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Citation: White, W., & Kurtz, E. (2010). A message of tolerance and celebration: The portrayal of multiple pathways of recovery in the writings of Alcoholics Anonymous co-founder Bill Wilson. Posted at www.williamwhitepapers.com

A Message of Tolerance and Celebration: The Portrayal of Multiple Pathways of Recovery in the Writings of Alcoholics Anonymous Co-Founder Bill Wilson

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One of the central messages of the New Recovery Advocacy Movement is the declaration that there are many pathways and styles of long-term recovery from severe alcohol and other drug problems. This message is of historical note, but it is not surprising. The recovery advocates who have forged this grassroots movement represent a broad spectrum of religious, spiritual, and secular pathways of recovery and represent quite variable styles of recovery practices within these respective frameworks of recovery (White, 2006, 2007).

Such diversity does not preclude the fact that *the majority* of recovery advocates have past or current affiliation with Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), Narcotics Anonymous (NA), or another Twelve Step recovery program. Such backgrounds are not obvious because most advocates with

Twelve Step recovery experience, in keeping with Twelve Step traditions, maintain anonymity at the level of press regarding their past or present affiliation with Twelve Step groups. When they stand and speak in their advocacy roles, they do so as *persons in recovery*, not as members of AA, NA, or other Twelve Step fellowships (Advocacy and Anonymity, 2006).

But, given the high representation of people with Twelve Step backgrounds within this movement, how can these recovery advocates' declaration of the legitimacy of multiple pathways of recovery be reconciled with the charges by Twelve Step critics that AA and other Twelve Step groups practice coercive and cult-like indoctrination and a "one size fits all," anti-professional, anti-scientific approach to addiction recovery?¹ Are these recovery advocates heretics within

¹ Such criticism is part of a "backlash movement" against AA, AA-oriented addiction treatment, and the portrayal of addiction as a disease. This backlash movement has its own leaders, celebrity speakers, literature, and websites. This movement rarely distinguishes 12-step groups from 12-step oriented professional interventionists, 12-step

oriented treatment, and external authorities who may mandate participation in 12-step groups (e.g., professional licensing boards, judges, probation/parole officers, child welfare agencies.) For representative literature of this movement, see Bufe, 1991; Fransway, 2000; Peele, 1989; Peele, Bufe, & Brodsky, 2000; Ragge, 1998; for

their Twelve Step societies for their support of the legitimacy of multiple recovery pathways? Or have the philosophies of Twelve Step programs toward alternative frameworks of recovery been misrepresented by their critics? This brief essay will explore these questions using the writings of AA co-founder Bill Wilson as a guide to how AA views itself and alternative frameworks of addiction recovery.

Defining what AA does and does not believe or does and does not practice is difficult in light of the variability across Twelve Step programs, the lack of central leadership within such programs, and the varieties of local practices that can be found under the Twelve Step umbrella. We have been struck by the number of people we have encountered who have talked with a few AA members or attended an open AA meeting where they talked to a few willing informants and left such experiences feeling as if they understood AA. As long-time researchers of AA, it is our experience that the person most willing to speak first on behalf of AA is, by definition, the least qualified to do so. Wilson addressed this question of the voice of AA by first depicting two archetypal AA roles—the “bleeding deacon” and the “AA show-off”—who are most likely to assert themselves as the embodiment and voice of AA (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1957, p. 122, 133). Wilson went on to suggest that most AA members matured out of this role to become the “elder statesmen” whose humility, wisdom, patience, and example qualified them as the “true voice of Alcoholics Anonymous” (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1957, p. 122). The best access we have to this voice is in AA’s core literature through which Wilson attempted to express the collective experience of those who shared this “kinship of common suffering” and who had reaped the promises of recovery (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1957, p. 59). The clearest

definition of Twelve Step philosophy can be found in AA’s basic texts and the other writings of AA co-founder Bill Wilson, particularly his articles in the *AA Grapevine*.

Focusing on AA (as opposed to other Twelve Step groups) and the writings of Bill Wilson to answer the questions we have posed is warranted for several reasons:

- AA is the first and longest surviving Twelve Step program.
- AA is the largest (in total membership—1.9 million members—and number of registered groups—more than 114,000) and most geographically dispersed (more than 180 countries) Twelve Step program.
- AA’s Steps and Traditions constitute the program from which all other Twelve Step programs have been adapted.
- Bill Wilson is the primary author of A.A.’s basic texts and was the primary interpreter of AA history, philosophy, and practices during AA’s seminal years of development.
- The AA literature authored by Bill Wilson, perhaps more than the literature of any other recovery support group, exerted a significant and continuing influence on the practice of addiction treatment, particularly in the United States.

Bill Wilson, the intellectual engineer of AA and by derivation, other Twelve Step recovery programs, died in 1971. He did not live to witness and offer commentary on the more than 60 adjunctive and alternative addiction recovery mutual aid societies that have risen since his passing (see White, 2010 for a chronology of such groups). He did not live to share his thoughts on the rapidly growing varieties of spiritual, religious, and secular approaches to addiction recovery within and outside of AA.

representative websites, see <http://www.orange-papers.org/>;

http://www.aadeprogramming.org/index_frames.html.

However, his early writings provide important clues to his appreciation and even celebration of such diverse recovery experiences. It is hoped that this essay will bring Wilson's own words to a new audience of readers who are not aware of his reflections on what continue to be contentious issues within and outside of AA. Wilson's words are offered here with a minimum of accompanying commentary. They speak for themselves on several pervasive themes: respect for the varieties of recovery experience within AA, respect for the varieties of recovery that can be achieved outside the fellowship of AA, an unending search for ways to widen the doorways of entry into recovery and respect for AA's critics.

Varieties of AA Experience

AA's Core Values: If one reads through AA's basic texts (*Alcoholics Anonymous, Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, and *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*) and the other voluminous writings of AA co-founder Bill Wilson, even the casual reader will note several core values that permeate these works. These core values guide AA's internal and external relationships as well as AA's view of alternative approaches to alcoholism recovery. The most frequently referenced of these values in AA literature are honesty, modesty, humility, humor, tolerance, patience, unselfishness, kindness, love, and service.

The values of tolerance and modesty form a particularly important foundation to the writings cited in this paper.

Most of us sense that real tolerance of other people's shortcomings and viewpoints and a respect for their opinions are attitudes which make us more useful to others. (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1939, p. 30)

Personal glorification, overweening pride, consuming ambition, exhibitionism, intolerant smugness,

money or power madness, refusal to admit mistakes and learn from them, self-satisfaction, lazy complacency—these and many more are the garden variety ills which so often beset movements as well as individuals.... Let us never say, "It can't happen here." (Wilson, 1945/1988a, p. 4)

AA's own modesty is evident in Bill Wilson's repeated declarations that the core philosophy of AA is not new.

At the very outset we should like it made ever so clear that AA is a synthetic concept—a synthetic gadget, as it were, drawing upon the resources of medicine, psychiatry, religion and our own experience of drinking and recovery. You will search in vain for a single new fundamental. (Wilson, 1944, p 1805)

Does Alcoholics Anonymous contain any new principle? Strictly speaking it does not. AA merely relates the alcoholic to time tested truths in a brand new way. (Wilson, 1950)

Such modesty is also evident in Wilson's repeated denials that AA is the only way to solve alcohol problems.

AA has no monopoly on reviving alcoholics. (Wilson, 1944/1988, p.98)

The average member of Alcoholics Anonymous does not suppose we have a cure- all. (Wilson, 1945b, p. 239)

In all probability, we shall never be able to touch more than a fair fraction of the alcohol problem in all its ramifications. Upon therapy for the alcoholic himself, we surely have no monopoly. (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1955, p. ix)

In no circumstances should members feel that Alcoholics Anonymous is the know-

all and do-all of alcoholism. (Wilson, 1965/1988, p. 332)

Then, too, it would be a product of false pride to believe that Alcoholics Anonymous is a cure-all, even for alcoholism. (Wilson, 1963/1988, p. 346)

When you consider the ramifications of this disease, we have just scratched the surface. I think we should humbly remember this. (Wilson, 1969, p. 9)

AA's elevation of humility as an aspirational value is perhaps best exemplified through its rejection of absolutes—a position that led to its early split from the Oxford Group—and through what in AA folklore became reified as *Rule No. 62*: “Don’t take yourself too damned seriously” (Kurtz, 1979; Alcoholics Anonymous, 1957, p. 104).

On Dogma and Coercion: Bill Wilson feared that dogma—seeing AA as the only way to recover or reducing AA to a concretized set of beliefs or rules—could injure AA as such dogma had injured AA’s predecessors.

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.... 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.... 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. (Wilson, 1965/1988, p. 333)

The degree of Wilson’s fear about the harmful effects of imposing a set of beliefs on new AA members is indicated by the number of times he returned to this subject. The excerpts below, spanning nearly 20

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years, are representative of his expressed concerns.

Most strongly we point out that adherence to these principles [the Steps] is not a condition of AA membership. Any alcoholic who admits he has a problem is an AA member regardless of how much he disagrees with the program. Based upon our experience, the whole program is a suggestion only. (Wilson, 1944, p. 1807)

It is a tradition among us that the individual has the unlimited right to his own opinion on any subject under the sun. He is compelled to agree with no one; if he likes, he can disagree with everyone. (Wilson, 1944/1988, p. 98)

...the Twelve Steps of our AA program are not crammed down anybody's throat. They are not sustained by any human authority. Yet we powerfully unite around them because the truth they contain has saved our lives, has opened the door to a new world. (Wilson, 1945/1988b, p. 8)

This clearly implies that an alcoholic is a member if he says so; that we can't deny him membership; that we can't demand from him a cent; that we can't force our beliefs and practices upon him; that he may flout everything we stand for and still be a member. In fact, our Tradition carries the principle of independence for the individual to such an apparently fantastic length that, so long as there is the slightest interest in sobriety, the most unmoral, the most antisocial, the most critical alcoholic may gather about him a few kindred spirits and announce to us that a new Alcoholics Anonymous Group has been formed. Anti-God, anti-medicine, anti-our recovery program, even anti-each other—these rampant individuals are

still an AA group if they think so. (Wilson, 1946/1988a, p. 33)

Perhaps there is no society on earth more solicitous of personal welfare, more careful to grant the individual the greatest possible liberty of belief and action. Alcoholics Anonymous has no “musts”....compliance or noncompliance with any AA principle is a matter of conscience of the individual.... (Wilson, 1947/1988b, p. 76)

We realize that he is altogether too weak and confused to jump hurdles. If we raise obstacles, he might stay away and perish. He might be denied his priceless opportunity. (Wilson, 1948/1988, p. 79)

Alcoholics Anonymous does not demand that you believe in anything. All of its Twelve Steps are but suggestions. (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1952, p. 26)

Neither does AA exert the slightest religious authority over its members. No one is compelled to meet membership conditions. No one is obliged to pay anything. Therefore we have no system for authority, spiritual or temporal.... (Wilson, 1960)

So this is the substance of the AA party line as I happen to see it. But please be assured you don't necessarily have to see it the same way. Plenty of people differ with me, and yet remain sober.... AA's orthodoxy, if it can be called that, is merely what the majority experience suggests. You can still take your pick! (Wilson, 1962/1988b, p. 274)

Varieties of AA Experience: Wilson often remarked that, beyond the “suggestions” set forth in AA's Twelve Steps, there is no ONE true brand of AA. Wilson chastised those AA members who conveyed
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the message, “Folks, *listen to us*. We have the only true brand of AA—and you'd better get it!” (Wilson, 1961/1988b, p. 252). He illustrated the futility such an attitude in the following 1946 reflection on AA's early history.

Two or three years ago the Central Office [of AA] asked the groups to list their membership rules and send them in. After they arrived we set them all down. They took a great many sheets of paper. A little reflection upon those rules brought us to an astonishing conclusion. If all these edicts had been in force everywhere at once, it would have been practically impossible for any alcoholic to have ever joined Alcoholics Anonymous. About nine-tenths of our oldest and best members could never have gotten by! (Wilson, 1946/1988, p. 37)

That understanding was subsequently codified in AA's Third Tradition, “The only requirement for A.A. membership is a desire to stop drinking”, which stated unequivocally that “any alcoholic is a member of our Society when he says so” (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1952/1981, p. 139, 145)

Wilson further illustrated his respect for the varieties of recovery experience within AA by contrasting styles of change within AA—from his own experience of sudden transformational change to the more typical incremental change experienced by most AA members.

There is a very natural tendency to set apart those experiences of awakenings which happen to be sudden, spectacular, or vision-producing.... It now seems clear that the only special feature of my experience was its electric suddenness and the overwhelming and immediate conviction that it carried to me.... I am sure that my own experience was not in the least different from that received by every

AA member who has strenuously practiced our recovery program. (Wilson, 1962/1988a, p. 275)

Wilson's earliest writings did not address the subject of styles of AA participation, but as early as 1945, he did note people who were recovering in AA without access to AA meetings.

It was discovered several years ago that the "A.A." job could be done solely through correspondence and our literature. (Wilson, 1945b, p. 241)

When he testified before a Senate Subcommittee in 1969, Wilson also alluded to the number of people who had achieved sobriety in AA, disengaged from active AA participation, and sustained their recovery without AA involvement.

Besides the 285,000 [AA's active membership in 1969] there are hundreds of thousands—maybe 200,000, for all we know, 300,000 recovered AA's on the sidelines who do not get caught up in the active statistics, people who have remained for the greater part sober, who are carrying AA attitudes and practices and philosophies into the community life. (Wilson, 1969, p. 3)

Varieties of Recovery Outside of AA

The question of alternative pathways of recovery came up early in the history of AA. The September 1944 issue of the *AA Grapevine* included an article by noted author Philip Wylie, who described his solo recovery from alcoholism (without the help of AA). Anticipating some potential resistance among AA readers, the *Grapevine* editor asked Bill Wilson to offer comment on Wylie's story. Bill declared that Wylie's article should "endear" Wylie to every AA member.

No AA should be disturbed if he cannot fully agree with all of Mr.

Wiley's truly stimulating discourse. Rather shall we reflect that the roads to recovery are many; that any story or theory of recovery from one who has trod the highway is bound to contain much truth. (Wilson, 1944/1988, p. 98)

Bill Wilson responded similarly to the question of whether people could recover from alcoholism through professional help alone. Here is an excerpt from his address to the New York State Medical Society on Alcoholism in 1958:

Your President and other pioneers in and outside your Society have been achieving notable results for a long time, many of their patients having made good recoveries without any A.A. at all. It should be noted that some of the recovery methods employed outside A.A. are quite in contradiction to AA principles and practices. Nevertheless, we of AA ought to applaud the fact that certain of these efforts are meeting with increasing success. (Wilson, 1958)

Two years later, Bill Wilson was asked whether the principles of Recovery, Inc.—a self-help mental health recovery program founded in 1937 by Dr. Abraham A. Low—might be used to help alcoholics. Wilson's response illustrates AA's values of modesty and tolerance even in judging ideas, people, and programs counter to AA central tenets.

I have always looked with great sympathy upon Recovery, Inc. The founder of that movement was a psychiatrist. In actuality, Recovery Inc. is very much of a heresy to AA. But it's the kind of heresy that often seems to work. Those good people operate on the basis that through a program of discipline and constant exertion of the will, their several compulsions and hexes can be directly attacked and eliminated.... In

many cases their results have been extraordinary.... Altogether I have the highest opinion of that outfit. (Wilson, 1960)

The Question of Secular Recovery:

Bill Wilson wrestled for many years with the question of recovery from alcoholism that did not apparently involve a spiritual dimension. He first noted the numbers of atheists and agnostics who had recovered in AA.

Alcoholics Anonymous is not a religious organization; there is no dogma. The one theological proposition is a "power greater than one's self." Even this concept is forced on no one. The newcomer merely immerses himself in our society and tries the program as best he can. Left alone, he will surely report the gradual onset of a transforming experience, call it what he may. (Wilson, 1949/1994, pp. 261-262)

Bill Wilson thought that the potential for successful non-spiritual recovery from alcoholism depended primarily on the severity of alcoholism. He believed that non-spiritual approaches could work for those with less severe alcohol problems but that a spiritual awakening might well be necessary for the most severe forms of alcoholism.

Whether such a person can quit upon a non-spiritual basis depends upon the extent to which he has already lost the power to choose whether he will drink or not. (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1939, p. 45)

...it doesn't matter too much how the transforming spiritual experience is brought about so long as one gets one that works for him. Somehow the alcoholic must get enough objectivity about himself to abate his fears and collapse his false pride. If he can do all that through his intellect, and thereafter support his life structure

upon a "transcendent symbol," more power to him! ...the more intellectual techniques do work sometimes, reaching those who might never take the stronger dose. (Wilson, 1944/1988, p. 98)

Religion and Recovery: Bill Wilson's respect for the varieties of AA experience is further reflected in his comments on the role of religion in recovery.

We think it no concern of ours what religious bodies our members identify themselves with as individuals. This should be an entirely personal affair which each one decides for himself in the light of past associations, or his present choice. Not all of us have joined religious bodies, but most of us favor such memberships. (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1939, p. 39)

If he thinks he can do the job in some other way, or prefers some other spiritual approach, encourage him to follow his own conscience. We have no monopoly on God; we merely have an approach that worked with us. (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1939, p. 108)

As Wilson drafted what became the book, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, he faced a dilemma. He knew that many alcoholics had a distinct aversion to anything smacking of God and religion, yet he had to convey the role spiritual experience had played in the recoveries of AA's first members. As work on the book continued, a great tension rose between conservative, liberal, and radical viewpoints on the role of religion in the AA program of recovery. The conservatives wanted an explicitly Christianized framework of recovery, the liberals were okay with "God" but rejected any attempt to inject religious doctrine into the AA program, and the radicals (atheists and agnostics) wanted no reference to God. The challenge for codifying AA's program was crafting language that reflected this diversity of

recovery experience (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1957).

Wilson's way out of this dilemma was through four propositions. First, he defined the problem of alcoholism as a problem of power ("Lack of power, that was our dilemma"; *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 1939, p. 57). Second, he defined the essential task of recovery as the acquisition of power ("We had to find a power by which we could live...; *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 1939, p.57). Third, that power had to transcend the assertion of personal will ("...it had to be a Power greater than ourselves"; *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 1939, p. 57). Fourth, that Power was defined broadly ("To us, the Realm of the Spirit is broad, roomy, all inclusive...; *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 1939, p. 59) and personally ("Experience has taught us that these are...matters for each individual to settle for himself"; *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 1939, p. 62). Conservatives, liberals, and radicals are still embraced within the fellowship of AA, and one can get a quite different view of AA depending on which member is describing AA through the lens of his personal experience. Wilson was in a unique vantage point to try to depict the diversity and totality of AA recovery experience—dimensions that can be missed by both AA advocates and AA critics.

Medication and Recovery: As early as 1945, Bill Wilson warned AA members of the dangers of drugs other than alcohol.

Morphine, codeine, chloral hydrate, Luminal, Seconal, Nebutal, amytal, these and kindred drugs have killed many alcoholics. And I once nearly killed myself with chloral hydrate. (Wilson, 1945/1988c, p. 103)

Yet Wilson remained open throughout his life to the potential role of pharmacological adjuncts in recovery from alcoholism. We know that he used sedatives for an undetermined length of time during his ongoing treatment for depression between the mid-1940s and 1953, and that he personally used and publicly promoted LSD and Vitamin B-3 as adjuncts in the treatment

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of alcoholism during the late 1950s and early 1960s—before LSD had been christened a "drug of abuse"—at a time LSD was being recommended by prominent psychiatrists as a potential breakthrough treatment for alcoholism. Wilson hoped these aids might help those who failed to get the AA program (Kurtz, 1979, 1999; Wilson, 1965a).

Wilson's continued openness to medications in the role of recovery is further illustrated by a story told by Dr. Vincent Dole, co-developer of methadone maintenance and non-alcoholic trustee of AA. Dole recounts that in one of his last conversations with Bill Wilson, Wilson had asked Dole if there might be an analogue of methadone that could be used in the treatment of alcoholism and encouraged Dole to undertake research to discover it (Dole, 1991).

Moderation as a Solution to Alcohol Problems: Moderation had not worked for early AA members, but they made no effort to deny that option to others. In fact, they took quite the opposite position. AA's (Wilson-authored) basic text suggested moderation as an option for some problem drinkers.

Then we have a certain type of hard drinker. He may have the habit badly enough to gradually impair him physically and mentally. It may cause him to die a few years before his time. If a sufficiently strong reason-ill health, falling in love, change of environment, or the warning of a doctor-becomes operative, this man can also stop or moderate, although he may find it difficult and troublesome and may even need medical attention. (*Alcoholics Anonymous*, 1939, p. 31)

If anyone, who is showing inability to control his drinking, can do the right-about-face and drink like a gentleman, our hats are off to him. Heaven knows we have tried hard enough and long enough to drink like

other people! (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1939, p. 42)

Bill Wilson and the broader literature of AA make no claim that their experience constitutes a universal truth applicable to the broader universe of all alcohol problems. By distinguishing themselves (“real alcoholics”) from problem drinkers, early AA members defined their own recoveries in terms of abstinence because that is what had been successful in their experience.

Tolerance and Open-mindedness

We have illustrated the respect Bill Wilson expressed toward the varieties of methods and styles of recovering from alcoholism and resolving other forms of alcohol-related problems. Wilson’s tolerance and open-mindedness are further illustrated in his stand toward AA’s cooperation with service professionals and scientists, his continual efforts to widen the doorways of entry into recovery, his openness to change and his response to AA critics.

On Cooperation with Professionals and Scientists: Wilson brought personal experience to the question of the role of professional treatment in alcoholism recovery, and Wilson’s treatise on the early history of AA is replete with expressions of gratitude to the roles non-alcoholic professionals and other non-alcoholic friends of AA played in the history of the fellowship (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1957). He had been treated multiple times before his successful recovery, and he often acknowledged the role of his physician, Dr. William Silkworth, in his own recovery process and in the birth of AA—going so far as to refer to Silkworth as a “founder of A.A.” (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1957, p. 13). Wilson also was treated by two psychiatrists for the depression that lingered years into his recovery. Also of interest is the fact that Wilson came very close to accepting employment as a lay alcoholism therapist at Charles Towns Hospital in New York City, and that he did later briefly serve on the

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board of an alcoholism rehabilitation facility (High Watch) (White, 1998). These experiences and the larger body of AA experience with expanding alcoholism treatment resources shaped his views of the role of treatment in recovery and the role AA members might play working in the larger alcoholism treatment field.

...many [AA members] were called and many chosen since that day to go into related fields [helping alcoholics] which has now got to be so large in their promise that we of Alcoholics Anonymous are getting down to our right size and we are only now realizing that we are only a small part of a great big picture. We are realizing again, afresh, that without our friends, not only could we have not existed in the first place but we could not have grown. (Wilson, 1956)

It used to be the fashion among some of us in A.A. to decry psychiatry, even medical aid of any description, save that barely needed for sobering up. We pointed to the failures of psychiatry and religion. We were apt to thump our chests and exclaim, “Look at us. We can do it, but they can’t.” It is therefore with great relief that I can report this to be a vanishing attitude. Thoughtful AA members everywhere realize that psychiatrists and physicians helped to bring our Society into being in the first place and have held up our hands ever since.... So let’s bring to this floor the total resources that can be brought to bear on this problem...Let us think of unity among all those who work in the field...Let us stand together in the spirit of service. (Wilson, 1958)

We clearly see that by pooling our resources we can do together what could never be accomplished in separation; or in short-sighted criticism and in competition. (Wilson, 1958)

Wilson's Obsession: The Unrecovering Alcoholic: Bill Wilson manifested something of an obsession throughout his years of recovery. While others were celebrating AA's near miraculous survival and growth, Wilson continued to concentrate his attention on the still suffering alcoholic—particularly those who came to AA but failed to get the program and achieve sustained physical and emotional sobriety.

We [AA members] should very seriously ask ourselves how many alcoholics have gone on drinking because we have failed to cooperate in good spirit with these many [alcoholism treatment] agencies—whether they be good, bad or indifferent. No alcoholic should go mad or die merely because he did not come straight to A.A. at the beginning. (Wilson, 1965b)

AA does not sponsor projects in other fields. But if these projects are constructive and non-controversial in character, AA members are free to engage in them without criticism if they act as individuals only, and are careful of the AA name. (Wilson, 1947/1988a, p. 46)

Wilson's views on cooperation with professionals extended to the scientific community.

Please know that we [AA] hold ourselves ready for scientific investigation; that we fully realize that we are but a small part of the total effort going on in this broad field and so wish to aid where we can. (Wilson, 1950)

Today, the vast majority of us [AA members] welcome any new light that be thrown on the alcoholic's mysterious and baffling malady. We don't care too much whether new and valuable knowledge issues from a test tube, a psychiatrist's couch, or from revealing social studies.... More and more we regard all who labor in the total field of alcoholism as our companions on a march from darkness to light. We see that we can accomplish together what we could never accomplish in separation and rivalry. (Wilson, 1958/1988, p. 185)

Our first concern would be with those sufferers that we are still unable to reach.... Some cannot be reached because they are not hurt enough, others because they are hurt too much. (Wilson, 1965/1988, p. 331)

Wilson's concerns with the still suffering alcoholic were the source of his later interest in LSD and Vitamin B-3 as potential adjuncts in recovery from alcoholism (see Kurtz, 1999 for a full discussion).

Openness to Change: Throughout his years of recovery, Bill Wilson maintained an openness to change for himself and for AA. His consciously cultivated humility undergirded Wilson's ability to keep his current ideas open to revision pending new knowledge and experience.

The process [trial and error] still goes on and we hope it never stops. Should we ever harden too much, the letter might crush the spirit. We could victimize ourselves by petty rules and prohibitions; we could imagine that we had said the last word. We might even be asking alcoholics to accept our rigid ideas or stay away. May we never stifle progress like that! (Wilson, 1946/1988b, p. 20)

We have to grow or else deteriorate. For us, the "status quo" can only be for today, never for tomorrow. Change we must; we cannot stand still. (Wilson, 1961/1988a, p. 321)

Let us never be a closed corporation.
(Wilson, 1963/1988, p. 346)

Let us never fear needed change. Once a need becomes clearly apparent in an individual, a group, or in AA as a whole, it has long since been found that we cannot stand still and look the other way. (Wilson, 1965/1988, p. 334)

Let us always remember that any society of men and women that cannot freely correct its own faults must surely fall into decay if not collapse. Such is the universal penalty for the failure to go on growing. Just as each AA must continue to take his moral inventory and act upon it, so must our whole Society do if we are to survive and if we are to serve usefully and well. (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1957, p. 231)

Pioneering in A.A. of course has not stopped. I hope it never will. (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1957, p. 80)

Response to Critics: AA's core values were most tested in the face of criticism. In 1959, Bill Wilson reported to AA's General Service Conference:

As a society, we have seen no attacks, nor have we been attacked. We have made no aggressions on the world outside and they have not trespassed upon us; they have befriended us. (Wilson, 1959)

For the most part, AA escaped public criticism in its first 25 years of existence, but such criticism began in the 1960s and evolved into a fully organized Twelve Step backlash movement in the 1980s and 1990s. When AA members asked Bill Wilson to respond to early public criticism, he penned an article in the April 1963 AA Grapevine entitled, "Our Critics Can be Our Benefactors." In that article, Wilson
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highlighted excerpts from earlier writings that called upon AA to not respond to such criticism publicly, lest AA get caught up in public controversy that diverted the fellowship from its central mission. Instead, Wilson urged members to use such criticism as an opportunity for self-inventory and self-improvement, going so far as to suggest, "*If a given criticism of AA is partly or wholly justified, it may be well to acknowledge this privately to the critics, together with our thanks*" (Wilson, 1963/1988, p. 347).

Summary

This short essay has used excerpts from the writings of Bill Wilson to illustrate AA's understanding of its own limitations, recognition of diverse recovery experience within AA, tolerance toward alternative pathways and styles of recovery, openness to collaborate with service professionals and scientists in the alcoholism field, and Wilson's personal hope that AA would remain an open, evolving society forever focused on service to and recovery for the still suffering alcoholic.

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Acknowledgement: Support for the development of this paper was provided by the Office of Addiction Services of the Philadelphia Department of Behavioral Health and Mental Retardation Services.

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