Twelve Steps

Bill wrote: *This particular evening, as my mind ran over these developments, it seemed to me that the program was still not definitive enough. It might be a long time before readers 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.*¹⁶

Bill wrote the first draft of the Twelve Steps, in December 1938. The written draft has been lost. He wrote them while lying in bed in his house at 182 Clinton St., Brooklyn, NY. Below is what he remembers he wrote:¹⁷

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 ready that God remove all these defects of character.
7. Humbly on our knees asked Him to remove these shortcomings – holding back nothing.
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 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.

January 1939: the Multilith Manuscript of the Big Book¹⁸

The Big Book text and personal stories were completed and edited by January 1939. Prior to going to the printers, it was decided to distribute 400 hundred copies of a multilith manuscript to physicians, members of the clergy and members of the Fellowship for final review and comments.

The wording of the Twelve Steps as they appeared in the multilith manuscript was:

1. 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 will and our lives over to the care and direction of God as we understood Him.
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 ready 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 list of all persons we had harmed and became willing to make complete amends to them all.

¹⁶ AA Comes of Age, page 161

¹⁷ Pass It On, page 198

¹⁸ Copy of the manuscript obtained from Akron, OH Archives

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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 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.

It is well documented in AA literature that there was much (sometimes very heated) discussion among members on the wording of the Twelve Steps from their very inception. There were those members who wanted strong emphasis on God. There were those who did not (the latter were principally in New York).

Arguments over the wording remained intense right up to the end but the power of the group conscience emerged. One camp in New York, led by avowed atheists Hank P¹⁹ and Jim B, wanted “less God”. (Hank P’s Big Book story is *The Unbeliever*, Jim B’s Big Book story is *A Vicious Cycle*).

The other camp in New York, led by Fitz M, wanted “more God” (Fitz M’s Big Book story is *Our Southern Friend*). The members in Akron, OH more orthodox in the principles of the Oxford Group liked the emphasis on God. This emphasis still shows today in a number of pamphlets that originated in the mid-west (Akron and Cleveland).

Some members did not want to get on their knees in the proposed Seventh Step.

Others still wanted to stay with six Steps instead of having twelve.

Non-alcoholic friends who reviewed the multilith manuscript recommended that the tone of the book be changed from “directions” to “suggestions.” All these ideas came together to help produce what the Twelve Steps are today – with one exception.

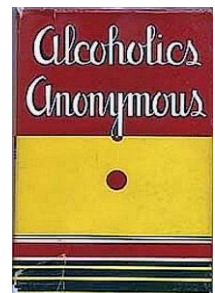
Bill W felt that the most profound change that came from the group conscience of the members was the addition of the terms “as we understood Him” and “Power greater than ourselves” to qualify that each member defined their own personal understanding of God.

New York member Jim B, is credited with coming up with the term “God as we understood Him.” Jim B later went on to help found AA in Philadelphia and Baltimore and helped Fitz M start AA in Washington, DC.

April 1939: the First Edition of the Big Book

The first printing of the first edition of the Big Book had the following version of the Twelve Steps:

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol – that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.
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 ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.
8. Made a 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 conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.
12. Having had a spiritual experience as result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.



¹⁹ Hank P played a prominent role in getting the Big Book published. He also wrote all but the first paragraph of Chapter 10, *To Employers*.

Two Final Changes - Step Twelve and an Appendix

The wording of Step Twelve was changed twice in the first and second editions of the Big Book.

Having had a spiritual experience as result of these steps ...- was changed to

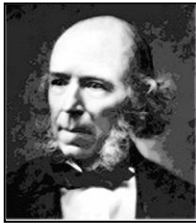
Having had a spiritual awakening as result of those steps ...- in the 2nd printing of the 1st edition, then to

Having had a spiritual awakening as result of these steps ...- in the 2nd printing of the 2nd edition (1956)

In the 2nd printing of the 1st edition Big Book, an appendix was added to discuss the meaning of *Spiritual Experience*.

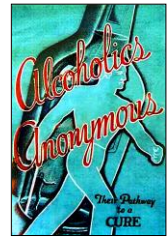
The Appendix explained that spiritual experiences are frequently of the educational variety and did not have to constitute the type of profound and sudden experience Bill had in Towns Hospital in December 1934.

Today the *Spiritual Experience* appendix contains an ending quotation attributed to Herbert Spencer:²⁰



Herbert Spencer

The Spencer quotation was not part of the initial version of the *Spiritual Experience* appendix printed in the first edition 2nd printing of the Big Book. The quotation was originally the opening part of a story by member Ray C, titled *An Artist's Concept*. Ray's story appeared in the first edition but was not carried forward into the second edition. Ray was also the designer of the "circus color" dust jacket of the first edition Big Book. There were two choices for dust jackets the one that was rejected phrased our program as a "cure."



Alternate
Dust Jacket

²⁰ It is possible that the attribution to Spencer is not valid. No written work by Spencer can be found that contains the quotation. Widely studied in academia, Spencer is noted for the saying "survival of the fittest."