

Mr. X and Alcoholics Anonymous

By Rev. Dilworth Lupton

This was a sermon preached on November 26, 1939 by Dilworth Lupton at the First Unitarian Church (Universalist - Unitarian), Euclid at East 82nd Street, Cleveland, Ohio.

Mr. X was Clarence H. S. This was turned into one of the first pamphlets concerning A.A. and was used by A.A. members in Cleveland in the late 1930's and early 1940's.

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My friend, Mr. X, is a young man with a family. For five years, to use his own words, Mr. X did not "draw a sober breath." His over-patient wife was about to sue him for divorce. Now for over two years, he has not had a single drink. He maintains that his "cure" is due to the efforts of a group of "ex-drunks" (their own term) who call themselves Alcoholics Anonymous.

I have had several opportunities to meet members of Alcoholics Anonymous. Not long ago I accepted an invitation from Mr. X to attend one of their meetings, held in a private home. They are simple affairs: First a brief prayer, then four or five give public testimony to their experiences, refreshments are served, and there is general fellowship. They call themselves religious, but I find no sign of excessive piety, sensationalism, or fanaticism. Furthermore they have a sense of humor, somewhat of a rarity in religious circles. They are not trying to make other people or the country into "dries." They merely say, "We are the type that can't take it, and we have found a way of leaving it alone."

In my own home recently nine members of this group submitted themselves to questions for four hours from a prominent physician and a psychiatrist. Both were impressed by the trim appearance, sincerity, manliness of the ex-victims, and by the seeming efficacy of their methods. As the physician said to me privately, "These boys have got something!"

Thank God someone is throwing light on the problem of the chronic alcoholic, a problem that has perplexed men for centuries. There may be a million victims in the United States. Chronic alcoholism is not a vice but a disease. Its victims know that the habit is exceedingly harmful - as one of them graphically expressed it to me, "I was staring into a pine box" - but they are driven toward drink by an uncontrollable desire, by what psychologists call a compulsive psychosis.

Complete abstinence appears the only way out, but except in rare cases that has been impossible of attainment. Religion, psychiatry, and medicine have been tried, but with only sporadic success. The members of Alcoholics Anonymous, however, appear to have found an answer, for they claim that at least fifty per cent of those they interest have stopped drinking completely.

From conversations with my friend, Mr. X, and with members of the Cleveland group, I am convinced that this success comes through the application of four religious principles that are as old as the Ten Commandments.

1. The principle of spiritual dependence

Mr. X, who had been drinking excessively for years, found that he couldn't summon enough will power to stop even for a single day. Finally in desperation he consented to a week of hospital treatment. During this time he received frequent visits from members of Alcoholics Anonymous. They told him that he must stop trying to use his will and trust in a Power greater than himself. Such trust had saved them from the abyss and could save him. Believe or perish! Mr. X chose to believe. Within a few days he lost all desire for alcohol.

Trust in God seems to be the heart of the whole movement. Religion must be more than a mere set of beliefs; it must be a profound inner experience, faith in a Presence to which one may go for strength in time of weakness.

This fact is made quite clear in the book ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS, which gives the philosophy behind the movement and also the testimony of thirty of those who have benefited. Although written by laymen it contains more psychological and religious common-sense than one often reads in volumes by religious professionals. The book is free from cant, from archaic phraseology. It gives with skill and intelligence an inside view of the alcohol problem and the technique through which these men have found their freedom.

I will let "Bill," one of the contributors to ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS, describe his own experience. He had been drinking in his kitchen - there was enough gin in the house to carry him through that night and the next day. An old friend came to see him. They had often been drunk together, but now he refused to drink! He had "got religion." He talked for hours... it all seemed impossible, and yet there he was, sober. But let me quote from the book:

God had done for him what he could not do for himself. His human will had failed. Doctors had pronounced him incurable. Society was about to lock him up. Like myself, he had admitted complete defeat. Then he had, in effect, been raised from the dead, suddenly taken from the scrap heap to a level of life better than the best he had ever known!

Had this power originated in him? Obviously it had not. There had been no more power in him than there was in me at that moment, and this was none at all.

That floored me. It began to look as though religious people were right after all. Here was something at work in a human heart which had done the impossible. My ideas about miracles were drastically revised right then. Never mind the musty past; here sat a miracle directly across the kitchen table. He shouted great tidings.

Alcoholics Anonymous (New York, AAWS, Inc., 1976), p. 11

How hard is it for us moderns to concede - much less express it as our deep conviction - that our inner lives ultimately are dependent upon a power-not-ourselves. Such an attitude seems weak and cowardly. But we go even farther; we suspect that faith in a spiritual Presence outside ourselves is absurd.

Why absurd? Our bodies are dependent ultimately upon the physical cosmos, upon air and sunlight, and upon this strange planet that bears us up. Why is it absurd then, to think of our spiritual selves - our souls, psyches, call them what you will - as being dependent upon a spiritual cosmos? Is it not absurd,

rather to conceive that the material side of us is part of a material universe, but that our nature is isolated, alone, independent? Is not such an attitude a kind of megalomania?

At any rate these ex-alcoholics declare that only when they recognized their spiritual dependence was their obsession broken.

2. The principle of universality

In our great museums one usually finds paintings covering several ages of art, often brought together from widely separated localities - the primitive, medieval and modern periods; products of French, American, English, and Dutch masters; treasures from China, Japan, and India. Yet as one looks at these productions he instinctively feels that a universal beauty runs through them all. Beauty knows no particular age or school. Beauty is never exclusive and provincial; it is inclusive and universal.

So, too, in the field of religion. We are beginning to recognize the substantial unity of all religious faiths. Back of all religions is religion itself. Religion appears in differing types, but they are all expressions of one great impulse to live nobly and to adore the highest.

This universality of religion is recognized by the Alcoholics Anonymous. Their meetings are attended by Catholics, Protestants, Jews, near-agnostics, and near-atheists. There is the utmost tolerance. It seems of no concern to the group with what religious bodies non-church-going members eventually identify themselves; indeed there is no pressure to join any church whatever. What particularly impresses me is the fact that each individual can conceive of the Power-not-himself in whatever terms he pleases.

"Bill" - the writer already quoted in ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS - makes this tolerance clear when he further narrates his conversation with his ex-alcoholic friend:

My friend suggested what then seemed a novel idea. He said, 'Why don't you choose your own conception of God?'

That statement hit me hard. It melted the icy intellectual mountain in whose shadow I had lived and shivered many years. I stood in the sunlight at last.

It was only a matter of being willing to believe in a power greater than myself. Nothing more was required of me to make my beginning. I saw that growth could start from that point. Upon a foundation of complete willingness I might build what I saw in my friend. Would I have it? Of course I would!

Alcoholics Anonymous (New York, AAWS, Inc., 1976), p. 12

Perhaps these laymen in Alcoholics Anonymous are laying foundations for a new universal movement in religion. Surely the conventional conceptions of religion have been too narrow. Religion, itself, is far bigger and broader than we thought. It is something we can no more capture through rigid dogmas than we can squeeze all the sunshine in the world through one window.

3. The principle of mutual aid

Consider again the case of Mr. X. When he was being hospitalized eighteen laymen visitors called on him within the brief space of five days. These men were willing to give their valuable time in trying to help a man they had never seen before. To Mr. X they related their own dramatic experiences in being saved from slavery to alcohol, and offered their assistance. Upon leaving the hospital Mr. X began attending the weekly meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous. (editor's note- these were actually meetings of the Oxford Group as Alcoholics Anonymous was not officially named in 1938)

Before long he was following the example of the men who had so generously given him of their help. From what I know of the practices of these members of Alcoholics Anonymous, I feel quite confident that Mr. X this very day is using virtually every hour of his spare time to assist other victims in getting on their feet.

As he said to me recently, "Only an alcoholic can help an alcoholic. If a victim of chronic alcoholism goes to a doctor, psychiatrist, or a minister, he feels the listener cannot possibly understand what it means to be afflicted with a compulsion psychosis. But when he talks with an ex-alcoholic, who has probably been in a worse fix than himself and has found the way out, he immediately gains a confidence in himself that he hasn't had in years. He says to himself in substance, 'If this fellow has been saved from disaster I can be too'."

The weekly meetings of the Alcoholics Anonymous operate on this same principal of mutual aid. The ex-victims bolster up each other's morale through comradeship. Like ship-wrecked sailors on a raft headed for the shore, the bond that holds them together is the same that they have escaped from a common peril. Upon each newcomer is impressed the necessity of helping other alcoholics obtain the freedom he has attained. They believe they gain strength from expenditure - not expenditure of money, of which most of them have but little, but of themselves. Said one of them to me, "What I have is no good unless I give it away." There are no dues, no fees, just the sheer pleasure and, in this case, moral profit, that comes from helping the other fellow. This mutual aid acts as a sort of endless chain. Mr. A, Mr. B, and Mr. C help Mr. X out of the frightful mess he is in; then Mr. X turns around and helps Mr. Y and Mr. Z. These in turn helps other victims.

As "Bill" writes in ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS:

My wife and I abandoned ourselves with enthusiasm to the idea of helping other alcoholics to a solution of their problems. It was fortunate, for my old business associates remained skeptical for a year and a half, during which I found little work. I was not too well at the time, and was plagued by waves of self-pity and resentment. This sometimes nearly drove me back to drink. I soon found that when all other measures failed, work with another alcoholic would save the day. Many times I have gone to my old hospital in despair. On talking to a man there, I would be amazingly uplifted and set on my feet. It is a design for living that works in rough going.

Alcoholics Anonymous (New York, AAWS, Inc., 1976), p. 15

4. The principle of transformation

During the last half century many able psychologists have turned the searchlight of their investigations on "religious experience." It seems quite clear from these studies that religion consists not primarily in the intellectual acceptance of certain beliefs. It involves even more the transformation of human character. Such transformations have taken place not only in the lives of saints and religious leaders, but in the souls of multitudes of common folk as well. It is a scientific fact that through religious faith people are sometimes suddenly, and sometimes gradually aroused to a new set of interests, are raised from lower to higher levels of existence. Life and its duties take on new meaning, and selfishness (half-conscious often) is displaced by the conscious desire to help other people.

If any human being needs such a transformation, it is the chronic alcoholic. He may not be at the point where he is willing to admit that, but his family and friends are! Alcoholism is a sickness, to be sure, but it is unlike any other malady in certain fundamental aspects. Compare for example, the case of the alcoholic with that of a tubercular patient. Everybody is sorry for the "T.B." and wants to help. He is surrounded by friendliness and love. But in all likelihood, the alcoholic has made a perfect hell of his home and has destroyed his friendships one by one. He has drawn to himself not compassion and love, but misunderstanding, resentment, and hate.

There seems to be every evidence that the Alcoholics Anonymous group has been amazingly successful in bringing about religious transformation. Note how a doctor describes the effect of this technique on one of his patients:

He had lost everything worth while in his life and was only living, one might say, to drink. He frankly admitted and believed that for him there was no hope. Following the elimination of alcohol, there was found to be no permanent brain injury. He accepted the plan outlined in this book (ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS). One year later he called to see me, and I experienced a very strange sensation. I knew this man by name, and partly recognized his features, but there all resemblance ended. From a trembling, despairing, nervous wreck, had emerged a man brimming over with self-reliance and contentment. I talked with him for some time, but was not able to bring myself to feel that I had known him before. To me he was a stranger, and so he left me. More than three years have now passed with no return to alcohol.

Alcoholics Anonymous, "The Doctor's Opinion" (New York, AAWS, Inc., 1976), p. xxix

Every member of this movement declares that since he has come to believe in a Power-greater-than-himself a revolutionary change has taken place in his life; even his acquaintances note a marked change. He has radically altered his attitudes and outlooks, his habits of thought. In the face of despair and impending collapse, he has gained a new sense of direction, new power.

I have seen these things with my own eyes. They are convincing, dramatic, moving.

One final word to the members of Alcoholics Anonymous. Go back to your synagogues and churches; they need you and you need them. Preserve your principle of Universality, your faith that all religion is one. Never allow yourselves to be absorbed by any single church or sect. Keep your movement what you call it now, a "layman's outfit." Avoid over-organization for religious organizations always tend to follow the letter rather than the spirit, finally crushing the spirit. Remember that early Christianity was promoted not by highly involved organization, but by the contagion of souls fired with enthusiasm for

their cause. And keep your sense of humor! So far you do not seem afflicted with the curse of over-seriousness.

To doctors and psychiatrists I would say; Be skeptical, investigate this movement with an open mind. If you become convinced of their sincerity and the efficacy of their methods, give these men your approval and open support.

ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS ought to have a wide reading by the general public. For one thing the public ought to learn first hand that the chronic alcoholic is suffering not from a vice, but from a disease; that it is impossible for him to "drink like a gentleman." Moderation for him is out of the question. For him there is no such thing as the single drink. It is one taste, and then the deluge.

Certainly every victim of alcoholism and every friend of victims ought to buy or borrow and read this book, then seek to get in touch with some member of the movement. The writer of this article will be glad to furnish addresses of the Cleveland leaders. Or communicate with Alcoholics Anonymous, Box 658, Church Street Annex, New York City.