

AA Before There Was AA



by bob k.

William L. White, author of *Slaying The Dragon: The History of Addiction Treatment and Recovery in America*, published a memoir in 2017. In *Recovery Rising*, the treatment professional and addiction historian discusses the idea of the “wounded healer.” “One of the foundational concepts within the history of recovery support is that of the wounded healer – the notion that people who have survived a particular illness or trauma might use that experience as a foundation to help others in similar circumstances.” (*Recovery Rising*, William L. White, p. 470)

The great strength of Alcoholics Anonymous is birthed in the process of identification. Typically, the alcoholic has already suffered through the remonstrations of a frustrated spouse, parent, or employer; and/or the counseling of a minister, priest, rabbi, yogi, physician, or any other would-be helper. These well-intentioned folks are seen by the alcoholic as “not really getting it.” During his chastisement, the penitent drunkard does his part, which is to hang his head in shame. He may pledge to never again do what he has done a thousand times before.

It’s different in AA. The man or woman being “helped” is asked to listen to the *story* of the “helper.” In the best cases, he or she hears a tale much like his or her own, except that the account includes not just struggling, but overcoming. In the best of cases, there are “no lectures to be endured.”

In helping, the helper helps himself.

The wounded healer class is not limited to alcoholics. As was the case with William James, Carl Jung had had his own confrontations with inner demons. The psychoanalyst later stated that “a good half of every treatment that probes at all deeply consists in the doctor examining himself . . . it is his own hurt that gives a measure of his power to heal.” (*Jung*, Anthony Stevens, p. 110)

In the world of the now, “wounded healers” serve as mentors in mutual aid groups, most notably, the many 12-Step fellowships. Other recovered alcoholics and addicts work professionally as paid counsellors. There is precedent for both of these functions, dating back to decades before Bill Wilson took his final drink.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there were amateur wounded healers performing much as they do today. The Washingtonians (founded 1840) remain the best known of the early mutual aid groups who helped themselves by helping others, but there were many such societies, and to varying degrees, they were AA-like in how they operated. The Sons of Temperance, Rechabites, Templars, and others were groups of alcoholics who helped each other to get and stay sober. The Ribbon Reform Clubs and Fraternal Temperance Societies that came later did the same. A serious problem for these groups of “drunks helping other drunks” is that they were absorbed into the broader temperance movement controlled by nonalcoholics.

Furthermore, long before the proliferation of modern treatment centers, there had been reformed drinkers working as paid counselors. Richard Peabody is perhaps the most recognizable name among the alcoholics who followed personal recovery by going on to careers in the field of lay therapy. At ten years sober, Peabody wrote *The Common Sense of Drinking* (1931), a volume that influenced Bill W.’s writing of the Bigga Booka.

Throughout the nineteenth century, some reformed drunkards had made their livings as paid temperance speakers inspiring others with their stories of salvation. Earlier still, Native Americans had formed “recovery circles” of sober alcoholics and those seeking help in stopping drinking.

Missions

At the time AA’s Big Book was undergoing last-minute alteration before publication, Henry G. Parkhurst was lobbying, yet again, for a toning down of what he viewed as religiosity and preachiness of the book’s message. In support of that cause, he offered the view that “the missions had never been effective with alcoholics.”

He was wrong.

Wounded healer Jerry McAuley had his Water Street Mission (founded in 1872) working reasonably well some decades earlier. We have no percentages and no statistics, but the former drunken criminal was sobering up some hard cases and putting them to work helping others similarly afflicted. These healed healers clung together drawing strength from more than just the religious comforting of the mission's format. It's very likely that in daytime hours, the facility operated much like a modern Alano club.

Samuel H. Hadley experienced a similar reformation in 1882 and for the remainder of his life, worked diligently to bring others into recovery from alcoholism. Both of these men receive mention in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902).

Further, in the decades immediately preceding the birth of Alcoholics Anonymous, the men relieved of their obsession to drink through the Emmanuel Movement were encouraged to help others. The Jacoby Club (1908) was formed so that alcoholics brought into sobriety at the Boston church could congregate with others hoping for a similar result. The club flourished for three decades. It was forced to find larger quarters multiple times in order to accommodate the rising numbers of down-and-outers being helped to attain a new way of life.

The group's motto was: ***Men who help themselves by helping other men.*** As with the missions and the Washingtonians, assistance with basic needs accompanied the support in overcoming troubles with alcohol. Why did the Jacoby Club not spread across America? The simplest answer seems to be that they lacked a leader with the vision and ambition of a Bill Wilson to take the group to a national audience. Locally, the club was *highly* effective in demonstrating the power of wounded healers to aid others of their ilk.

Many alcoholics, then and now, after countless failed attempts to climb out of the pit of alcoholism, see recovery as something that's "undoable" for them. Powerful is the living example of ones who were once as they were, and possibly worse. The seemingly hopeless find new glimmers of hope. Possibilities become realized with each step forward encouraged and supported. The Jacoby Club had sober entertainments, and they had sponsors operating under the title "special brothers."

You are no longer alone.

Mutual Aid Groups

The emotional core of addiction is a mixture of isolation (in the end, only the drug exists), desperation (over rapidly fading power and control), and shame (over the loss of control of the drug and ourselves and the damage we are inflicting on ourselves, our loved ones, and the world.

Recovery Rising, p. 221

AA sponsors are wounded healers. They help sponsees to find healing. Sometimes the sponsor falls and the roles might be reversed. In any case, the battle is no longer a solitary one. In short order, the sobriety seeker is aware that he has new friends who have insiders' knowledge of the problem. There is much talk of *community and connection* in the modern iterations of spirituality and as antidotes to addiction.

We know that numerous drunks who recovered in the pre-AA era maintained their sobriety. Some authored books about their struggles with alcohol addiction, their release, and their return to normal living. The drinking is typically vividly described with the purple-est of prose. Even allowing that these accounts may be somewhat exaggerated, we are presented with real alcoholics of the most desperate type.

The stories of wounded healers such as John Hawkins, John Gough, Jerry McAuley, Samuel Hadley, Orville Gardner and others are well documented. To some degree, they were public figures. They seem to have intuited that service would help them through the tribulations of maintaining sobriety. We find this critical element described in "Bill's Story."

My wife and I abandoned ourselves with enthusiasm to the idea of helping other alcoholics to a solution to 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, but 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 lifted up and set on my feet. It is a design for living that works in rough going.*

AA Big Book, p. 15

The power derived from both service and association with like-minded others had been demonstrated many times over, long before Bill Wilson helped himself by helping Dr. Bob Smith.

The Keeley Institutes undoubtedly brought many alcoholics into sobriety, even though the “gold cure” itself was essentially a scam. The major upside of that whole therapeutic effort, besides making Dr. Leslie Keeley a very wealthy man in a short period of time, was that Keeley Cure graduates congregated in support groups called Keeley Leagues.

By helping others, they helped themselves.

The unique ability of alcoholics to assist other alcoholics has been demonstrated again and again and continues to be in the treatment world of the twenty-first century.

True believers prefer not to recognize that the Big Book, as Emerson famously observed of Whitman’s Leaves of Grass, “must have had a long foreground somewhere, for such a start.” In fact, nearly all the constitutive elements of the AA program were in place a century before Bill W. ever set foot in Akron.

As William L. White says in his magisterial history of addiction treatment in America, it is “clearly not the case” that mutual support groups for inebriates began with AA.

Bill W. and Mr. Wilson, Matthew Raphael, p. 67

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