

# Responsibility Is Our Theme

In AA's Thirtieth Year

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MARKING AA's thirtieth year we shall, in this month of July, 1965, hold our International Convention at Toronto. It is most fitting that the chosen keynote for this gala occasion will be "AA's Responsibility." There we shall review the three decades of AA life that are now history. Stirred by gratitude beyond expression, we shall give thanks to God whose Grace has made it possible for us to achieve the quality of responsibility, individual and collective, that has brought our Fellowship into its present state of well-being and worldwide reach.

Looking back through the years, we shall be unable to conceive more than a mere fraction of what God has wrought among us. None will be able to imagine the sum of the suffering that was once ours, or the misery borne by those near and dear. Who will really understand the inner nature of our transforming spiritual experiences, those gifts of God, that opened to us a new world of being and doing and living? Indeed our blessings have been quite beyond any human comprehension.

At our international gathering, we shall look into new faces. Many from afar will be heard to speak in other tongues. We shall see that the sun never sets upon AA's Fellowship, that 350,000 of us have now recovered from our malady; that we have everywhere begun to transcend those formidable barriers of race, creed and nationality. This assurance that so many of us have been able to meet our responsibilities for sobriety and for growth and effectiveness in the troubled world where we live, will surely fill us with the deepest joy and satisfaction. But as a people who have nearly always learned the hard way, we shall certainly not congratulate ourselves. We shall perceive these assets to be God's gifts, which have been in part matched by an increasing willingness on our part to find and do His will for us.

Then we shall remember, too, how the pains of our illness literally drove us to what for most of us was the first responsible act of years--that of joining AA. Alcoholism had literally lashed us to such a point of collapse that we became willing to do whatever was necessary to get well; it was a matter of life or death.

Thus propelled we finally did join the AA Fellowship and there had our first glimpse of its quite new world of understanding and loving concern. Soon we took a look at AA's Twelve Steps for recovery but many of us promptly forgot ten of them, as perhaps not needed. We bought only the concept that we were alcoholics; that attendance at meetings and a helping hand to the newcomers would be sufficient to solve the booze problem, and probably all problems. We looked with approval on that dear old cliché which says that "Drinking is but a good man's fault." Once off the grog, life should be as pleasant as eating cherries. By happily warming our hands at the AA fire, all seemed well.

But by degrees certain dissatisfactions set in, even with our own group: it was not as wonderful as we had first supposed. There was, perhaps, some rock-throwing at a scandal, or a distressing row over who would become the group's next chairman. There were people we simply did not like, and the ones we did admire failed to give us the attention we thought we deserved. At home we were also shocked. After the pink cloud had departed from the household, things seemed as bad as ever. The old wounds

weren't healing at all. Though impressed with our sobriety, the bank nevertheless asked when were we going to pay up. Our boss likewise demanded in firm tones that we "get with it."

So each of us looked up his sponsor and regaled him with these woes. Our resentments, anxieties and depressions were definitely caused, we claimed, by our unfortunate circumstances and by the inconsiderate behavior of other people. To our consternation, our sponsors didn't seem impressed either. They had just grinned and said, "Why don't we sit down and take a hard look at all of AA's Twelve Steps? Maybe you have been missing a lot--in fact, nearly everything."

Then we began to take our own inventories, rather than the other fellow's. Getting into the swing of self-examination, we finally began to discover our real responsibilities toward ourselves and toward those around us. Though a tough assignment, it did by degrees get easier. We began to make restitution to those we had harmed, grudgingly at first, and then more willingly. Little by little, we found that all progress, material or spiritual, consisted of finding out what our responsibilities actually were and then proceeding to do something about them. These activities began to pay off. We found that we didn't always have to be *driven* by our own discomforts as, more willingly, we picked up the burdens of living and growing.

Then, most surprisingly, we discovered that full acceptance and action upon any clear-cut responsibility almost invariably made for true happiness and peace of mind. Moreover these durable satisfactions were redoubled when we realized that our now better quality of willingness made it possible in meditation to find God's will. At last we discovered that we joyfully wanted to live responsibly.

Such has been the course of spiritual unfoldment in AA; our Pilgrim's Progress, if you like.

As it has been with each AA member, so it has been with each group, and with AA as a whole. I have often seen our Society timid and fearful, angry and prideful, apathetic and indifferent. But I have also seen these negatives fade, as the lessons of experience were learned and gladly applied.

Let us recall a few instances:

In the early days we were so timid that we were sure AA should be a secret society. We shunned publicity because we still labored under the stigma of alcoholism--also because we might be overwhelmed by an influx of so-called undesirable people. We have often been angered at criticism from within, and from the outside world. We have generally been far better at dishing out criticism than taking it. Sometimes we have boasted of AA as the know-all and do-all of alcoholism, so alienating our friends. Quite understanding the perils of accumulated wealth, we have converted this fear into an alibi for failing to meet our trivial group, Intergroup and World Service expenses--those vital arms of service so indispensable to carrying AA's message into the world about us. By poor sponsorship we have sometimes failed the needs of newly arrived sufferers.

Then at certain great turning points of our history, we have, in anger or sheer indifference, backed away from what should have been clearly visible responsibilities. Disastrous results were on a few occasions barely averted. Old-timers can recall that the book *Alcoholics Anonymous* might never have been printed because some avowed that we did not need it, while others shrank from the risks of preparing that invaluable text. There was a great outcry against formation of the General Service Conference of Alcoholics Anonymous, that indispensable body of Delegates which today links our Society with the AA Trustees of our World Services. There was almost no belief that such a linkage could be effectively

forged; even an attempt at such a project would ruin us, many thought. In consequence, this utterly vital undertaking nearly fell by the wayside from the sheer burden of indifference, heavy attack and little faith.

Yet, in God's time, our spiritual assets have invariably come to exceed even such large liabilities. AA recovery goes forward on a large scale. Practice of AA's Twelve Traditions has amazingly cemented our unity. Our Intergroup Associations and our World Service Conference have made possible a wide spreading of our message, at home and abroad. Our pains and our necessities first called us reluctantly to responsibility. But in the latter years, a joyous willingness and a confident faith have more and more permeated all the affairs of our Fellowship.

Despite this happy transcendence of the difficulties of yesterday and of today, we nevertheless deeply realize that our negative traits are still with us, and always will be. Therefore our constant responsibility should be that of taking a fearless inventory of our defects as we go along, the better to undertake their mending.

At Toronto, we shall therefore be asking ourselves, "What sort of heritage are we leaving, for the use of all those future generations that will people our Society? Is this heritage as good as we can make it? While there is yet time, what can we still do that may multiply our assets and decrease our liabilities?"

In so surveying our Society of today, I hope that I shall not be regarded as the wise and righteous elder who would admonish and exhort his fellows. If I inventory AA's shortcomings, be also assured that I am also taking stock of my own. I know that my errors of yesterday still have their effect; that my shortcomings of today may likewise affect our future. So it is, with each and all of us.

Therefore, let us together take a look at the more important areas in the life of our Fellowship where the call for improvement will always be insistent.

Our first concern should be with those sufferers that we are still unable to reach. Let's first humbly realize that throughout the world of today there are 20,000,000 alcoholics, 5,000,000 of these being in the United States alone. Of course, these vast numbers are in all stages of sickness. Some cannot be reached because they are not hurt enough, others because they are hurt too much. Many sufferers have mental and emotional complications that seem to foreclose their chances. Yet it would be conservative to estimate that at any particular time there are 4,000,000 alcoholics in the world who are able, ready and willing to get well--if only they knew how! Clearly, all these sufferers need to know what alcoholism is and to recognize that they are so afflicted. Being thus readied, they need to be brought within our reach by every resource of public information and word of mouth that will tell them exactly what steps they can take in finding the road to recovery. When we remember that in the thirty years of AA's existence, we have reached less than ten per cent of those who might have been willing to approach us, we begin to get an idea of the immensity of our task, and of the responsibilities with which we will always be confronted.

These facts point straight to our next responsibility: that of intelligently and lovingly sponsoring each man and woman who comes among us asking help. The care and concern with which we individually and collectively do this can make all the difference. Besides, this is the greatest expression of gratitude that we can give for what we ourselves have received. Without much doubt, a million alcoholics have approached AA during the last thirty years. We can soberly ask ourselves what became of the 600,000 who did not stay. How much and how often did we fail all these?

In no circumstances should we feel that Alcoholics Anonymous is the know-all and do-all of alcoholism. We have in the United States and Canada alone perhaps one hundred agencies engaged in research, alcohol education and rehabilitation. Research has already come up with significant and helpful findings, and can still do far more. Those engaged in education are carrying the message that alcoholism is a definite illness and that something can be done about it. All these workers can make our efforts more effective. It is a statistical fact that rehabilitation agencies in the U.S. and Canada treat something like 50,000 alcoholics annually. True, their approach is often different from our own. But what does that matter, when the greater part of them are, or could become, entirely willing to cooperate with AA? Too often, I think, we have deprecated and even derided these projects of our friends just because we do not always see eye to eye with them. We should very seriously ask ourselves how many alcoholics have gone on drinking simply because we have failed to cooperate in good spirit with these many agencies--whether they be good, bad or indifferent. No alcoholic should go mad or die merely because he did not come straight to AA at the beginning.

Now let's look at the matter of criticism--criticism of AA that is made in the world about us. For years AA has been amazingly exempt from those barbs which society pitches at all endeavors of any consequence, whether they be social, medical, religious or political. So we register surprise, shock and anger when people find fault with AA. We are apt to be disturbed to such an extent that we cannot benefit by constructive criticism. Nor are we able to be good-natured about criticism which isn't so good. While these attitudes are not general among us, it is nevertheless a fact that many AAs do so react when they are hit where they live. Surely this sort of resentment makes no friends and achieves no constructive purpose. Certainly this is an area in which we can improve.

Alcoholics Anonymous is not a religion, nor is it a medical treatment, nor does it profess expertise in respect of unconscious motivations for behavior. These are facts all too often overlooked. Here and there we hear our members proclaiming AA as the great new religion. Except for strictly sobering-up operations, we are also apt to underrate medical contributions to our welfare. The fact that psychiatry does not yet sober up many alcoholics sometimes inclines us to think in unflattering terms of that profession. Again we are forgetting that to religion and to the medical arts we owe our very existence. In its cardinal principles and attitudes AA has made great use of all of these resources. It is chiefly our friends who first gave us the principles and attitudes that enable us to live and to move today. Therefore, the credit of all these vital contributors should stand aces high among us. Certainly we drunks did put AA together, but all of its basic components were supplied by others. Here, especially, our maxim should be "Let's be friendly with our friends."

It is an historical fact that practically all groupings of men and women tend to become more dogmatic; their beliefs and practices harden and sometimes freeze. This is a natural and almost inevitable process. All people must, of course, rally to the call of their convictions, and we of AA are no exception. Moreover, all people should have the right to voice their convictions. This is good principle and good dogma. But dogma also has its liabilities. Simply because we have convictions that work well for us, it becomes very easy to assume that we have all the truth. Whenever this brand of arrogance develops, we are certain to become aggressive; we *demand* agreement with us; we play God. This isn't good dogma; it's very bad dogma. It could be especially destructive for us of AA to indulge in this sort of thing.

Newcomers are approaching AA at the rate of tens of thousands yearly. They represent almost every belief and attitude imaginable. We have atheists and agnostics. We have people of nearly every race, culture and religion. In AA we are supposed to be bound together in the kinship of a common suffering.

Consequently, the full individual liberty to practice any creed or principle or therapy whatever should be a first consideration for us all. Let us not, therefore, pressure anyone with our individual or even our collective views. Let us instead accord each other the respect and love that is due to every human being as he tries to make his way toward the light. Let us always try to be inclusive rather than exclusive; let us remember that each alcoholic among us is a member of AA, so long as he or she so declares.

Some of our more obvious perils will always attach to money, to controversies within AA, and to the ever-present temptation to scramble within AA and outside it for distinction, prestige and even power. The world around us is today shattered by these untoward forces. As drinkers we have been more subject to these forms of destruction than most other people. Here, thank God, we do have, and I trust we shall continue to have, a tremendous amount of awareness of our responsibilities for improvement.

However, the fear of these forces should not deceive us into absurd rationalizations. In the fear of accumulated wealth and bureaucracy, we should not discover an alibi for failure to pay AA's legitimate service expenses. For fear of controversy, our leadership should not go timid when lively debate and forthright action is a necessity. And for fear of accumulating prestige and power, we should never fail to endow our trusted leaders with proper authority to act for us.

Let us never fear needed change. Certainly we have to discriminate between changes for worse and changes for better. But once a need becomes clearly apparent in an individual, a group, or in AA as a whole, it has long since been found out that we cannot stand still and look the other way. The essence of all growth is a willingness to change for the better and then an unremitting willingness to shoulder whatever the responsibility.

In conclusion, it is only fair to say that we of AA have been able in most areas of our lives together to make substantial gains in both our willingness and our capability for the acceptance and discharge of responsibility, something that our great gathering in Toronto will symbolize and demonstrate.

As we look into the future, we clearly see that an ever greater willingness will certainly be the key to that progress which God intends for us as we move toward His appointed destiny.

Bill W.