



In the Spirit - not the Letter - of Alcoholics Anonymous

Love, not worship, for the Big Book

By Laurie A.

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My friends (and enemies) had diagnosed the problem - I could not drink without getting drunk. They weren't telling me anything I didn't know. And they offered no solution except, "Just don't drink," or, "Stop when you've had enough." If I could have done that, I would have. I'd tried countless times to control my drinking and always failed. In the end, I reached that state of "pitiful and incomprehensible demoralization" described in the book, *Alcoholics Anonymous*. A suicide attempt landed me in the hospital and a psychiatrist told me I should go to AA. So I made the call.

Two AA members twelfth-stepped me, and one of them gave me his copy of the Big Book as he left. "You can borrow this for a week," he growled, "and then you must get your own." And I did. At an AA meeting a week later, I returned his book and bought my own copy.

During their visit, I had asked the man with the book how AA worked. He had opened it at chapter five, shoved it in front of me and said, "That's how it works."

After he and his companion left that night, I sat down and read the book. The scales fell from my eyes. I'd known for years that there was something terribly wrong with the way I drank. Many people had scolded, lectured, demanded, threatened, pleaded, and implored me to "do something about your drinking." Heaven knows, I'd tried. I loved getting drunk - but I hated being a drunk. I felt humiliated, ashamed, guilty, mortified, and disgusted by my behavior during my binges.

"The Doctor's Opinion" explained a mystery that had baffled me for years - why couldn't I just get pleasantly high without descending into the chaos of uncontrolled excess? I read that I'd been in the grip of an obsession and, once I started to drink, I couldn't stop because the craving was more powerful than my good intentions and willpower. The book told how other men and women, similarly afflicted, had overcome the problem. I wanted what they had.

The chapter "There Is a Solution" says, "If you are an alcoholic who wants to get over it, you may already be asking - 'What do I have to do?'" The logical answer to the question, "What do I have to do?" is "You must do this."

The Big Book answers this question tangentially; the Twelve Steps are suggestions that we are invited to follow, not commandments we must obey. The book points the way; it does not issue instructions. In chapter five, I read, "With all the earnestness at our command, we beg of you to be fearless and thorough from the very start." By following the Big Book's suggestions for twenty-one years, I have had a life truly beyond my wildest dreams.

I have copies of all four editions of the Big Book, including a facsimile copy of the original with its red and yellow dust cover. (An AA member would not have been very anonymous walking to a meeting with that under her arm!)

I love the Big Book but do not worship it. That would be idolatry. The book itself does not claim to be infallible. The writers acknowledge their limitations.

"Upon therapy for the alcoholic himself, we surely have no monopoly," they write. "We realize we know only a little," they caution. "God will constantly disclose more to you and to us."

"By no means do we offer [our approach] as the last word on this subject, but... it has worked for us," they say.

I've heard the Big Book referred to as a textbook, which I think is a mistake. I believe it is our basic text, which is not the same thing at all. The Big Book is a storybook. It says so on the title page - "Alcoholics Anonymous - The Story of How Many Thousands of Men and Women Have Recovered from Alcoholism." A story does not give instructions; it is a narrative of experience, a work of inspired imagination. Bill W. wrote, in *As Bill Sees It*, "Most Steps are open to interpretation, based on the experience and outlook of the individual."

The Big Book is not sacred scripture; we have no "authorities" in AA who can impose their understanding of its message on the rest of us.

It is dangerous to make a fetish of the written word. As the Bible says, "The letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life."

Laurie is a retired national newspaper and BBC journalist in the UK. His sobriety date is 8/10/84. He served on the Great Britain AA literature committee and edited Share, the British fellowship's national magazine, and Share and Share Alike, a book celebrating 60 years of AA in Britain in 2007. He has written three posts for [AA Agnostica](#):

- [My Last Binge](#) (April 7, 2013)
 - [Don't Throw the Baby Out](#) (Oct. 12, 2014)
 - [Hallowed be the Book](#) (January 4, 2015)
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