

Sober For Thirty Years

One of the earliest members of the first New York AA group; Jim Burwell was also its first "self-proclaimed atheist."

As noted in my story, "The Vicious Cycle," in the Big Book, I came into the Fellowship in New York in January 1938. At that time AA was just leaving the Oxford Group. There was one closed discussion meeting a week, at Bill's home in Brooklyn, — attendance six or eight men, with only three members who had been sober more than one year: Bill, Hank, and Fritz. This is about all that had been accomplished in the four years with the New York Oxford Group.

During those early meetings at Bill's, they were flying blind, with no creed or procedure to guide them, though they did use quite a few of the Oxford sayings and the Oxford Absolutes. Since both Bill and Dr. Bob had had almost-overnight experiences, it was taken for granted that all who followed would have the same sort of experience. So the early meetings were quite religious, in both New York and Akron. There was always a Bible on hand, and the concept of God was all biblical.

Into this fairly peaceful picture came I, their first self-proclaimed atheist, completely against all religions and conventions. I was the captain of my own ship. (The only trouble was, my ship was completely disabled and rudderless.) So naturally I started fighting nearly all the things Bill and the others stood for, especially religion, the "God bit." But I did want to stay sober, and I did love the understanding Fellowship. So I became quite a problem to that early group, with my constant haranguing against all spiritual angles.

All of a sudden, the group became really worried. Here I had stayed sober five whole months while fighting everything the others stood for. I was now number four in "seniority." I found out later they had a prayer meeting on "what to do with Jim." The consensus seemed to have been that they hoped I would either leave town or get drunk.

That prayer must have been right on target, for I was suddenly taken drunk on a sales trip. This became the shock and the bottom I needed. At this time I was selling auto polish to jobbers for a company that Bill and Hank were sponsoring, and I was doing pretty well, too. But despite this, I was tired and completely isolated there in Boston. My fellow alcoholics really put the pressure on as I sobered up after four days of no relief, and for the first time I admitted I couldn't stay sober alone. My closed mind opened a bit.

Those folks back in New York, the folks who believed, had stayed sober. And I hadn't. Since this episode I don't think I have ever argued with anyone else's beliefs.

Who am I to say?

I finally crawled back to New York and was soon back into the fold. About this time, Bill and Hank were just beginning to write the AA Big Book. I do feel sure my experience was not in vain, for "God" was broadened to cover all types and creeds: "God as we understood Him."

I feel my spiritual growth over these past thirty years has been very gradual and steady. I have no desire to "graduate" from AA. I try to keep my memories green by staying active in AA — a couple of meetings weekly.

For the new agnostic or atheist just coming in, I will try to give very briefly my milestones in recovery.

1. The first power I found greater than myself was John Barleycorn.
2. The AA Fellowship became my Higher Power for the first two years.
3. Gradually, I came to believe that God and Good were synonymous and were found in all of us.
4. And I found that by meditating and trying to tune in on my better self for guidance and answers, I became more comfortable and steady.

Jim B

A.A. Grapevine, May 1968.