

**Trudging the Road of Happy Destiny: The Gift Economy in Early Alcoholics Anonymous
History and the Creation of The Big Book**

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In November of 1934 William “Bill” Wilson was released from his third stay at Towns Hospital in New York City for what was deemed a medically hopeless addiction to alcohol. Heavily in debt and without work as a stockbroker following the 1929 market crash, Bill was offered a gift that would upend his life and eventually influence the lives of millions of other people.¹ Visited by an old schoolmate named Ebby Thacher, Bill proceeded to uncork a bottle of gin and drink liberally as he listened to his friend explain that a spiritual solution had cured him of his desire to drink. The appearance and demeanor of the man hardly matched the Ebby of Bill’s memory. Five years prior, in more prosperous times, the two men had chartered a barnstorm flight from Albany to Manchester, Vermont during one of many inspired all-night benders. The arc of both men’s drinking and fortunes declined swiftly in the intervening years and Ebby had only recently been released from a psychiatric hold due to his habits. Bill would soon write, “The door opened and he stood there, fresh-skinned and glowing. There was something about his eyes. He was inexplicably different.”² Bill offered Ebby a drink which was refused. He recalled Ebby saying simply, “I’ve got religion.”³

Although Wilson would not accept the premise that evening, and would ultimately liberally reform its scope, this concept of a spiritual solution to alcoholism became the passion of his lifetime and propelled a gift economy amongst recovering alcoholics that now spans the globe. Out of this economy arose the original “Twelve Step” program which has in turn been

¹ William H. Schaberg, *Writing the Big Book* (Las Vegas: Central Recovery Press, 2019), 1-12 offers a helpful primer on this context. Towns Hospital was considered “the preeminent drying-out spot in New York City.”

² Bill Wilson, *Alcoholics Anonymous: The Story of How Many Thousands of Men and Women Have Recovered from Alcoholism* (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc., 1939), 9. It should be noted that although the authorship of *Alcoholics Anonymous* is formally unsigned, the 164 initial pages which comprise the focus of this project were primarily authored by Bill Wilson and have been maintained in each subsequent reprinting of the work. The “personal stories” sections which follow in the work have altered over time and are comprised of individual accounts of alcoholics in the program.

³ IBID.

deployed to empower recovery from many chemical and process addictions besides alcoholism.⁴ This project will examine the early workings of the gift economy created by Bill Wilson and his peers and specifically its culmination in the writing of *Alcoholics Anonymous: The Story of How Many Thousands of Men and Women Have Recovered from Alcoholism* (hereafter referred to as *The Big Book*) published in 1939.⁵ The work represents the codification of a gift economy formerly transacted exclusively interpersonally and through varying methods. It also allowed Bill Wilson to realize his goal of disseminating a spiritual solution to alcoholism at scale, despite reservations that to do so would ruin the message altogether.

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A nod to the dizzying turbulence of the interwar period is in order, as we place Bill Wilson in his time. While more than 53,000 American soldiers died in the gruesome, machine combat of World War I, 63,000 died from influenza, which likewise ravaged the domestic front.⁶ The success of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia stoked fears of the rise of communism in the United States, even as President Wilson pushed democracy abroad, exploiting the power vacuum created in the Great War's wake.⁷ The wartime labor vacuum filled domestically by immigrants and black southerners fleeing the Jim Crow South sparked racial tensions when soldiers returned home to claim their former jobs. At the same time, black veterans returned home emboldened in their claim for equality: "We return! We return from fighting! We return fighting! Make way for

⁴ Patrick Carnes, *A Gentle Path Through the Twelve Steps*. (Center City: Hazelden, 2012), 352. There are dozens of Twelve Step Programs as of 2021, many with their own texts modeled after AA's main text, *The Big Book*.

⁵ Bill Wilson, *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age* (New York: A.A. World Services, Inc., 1967), 133. Wilson notes that when arranging details for the initial printing, "we directed Mr. Blackwell [the publisher] to do the job on the thickest paper in his shop...the idea was to convince the alcoholic purchaser that that he was indeed getting his money's worth!" As a result, "The Big Book" is the name commonly used for the text to this day.

⁶ "War Losses (USA)" from *International Encyclopedia of the First World War*. https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/war_losses_usa (Retrieved March 2021).

⁷ *The American Yawp, Vol. II*, ed. Joseph L. Locke and Ben Wright (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019), 156-157.

Democracy!”⁸ The widespread violence of the “Red Summer” of 1919 followed. “By whipping up nationalist passions, American attitudes toward radicalism, dissent and immigration were poisoned. Postwar disillusionment shattered Americans’ hopes for the progress of the modern world” as the uncertainty of the next decade loomed.⁹

Amidst these tensions, the manufacturing boom of the 1920s further accelerated America into the modern world. Assembly lines and lines of credit spurred sales of innovative consumer goods such as “...ready-to-wear clothing, convenience foods, and home appliances” via first-of-their-kind department stores.¹⁰ Henry Ford’s assembly lines manufactured automobiles in bulk, swelling the number of automobiles on the road from nine million to nearly twenty-seven million by end of the decade and mobilizing trade and tourism.¹¹ Prohibition forced alcohol production and sales underground in a futile effort; consumerism would not be bound. As Edgar Burroughs wrote, channeling the Tarzan of his creation, “[w]e wish to escape the restrictions of manmade laws, and the inhibitions that society has placed upon us.”¹² Christian creation narratives were challenged by Darwinism in The Scopes trial. Women and African Americans pushed cultural norms in the workplace and jazz clubs, alike, while the Ku Klux Klan reformed in the South. In cities like New York, the homosexual community “lived more openly... in the 1920s than they would be able to for many decades following World War II,” even as “the increased sexualization of women brought new scrutiny to same-sex female relationships previously dismissed as harmless.”¹³ The roar of the economy likewise whiplashed, crashing with the New York Exchange in October of 1929. Every facet of society was in upheaval. As Bill Wilson

⁸ W.E.B Du Bois, “Returning Soldiers,” *The Crisis* (May 1919), 14. As cited in *The American Yawp*, 158.

⁹ *The American Yawp*, 159.

¹⁰ *IBID*, 167.

¹¹ *IBID*, 169.

¹² *IBID*.

¹³ *IBID*, 177.

entered the 1930s, jobless and drunk, we can understand him through this lens: he, too, wanted an escape from a world moving so fast.

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Also in order is a brief explanation of what defines a gift economy. Sociologist Marcel Mauss is attributed with shaping the predominant understanding of gift economies in his 1925 essay *The Gift*.¹⁴ Foremost, Mauss argued that there is no such thing as a true, altruistic gift. Instead, across societies there are social constructs which compel giving in order to maintain peace, trigger reciprocity, gain status and uphold diverse contracts. As he noted, his aim was “to isolate one important set of phenomena: namely, pretestations which are in theory voluntary, disinterested and spontaneous... are in fact... based on obligation and economic self-interest.”¹⁵ While Mauss concerned much of his focus with economic exchange, he also expanded the reach to include wider “courtesies, entertainments, ritual... and fairs in which the market is but one element” of gifting.¹⁶

It is this framework that best fits the exchange and utility of what Bill Wilson and his colleagues would ultimately form into the “program” of Alcoholics Anonymous (hereafter often referred to as AA). The shaping of this program and its ultimate articulation in the text of *The Big Book* was undertaken by trial and error as we shall examine further, but the general concept is “one drunk talking to another” and offering her or his personal story of “what we used to be like, what happened and what we are like now” after achieving sobriety through the acceptance of the concept of a Higher Power.¹⁷ The “gift” of the program is the message of how a hopeless

¹⁴ Bill Wilson was a well-read man, known to have studied contemporary works of William James, Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, amongst others. This author can find no clear record that he read Marcel Mauss, however.

¹⁵ Marcel Mauss, *The Gift* (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1954), 1.

¹⁶ *IBID*, 3.

¹⁷ Wilson, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 58.

drunk can achieve sobriety through spiritual means. While on its surface this may appear as raw altruism, there is a return on investment promised: in order to keep one's sobriety, it is held, one must constantly give it away.

Gift Exchange Theorist Lewis Hyde wrote that: "...stories can present gift exchange as a companion to transformation, a sort of guardian or marker or catalyst. It is also the case that a gift may be the actual agent of change, the bearer of new life. In the simplest examples, gifts carry an identity with them, and to accept the gift amounts to incorporating the new identity."¹⁸ During a stint as a counselor at a rehabilitation clinic, Hyde believed he observed this dynamic in action amongst members of AA.¹⁹ However, whereas Hyde's theory would suggest that in order to be meaningful such an exchange must transcend simply "...the act of giving... [that] gifts are only as valuable as the intention for which they are given," it's less clear that Bill Wilson and his peers believed this to be the case.²⁰ Indeed, we shall see that staying sober was a primary motivator in their economy, no matter the goodwill involved. For Bill and a few other charter members of AA, there also existed within this economy a financial imperative, the tensions of which will be discussed further.²¹

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¹⁸ Lewis Hyde, *The Gift: Imagination and The Erotic Life of Property* (New York: Random House, 1979), 45.

¹⁹ IBID.

²⁰ Benjamin Patrick Horgan, "Salvation Narratives: Alcoholics Anonymous, Storytelling, and the Logic of Gift Exchange" (Bachelor's Thesis in Religious Studies, Bates College, 2009), 51.

²¹ Historian Trysh Travis has also identified a gift economy in action in Alcoholics Anonymous history. Such an economy is "...a community self-consciously organized around modes of exchange that evade the logic and norms of market capitalism." Her focus becomes the extent to which AA grappled with market capitalism post World War II, compelling the creation of the "Twelve Traditions" of AA, which is beyond the historical scope of this project. See: Trysh Travis, *The Language of The Heart: A Cultural History of the Recovery Movement from Alcoholics Anonymous to Oprah Winfrey* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 92-100.

It was not for lack of trying to quit drinking that Bill Wilson found himself chronically drunk and although he was curious to see Ebby Thacher sober and to hear the explanation he was there to provide, Bill also wagered, correctly, that his ration of gin could outlast the evening's sales pitch. The gift Ebby offered was premised in a set of religious principles lifted from The Oxford Groups, members of which visited Ebby while in the mental hospital and whom he credited with helping him find sobriety.²² Founded by a former Lutheran minister named Frank Buchman in 1921 as a rebuttal to formal denominations, The Oxford Groups embraced so-called "First Century Christian Fellowship" that eschewed liturgy and church hierarchy in favor of what Trysh Travis calls "mystical communion with the divine facilitated by meditation over a limited canon of sacred texts."²³ As Ernest Kurtz notes, the Groups focused on "the necessity of conversion and restitution" and the attainment of "Four Absolutes – absolute honesty, absolute purity, absolute unselfishness, and absolute love" empowered through a direct surrender of one's self-will to God.²⁴

Ebby told Bill that at the behest of Oxford Group members, he conceded he was powerless over alcohol and thereafter God had done for him what he could not do for himself. The concept of a religious experience removing such an entrenched desire to drink at first seemed a bridge too far for Wilson. He reflected upon the wreckage religion had wrought, recalling "the wars which had been fought, the burnings and chicanery that religious dispute had

²² A contemporaneous compilation of The Oxford Groups theology can be found in *The Eight Points of The Oxford Groups* by C. Irving Benson. For background on Ebby Thacher's "conversion story" see: *Ebby: The Man Who Sponsored Bill W.* By A.A. historian Mel B. (In keeping with A.A. tradition, several A.A. historians who are themselves members of the program denote their last names only by first initial.) Included in Bibliography for this project.

²³ Trysh Travis, *The Language of The Heart*, 141.

²⁴ Ernest Kurtz, *Not-God: A History of Alcoholics Anonymous* (Center City: Hazelden, 1979), 25. This book is adapted from Kurtz' synonymous dissertation from Harvard published in 1978.

facilitated” which “made [him] sick.”²⁵ Himself a veteran of World War I, Bill noted that based on what he “had seen in Europe and since, the power of God in human affairs was negligible, the Brotherhood of Man a grim jest.”²⁶ After Ebby took leave that evening Bill kept drinking. Wilson reflected of Ebby’s visit that he was being asked “to give up the one attribute of which [he] was most proud, the one quality that set a man above the animals – [an] inquiring, rational mind.”²⁷ However, he could apparently not shake the intrigue of Ebby’s experience and Thacher himself recalled of that night’s discussion, Bill walking him to the subway saying, “I don’t know what you’ve got, kid, but you’ve got something, and I want to get it.”²⁸

Bill soon visited an evangelical service of The Oxford Group at Calvary Mission in New York City. Stumbling in drunk having first visited a bar, he was initially refused entry until he could be quieted down by Ebby and compelled to consume a “large plate of beans” and “a great deal of coffee” in order to mellow.²⁹ Once calmed, a still-intoxicated Bill even joined in the proceedings when penitents were called upon to “witness.”³⁰ He awoke the next morning feeling rather sheepish over his drunken participation in the prior night’s affair, but he did realize that on his way home he “...hadn’t thought of looking in any of the bars,” which was apparently an uncommon occurrence by that point in his drinking career.³¹ After three days in bed chewing on the experience and continuing to drink, on December 11, 1935, Bill once again checked himself into Towns Hospital exhibiting signs of delirium tremens and in a state he would define as

²⁵ Wilson, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 11.

²⁶ IBID.

²⁷ Robert Thomsen, *Bill W.*, (Center City: Hazelden, 1975.), 168.

²⁸ Michael Fitzpatrick, *Dr. Bob & Bill W. Speak: AA’s Cofounders Tell Their Stories*. (Center City, Hazelden 2012), 24. The quote is from an audio recording of Ebby Thacher.

²⁹ Kurtz, *Not-God*, 18-19. See also Wilson’s summary in *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, 52.

³⁰ IBID. Amongst other colorful details, we learn that Bill also brought with him an inebriated Finnish fisherman, Alec, he’d befriended at a bar in The Bowery. We sadly do not learn what became of Alec.

³¹ Wilson, *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, 53.

“pitiful and incomprehensible demoralization.”³² During this stay he alleged he surrendered to God and had a spiritual experience of his own. He never drank again and commenced from his release into vigorous propagation of the gift economy that continues today.

It is worth detailing in full an account Wilson gave in a 1955 speech regarding his conversion experience as it provides context for the state of mind of the alcoholics he would soon set out to pursue, as well as the gift he believed he was set to pass on:

“My depression deepened unbearably and finally it seemed to me as though I were at the bottom of the pit. I still gagged badly on the notion of a Power greater than myself, but finally, just for the moment, the last vestige of my proud obstinacy was crushed. All at once I found myself crying out, “If there is a God, let Him show Himself! I am ready to do anything, anything!” Suddenly, the room lit up with a great white light. I was caught up in an ecstasy which there are no words to describe. It seemed to me, in my mind’s eye, that I was on a mountain and that a wind not of air but of spirit was blowing. And then it burst upon me that I was a free man. Slowly the ecstasy subsided. I lay on the bed, but now for a time I was in another world, a new world of consciousness. All about me and through me there was a wonderful feeling of Presence, and I thought to myself, “So this is the God of the preachers!” A great peace stole over me and I thought, “No matter how wrong things seem to be, they are all right. Things are all right with God and His World.”³³

By his account, the sheer desperation of his alcoholism persuaded Bill Wilson to open himself to the possibility of a spiritual solution. He later wrote in a letter to Carl Jung of this experience that "release from the alcohol obsession was immediate. At once I knew I

³² Wilson, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 29.

³³ Excerpted from Wilson’s speech at the 1955 convention entitled "Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age." See: Wilson, *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, 55.

was a free man.”³⁴ Soon he’d realize that in order to stay free, he’d need to continually try to pass along the gift Ebby had given him.³⁵

Bill believed it was no small feat to be released from his addiction. After all, he’d willingly undergone multiple medical interventions to no avail, and it was not until his surrender and “white light” experience that he was able to shake his obsession with drink. The medical director at Town’s Hospital during each of Bill’s four stays was Dr. William Silkworth who’d reported to Bill that his condition was likely hopeless, that in his experience recovery for alcoholics of his ilk was “approximately only two percent.”³⁶ Dr. Silkworth wrote in an essay included in *The Big Book* that “Unless [an alcoholic] can experience an entire psychic change there is very little hope of his recovery.”³⁷ As Bill convalesced following his white light experience, he was visited by Ebby and reported to him the change he felt. Following the Oxford Groups’ approach Ebby had used, Bill recalled, “I fully acquainted him with my problems and deficiencies. We made a list of people I had hurt or toward whom I felt resentment. I expressed an entire willingness to approach these individuals, admitting my wrong.”³⁸ Bill considered this a “price [that] had to be paid. It meant destruction of self-centeredness.”³⁹ Ebby also told Bill that it was, “essential to work with others, as he had worked with me.”⁴⁰

³⁴ Excerpted from a letter dated January 23, 1961. Full correspondence between Wilson and Jung is available in Appendix 1 to: McCabe, *Carl Jung and Alcoholics Anonymous*. See: page 131.

³⁵ It should be noted that while Bill Wilson did not drink following his experience, Ebby Thacher did and would continue to struggle with alcohol throughout his life.

³⁶ Kurtz, *Not-God*, 24.

³⁷ William Silkworth, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, xxvii. Excerpted from a letter Dr. Silkworth originally wrote on behalf of Bill Wilson and the fledgling program of AA to attest to its efficacy to potential benefactors.

³⁸ Wilson, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 11-12.

³⁹ IBID.

⁴⁰ IBID, 12. As McCabe notes, these actions prompted by Ebby form a portion of the “Twelve Steps” Bill Wilson ultimately articulates in *The Big Book*. See McCabe, *Jung and Alcoholics Anonymous*, 27.

Here we see the genesis of Wilson's model for working with other alcoholics: relate first his account of being powerless over alcohol and ultimate submission to a Higher Power. Share how a spiritual experience cured him of an otherwise unshakable desire to drink. If that notion took hold, guide the prospect to identify the persons they had harmed and should offer restitution to, and the resentments towards others they carried. This perspective held that the subversion of self-will to God's and the rooting out of selfishness were key to what Dr. Silkworth called an "entire psychic change." Bill considered alcoholics inherently selfish, feeding their addiction by nursing resentments and self-pity. Only by surrendering this failed model for living could the obsession with drink subside. Unclear to Bill at this time were the full implications of sharing the gift he'd been given as Ebby instructed he do. It seemed the moral thing to do, but he did not yet understand it as the crux to maintaining his own continued sobriety.

It is not surprising that Bill Wilson embraced The Oxford Groups upon exiting Towns Hospital. A former religious skeptic, he now saw a spiritual life as the key to his survival and it was through The Oxford Groups that Ebby Thacher first found sobriety. Over the next five months Bill also sought out alcoholics to share the gift of spiritual recovery. He did so without a single success.⁴¹ Interestingly, he was allowed access to patients at Towns Hospital by Dr. Silkworth for this purpose and given that Wilson's professional name was a bit of a shambles owing to his drinking, there wasn't much else for him to spend his time on. As he noted:

"...my business associates remained skeptical for a year and 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. That sometimes nearly drove me back to drink. I soon found that when all other measures failed, work

⁴¹ Schaberg, *Writing the Big Book*, 9.

with another alcoholic would save the day. Many times I have gone back to my old hospital in despair. On talking to a man there, I would be amazingly lifted up and set on my feet.”⁴²

This realization is foundational in the development of AA’s gift economy. Not only was there a spiritual solution to alcoholism but the crux of keeping sobriety once found was to give it away. It’s also important to note that apparently even the act of attempting to give it away would suffice. As disheartening as the constant rejection of his witnessing must have been, whether the alcoholic being offered the gift accepted it or not, Wilson received back a reinforced sobriety. Therefore, we can see in Bill’s continued proselytizing at Towns Hospital, despite repeated dismissals, an example of Mauss’ concept of self-interested gifting at play. Even though he wished sobriety for others, selfishly he also needed to give it away in order to maintain his own.

By May of 1935 Bill Wilson was deemed fit enough for some of his former colleagues to take a flyer on him and he began to get work again. He was involved in a proxy contest to take control of National Rubber Machinery Company in Akron, Ohio, which required he travel there.⁴³ Although the venture was quickly a bust it was on this trip that Bill Wilson encountered the first person to accept the gift of spiritual sobriety from him: Dr. Robert Smith. Bill was staying in The Mayflower Hotel in Akron, nursing his wounds following the failure of the proxy fight. His business associates had returned to New York, but Bill stayed on, desperately clinging to the notion he could muster a deal. Very likely he knew there was no sure income waiting for him back home, so he had little to lose. He paced the hallway and noticed at one end the hotel bar, at the other a public phone. As Kurtz writes, "God," he thought, "I am going to get drunk”;

⁴² Wilson, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 16.

⁴³ Schaberg, *Writing the Big Book*, 9. See also: Wilson, *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, 56.

and in that thought began the final founding moment for Alcoholics Anonymous... "I *need* another alcoholic," Bill decided.⁴⁴

Instead of heading to the bar Bill opted to use the phone directory and searched for a church to call. He hoped to ultimately be connected with another alcoholic he could talk to. This triggered a strange bout of phone tag after Bill first reached the Reverend Walter Tunks, who coincidentally was associated with The Oxford Groups.⁴⁵ Tunks provided Bill a list of names he might call to connect with another alcoholic.⁴⁶ The popular story in AA mythology is that it was the last of the ten names to finally pick up his call. Whether that's accurate or not, Bill was ultimately connected to Henrietta Sieberling, a devout Oxford Groups participant who in her private meditations had received "guidance concerning the alcoholic surgeon: 'Bob must not touch one drop of alcohol.'"⁴⁷ So it was that Bill Wilson and "Dr. Bob" Smith came to meet, at the behest of a wealthy divorcee who made Bob's sobriety her pet project.⁴⁸ It was also in this meeting that Bill Wilson first tempered his approach to sharing the gift of spiritual sobriety.

Bill believed a concrete spiritual experience had led him to a psychic change and subsequent sobriety and until he met Dr. Bob Smith, it was an experience very much like this he preached to the alcoholics he was hoping to help. It had so far been a fruitless approach. Prior to

⁴⁴ Kurtz, *Not-God*, 27. Italics are Kurtz'.

⁴⁵ The Oxford Groups were not associated with a particular denomination so whether Wilson hoped to find an Oxford Groups connection or not, it's unlikely he could have known Tunks could provide one.

⁴⁶ Wilson, *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, 56.

⁴⁷ Kurtz, *Not-God*, 27-28. Here Kurtz draws upon an interview he conducted with Sieberling recorded April 6, 1976, housed in the AA Archives. Regarding the concept of "Guidance" Kurtz has helpful context: it "was to the Oxford Groups a technical term. It referred to God's direction of one's life, and was usually explicitly sought in moments of silence after prayer...In the mid- to late thirties, the Groups moved toward establishing as the criterion for true "guidance" conformity with its Four Absolutes – absolute unselfishness, absolute honesty, absolute purity, and absolute love."

⁴⁸ Henrietta Sieberling was the former daughter-in-law of the President of the Goodyear Rubber Company. A further note, within AA, Bill Willson and Bob Smith are commonly referred to as "Bill" and "Dr. Bob" and so these references will often be used in this project.

his trip to Akron, Bill shared with Dr. Silkworth his frustrations at his lack of success. He'd kept himself sober by offering the gift of recovery as he understood it to others but a lot of good it'd done them. Dr. Silkworth told him he believed Bill was going about things all wrong, that instead of leading with his spiritual experience he should instead define the medical problem his psychic change had helped him overcome. Bill wrote that Silkworth told him:

“...you've got the cart before the horse. You've got to deflate these people first. So give them the medical business, and give it to them hard. Pour it right into them about the obsession that condemns them to drink and the physical sensitivity or allergy of the body that condemns them to go mad or die if they keep on drinking. Coming from another alcoholic, one alcoholic talking to another, maybe that will crack those tough egos deep down. Only then can you begin to try out your other medicine, the ethical principles you have picked up from The Oxford Group.”⁴⁹

The day after Bill was connected to Henrietta Sieberling, she brought him to meet Dr. Bob and his wife, Anne, at their home in Akron. She'd tried to initiate a meeting the day before, but as Bob recalled, “I'd come home plastered... and forthwith went upstairs and passed out.”⁵⁰ Bill wrote that when he walked into The Smith home, he found Bob severely hungover and trembling, hardly the state a proctologist-surgeon in good health should be in. Ironically, it was to this medical doctor that Bill would first try the approach of emphasizing the medical perspective in his argument for spiritual recovery.⁵¹

Bill Wilson described his first meeting with Dr. Bob in several later accounts and in them we can begin to see a shift in his approach. He led with his personal story of struggling to quit

⁴⁹ Wilson, *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, 67-68.

⁵⁰ Bob Smith, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 179.

⁵¹ Ebby Thacher gave Bill a copy of *The Varieties of Religious Experience* by prominent philosopher William James following Bill's White Light experience. Bill would later often cite its centrality in the founding of AA. We see a seed of that here, as the argument that many paths lead to spiritual enlightenment became a tool Bill would adopt.

drinking, detailing his many failed promises to himself and his wife Lois that he would do so. He then "...bore down heavily on the medical hopelessness of Dr. Bob's case, freely using Dr. Silkworth's words describing the alcoholic's dilemma, the "obsession plus allergy" theme."⁵² It is interesting to note that in Dr. Bob, Bill was offering the gift of sobriety to an alcoholic who had already sought a spiritual solution to alcohol. Bob was even already keen on the teachings of The Oxford Groups, through which Sieberling knew of him and his problem. Indeed, Bill recalled, "[Bob] had paid little attention to that aspect of my story...always better versed in spiritual matters than I..."⁵³ Yet, something about this message from Bill was able to break through. As Smith noted, he "had been cured by the very means I had been trying to employ, that is to say the spiritual approach."⁵⁴ Bob continued, so "What did the man do or say that was different from what others had done or said?"⁵⁵

Smith's account here is helpful for understanding the earliest example of AA's gift economy coming full circle: it was not the spiritual message alone that would best drive it, nor simply the newly added-on medical argument. Dr. Bob recounted,

"He [Wilson] gave me information about the subject of alcoholism which was undoubtedly helpful.⁵⁶ *Of far more importance was the fact that that he was the first living human with whom I had ever talked, who knew what he was talking about in regard to alcoholism from actual experience. In other words, he talked my language. He knew all the answers, and certainly not because he had picked them up in his reading.*"⁵⁷

⁵² Wilson, *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, 136. See also: Bill Wilson, *The Language of The Heart: Bill W.'s Grapevine Writings*, (New York: AA Grapevine, Inc., 1988), 355-356. This text is a compilation of all writings Bill Wilson submitted to the monthly journal of AA, *The Grapevine*.

⁵³ IBID.

⁵⁴ Smith, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 180.

⁵⁵ IBID.

⁵⁶ Here we may assume this to mean the medical background supplied by Dr. Silkworth.

⁵⁷ Smith, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 180. Italics are Smith's.

It was this synthesis of messaging, premised in personal experience, bolstered by medical argument and explained through a spiritual lens that broke through for Dr. Bob. There was a credibility in this forging of camaraderie, one alcoholic talking to another, that made further argument for a spiritual solution plausible. As Kurtz notes, Wilson “didn’t ask questions and he didn’t preach... he simply told the dreary but fascinating facts... about his own drinking.”⁵⁸ We also see in this example another reinforcement of the concept that the giver in AA’s economy benefits along with the receiver. Bill told Bob he’d come to find him because he “needed another alcoholic. I needed you, Bob, probably a lot more than you’ll ever need me...I know now that I’m not going to take a drink, and I’m grateful to you.”⁵⁹ More than simple altruism led Bill to seek out Dr. Bob in Akron. Yet no matter the motivation, in working with Dr. Bob, Wilson stumbled upon what became the first success in his venture to share a spiritual solution to alcoholism. As important, he again kept himself sober in the process.

Just as Wilson did not stop drinking for good the day Ebby Thacher offered the gift of sobriety to him, so Bob did not quit for good right away, either. Shortly after their first meeting Bob invited Bill to stay with he and Anne in their home while Wilson ostensibly chased down any possibility of resurrecting his proxy fight in Akron.⁶⁰ For three weeks Bill participated in Bob and Anne’s daily routine of Oxford Groups readings, prayer and meditation and throughout this time Bob stayed sober.⁶¹ He relapsed shortly after, however, during a trip to Atlantic City for

⁵⁸ Kurtz, *Not-God*, 29.

⁵⁹ IBID. Here Kurtz combines primary quotations from Bill Smith from multiple sources. See also: Wilson, *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, 68-70. Here Wilson writes “I just talked away about my own case until he got a good identification with me, until he began to say “yes, that’s me. I’m like that.”...I had to quit preaching. I knew that I needed this alcoholic as much as he needed me. *This was it.*” Italics are Wilson’s.

⁶⁰ Kurtz notes that Henrietta Sieberling, delighted with Bill’s success in talking to Bob, housed him at a country club in the intervening days. It is unclear how many days Bill stayed there before moving in with The Smiths. See: *Not-God*, 261-262.

⁶¹ Kurtz, *Not-God*, 32. See also: Wilson, *The Language of the Heart*, 356.

a medical conference. After being out of touch for several days he resurfaced in Akron and checked himself into a hospital. Committed to performing an important surgery three days later, Bob was attended to by his wife and Bill and tapered off alcohol. Bill wrote that on the morning of the surgery Bob awoke shaking and told him, "I'm going through with it...this thing we've been talking about."⁶² Bill initially thought Bob merely meant the surgery, but he was referring instead to following through with the spiritual path of sobriety.⁶³ He never drank again and over the course of the next four months Bill and Dr. Bob set out to share their message with hospitalized drunks in Akron until Wilson finally conceded his proxy fight was over and returned to New York City. In this time, they worked with several other drunks, including the third man to successfully attain their method of spiritual sobriety, Bill D.⁶⁴ It is unclear how many others achieved sobriety in this time, with differing accounts estimating between four and six men.⁶⁵

This four-month experiment set in motion what Wilson called the "flying blind" period of AA, where trial and error continued to shape the gift economy, now spearheaded in New York City by Bill and in Akron by Dr. Bob.⁶⁶ Wilson described it, writing:

"It was a time of flying blind, when we feverishly sought the principles upon which we might stay sober and assist the few alcoholics who came around wanting to do likewise. We were entirely preoccupied with the life-and-death question of personal recovery. It was strictly a man-to-man affair. We hadn't even agreed upon a name for our movement. There was no literature."⁶⁷

⁶² Wilson, *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, 71.

⁶³ Concerned readers will be relieved to know that Dr. Smith performed a successful surgery despite his physical condition. See: Wilson, *The Language of The Heart*, 357.

⁶⁴ AA members are often referred to by their first names and first letter of their last names. This is in keeping the tradition of anonymity alluded to in the program's official name, Alcoholics Anonymous. Bill Wilson and Robert Smith are two of a few notable exceptions, given their status as founders.

⁶⁵ Kurtz, *Not-God*, 265. See note 16. There were at least two notable failures, as well. See: Schaberg, *Writing the Big Book*, 10.

⁶⁶ Wilson, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, xvii.

⁶⁷ Wilson, *The Language of The Heart*, 10.

As William Schaberg notes of this period, "...there was no concrete formulation of their program of recovery" and no "Twelve Steps that drinkers could follow as a road map for getting and staying sober."⁶⁸ Upon his return home to Brooklyn, Wilson committed himself to near full-time work with alcoholics, supported financially in this venture by his wife Lois and at times, her family.⁶⁹ Smith also began to devote a significant portion of his time to working with alcoholics while maintaining a small medical practice.⁷⁰ As both men struggled to make financial ends meet and stay sober, they nonetheless began to see fruit in their efforts sharing the message of spiritual recovery. Between late 1935 and mid-1937, both branches slowly grew their number of sober members to a combined total of forty.⁷¹ However, in this span major changes in the fundamental workings of the two had taken hold.

Both the New York and Akron branches of AA began with intimate ties to The Oxford Groups but Bill Wilson and his east coast peers soon encountered friction that caused them to fray. Upon his return home, Bill and Lois were regular attendees of services at the Calvary Church mission of Reverend Sam Shoemaker's Oxford Group. They also attended informal services at various members' "house parties." In audio recordings, Bill recalled that during this time he participated actively in group "guidance" sessions and maintained a personal meditation practice seeking direct inspiration from God, both encouraged by The Oxford Groups'

⁶⁸ Schaberg, *Writing the Big Book*, 11.

⁶⁹ Wilson would occasionally find work but as Kurtz notes "...it is clear, however, that from this point in time – the end of 1935, he had begun to determine to devote the main portion of his time and life to work with alcoholics." See Kurtz, *Not-God*, 265.

⁷⁰ In Notes recorded by Frank Amos in February of 1938, which will be discussed in more detail later in this project, it is recorded that Dr. Smith still maintained a medical practice throughout this time as his efforts skewed towards his work with alcoholics. Amos notes: "At present his income is so low that he can't keep an office secretary and finds it difficult to meet his necessary home expenses." See: Frank Amos, *Notes on Akron, Ohio Survey*, AA GSO, Box 22, Reel 10/8.1 The Alcoholic Foundation: 1937-1938, Documents P-7 through P-10, 3.

⁷¹ Wilson, *The Language of the Heart*, 10.

teachings.⁷² Following what he believed was consistent with this guidance, Bill adopted a new approach to his outreach methods. For six months, he and Lois housed alcoholics they met at Calvary Mission in their home. It was a dicey affair. According to Bill, "We used to have as many as five in the house at a time, and sometimes they would all be drunk at once... One day we came home to find a drunk swinging a piece of two-by-four on another down in the cellar."⁷³ In another instance, after leaving one guest home and unattended "...we came back to find him dead, a suicide."⁷⁴ Bill and Lois decided that hosting drunks in an in-patient format was unsustainable and fruitless, for "[a]s it turned out, we did not sober up a single one."⁷⁵ Even if it helped Bill stay sober, the experiment clearly wasn't worth the collateral risk. They instead switched to hosting a single, weekly meeting in their parlor for alcoholic prospects and Bill was given permission by Dr. Silkworth to continue meeting with alcoholics at Towns Hospital. After approaching them in the hospital and following the model of sharing he'd used with Dr. Bob, these alcoholics were invited to both the Wilson parlor meetings and Oxford Group services. "In spite of much failure," Bill wrote, "a really solid group finally developed. There was first Henry P., and then Fitz M., both out of Towns Hospital. Following them, more began to make real recoveries."⁷⁶

As the Tuesday evening gatherings at the Wilson household gained steam, it became clear that certain Oxford Groups practices were alienating the alcoholics attending them. Whereas Bill and the early New York contingent aimed to pass along a gift of spiritual sobriety, The Oxford Groups had a wider concern; to literally convert the world to their holistic teachings.

⁷² From *AA Main Events*, GSO Box 29, Reel 13 / 17.2. Recorded November 2, 1954. As cited in Schaberg, *Writing the Big Book*, 11. See also: Wilson, *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, 55.

⁷³ Wilson, *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, 63.

⁷⁴ *IBID.*

⁷⁵ *IBID.*

⁷⁶ *IBID.*, 62.

Bill put it this way: “We had found that certain of their ideas simply could not be sold to alcoholics...They would not stand for the rather aggressive evangelism of the Oxford Groups. And they would not accept the principle of “team guidance” for their personal lives. It was too authoritarian for them.”⁷⁷ The concepts of moral absolutes “...were frequently too much for the drunks. These ideas had to be fed with teaspoons rather than by buckets.”⁷⁸ Here again we see Bill embracing syncretism in his approach when needed: if a tactic didn’t help make the gift of spiritual sobriety attractive to drunks, it would be altered. Further, Wilson took issue with the evangelical bent of The Oxford Groups’ philosophy as it extended to recruiting and spotlighting high profile members. The Groups “depended very much upon the use of prominent names – something that was doubtless all right for them but mighty hazardous for us... most alcoholics wanted to be anonymous.”⁷⁹ For their part, the leadership of the Calvary Mission grew less than thrilled with the lack of conformity at Wilson’s parlor meetings and by the Spring of 1937 even told alcoholics at Calvary they were formally forbidden from visiting Wilson’s home. Lois Wilson claimed they were even singled out in a sermon for their “divergent work” as a “secret, ashamed sub-group.”⁸⁰ While Bill would not entirely abandon its concepts, his home group formally severed ties with The Oxford Groups soon after.

The progression of the Akron chapter was different. Known as “The Alcoholic Squadron of The Oxford Group” in Akron, Dr. Bob and his faster-growing cohort considered themselves as a clear extension of their local Oxford Group. As Schaberg notes, “...they were seamlessly integrated with many non-alcoholic members of the Group who attended their meetings each

⁷⁷ Wilson, *IBID*, 64.

⁷⁸ *IBID*.

⁷⁹ *IBID*.

⁸⁰ Kurtz, *Not-God*, 45. Attributed to Lois Wilson in End Note #26, 266.

week.”⁸¹ Critical insight into the workings in Akron at this time are compiled from tape recordings of early Akron member Bob E. and others made by Ernest Kurtz as research for his dissertation (and ultimately, his book) *Not-God: A History of Alcoholics Anonymous*. After sharing with Kurtz his alcoholic story, Bob E. recalled being referred to meet with Dr. Bob Smith who told him he was "chemically constituted differently from the average individual," also recalling that Dr. Bob at first "stayed away from the spiritual angle.”⁸² Over the next few days in the hospital, Bob E. was visited by groups of two or three "alcoholic squadron" members at a time, none of whom told him he needed to do anything. "[T]hey just introduced themselves and started telling [him] their experiences" and then left.⁸³

Like Bill Wilson’s approach to sharing the gift with Dr. Bob, it seems the Akron group’s practice was to lead by first building camaraderie, alcoholic to alcoholic, and then establishing a medical case for alcoholism. However, a key difference is established in Bob E.’s account. He said that once he shared with his visitors that he had some openness to Christian Science, he was charged full-bore with “the spiritual side” of the explanation. From his account:

“I was susceptible... and so he really laid it on thick. He got it over to me that drinking was simply a secondary proposition and was a form of release from whatever self-pity, resentment, imaginary weakness, so forth, and of course he brought out the chemical reaction – the explanation Dr. Smith gave from the medical standpoint – that all tied in.”⁸⁴

He was then put to a public commitment if he wanted to join in fellowship with the Squadron. With Dr. Bob standing over him, Bob E. was told to get on his knees and “ma[k]e a surrender” where he “shared completely...with another person...You couldn’t attend a meeting unless you

⁸¹ Schaberg, *Writing the Big Book*, 22.

⁸² Kurtz, *Not-God*, 53.

⁸³ IBID, 54.

⁸⁴ IBID.

had gone through with that. You couldn't just go to a meeting – you had to go through the program of surrender.”⁸⁵ This explains a nickname of the early Akron program coined by another drunk who found these requirements too harsh at first glance, "the take it or leave it program.”⁸⁶ While tape recordings of early New York AA members made by Kurtz also mention kneeling at times being practiced, there do not appear to have been any strict religious conditions for admission into the east coast fellowship.⁸⁷

Wilson visited Akron in November that year in conjunction with a trip to explore work prospects in Detroit and Cleveland. It was during this trip that the delicate news of the New York branch of AA's split from The Oxford Groups was first made known to their midwestern peers. It was also when the writing of *The Big Book* was first greenlit. Both topics were received tepidly in Akron and it seems possible Wilson expected they would be, for he brought with him three other New York members and their spouses.⁸⁸ Bill's public framing of this visit suggested the topic of *The Big Book* arose from spontaneous mutual interest between he and Dr. Bob. However, it's hard to imagine why he went to the trouble of bringing the other New York members along, unless as confederates to a plan already imagined. Bill recalled of this pivotal time, "When Dr. Bob and I realized on that Fall day in 1937 that some two score of us had recovered from alcoholism, we at once asked ourselves, "How can this experience be shared? How can the word be spread?"... The number of alcoholics in the world who wanted to get well was reckoned in the millions... At the snail's pace we had been going, it was clear that most of

⁸⁵ IBID.

⁸⁶ IBID.

⁸⁷ See endnote #54 in Kurtz, *Not-God*, 270.

⁸⁸ It seems fair to question whether this was truly envisioned to be primarily a work-related trip, as such.

them could never be reached.”⁸⁹ From this grave thought, Bill claimed, sprung the idea for writing a book that could widely disseminate the spiritual gift of sobriety:

“We could therefore no longer be a seldom heard of secret society. Word-of-mouth communication with the few alcoholics we could contact with our then current methods would not only be slow but also dangerous; dangerous because the recovery message in which we now had such high confidence might soon be garbled and twisted beyond recognition. Clearly our budding society and its message would have to be publicized... Above all we would have to put our methods down on paper. A book of experience could carry our message to distant places we could never visit ourselves. Moreover such a book could prevent the otherwise inevitable garble and distortion that would start as soon as publicity came. It would not only guide alcoholics to recovery, but also become the basis for telling our story to the world...”⁹⁰

This visionary proposal, along with plans for paid missionaries and specialized hospitals run by Dr. Bob to enhance it, is often framed as the harmonious ideation of Bill and his co-founder in AA lore. However, it’s likely the reality was far more contentious, as was the vote to proceed with these plans. As Schaberg notes, it’s plausible that Bill and the New York chapter had already conceived of this expansion project and needed to enfold the larger Akron group into its momentum, motivating the recruitment of New Yorkers to make the Akron trip. He writes, “Bill wasn’t going to Akron for these important discussions alone. He was bringing most of the firepower from his home group along with him to ensure at least some support for his ambitious proposals.”⁹¹ Kurtz helps enhance the context, noting that the Akron members were already dubious of Bill and his eastern posse’s recent break from The Oxford Groups. They “were conscious of owing much –indeed, *all-* to The Oxford Group; they relished their identification as

⁸⁹ Wilson, *Alcoholics Anonymous Come of Age*, 115.

⁹⁰ *IBID*, 115-116.

⁹¹ Schaberg, *Writing the Big Book*, 23.

its "Alcoholic Squadron."⁹² It's hard to imagine that Dr. Bob himself wasn't also stung by the schism but one way or another, his trust in Bill was clearly great enough to join him in proposing the writing of *The Big Book* to a quorum of Akron members and the assembled New Yorkers. He did, however, express reservations with other two prongs of Bill's plans.⁹³

The vote to proceed with all three of Bill Wilson's proposals passed by the thinnest of margins and as Schaberg calculates, may not have passed at all without the attendance of Wilson's fellow New Yorkers.⁹⁴ Amongst the concerns lodged by the Akron Squadron were that introducing any of these three proposals would create a profit-making imperative to what they viewed as an extension of the Oxford Groups' evangelical calling. Wilson acknowledged their pushback, writing:

"...those alcoholics really did work us over! They rejected the idea of paid missionaries. Paid workers, they said, would kill our goodwill with alcoholics; this would be sheer ruin. If we went into the hospital business, everybody would say it was a racket. Many thought we must shun publicity; we would be swamped; we could not handle the traffic. Some turned thumbs down on pamphlets and books. After all, they said, the apostles themselves did not need any printed matter."⁹⁵

Bill and the New York cohort did not seem to share any of these fears. In fact, Bill was candid about the need to mix money into their work – after all, how were he, Dr. Bob or others going to stay afloat to keep doing the work if not without outside funding? Bill

⁹² Kurtz, *Not-God*, 56.

⁹³ Wilson details these concerns in *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, 116. One may even read between the lines to conclude perhaps Dr. Bob compelled a vote over his reservations. As Bill writes, after lodging his concerns, Bob said "Why don't we call the Akron boys together and have a meeting at T. Henry's [an Oxford Group member]? Let's try out these ideas on them."

⁹⁴ Schaberg offers a painstaking analysis of the likely number of heads counted at this meeting, since no primary source has a definitive count. It's very likely that without the New York contingent in tow, Bill would not have had popular support to proceed. See: Schaberg, *Writing the Big Book*, 24-27.

⁹⁵ Wilson, *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, 116.

wrote, "I felt that we would have to have money and maybe a lot of it. Neither of us [himself and Dr. Bob] could give the work our full attention unless we were subsidized... The book alone would take considerable time and some money. Neither Bob nor I had money; we had only debts."⁹⁶ Thus, we see the extent of division at the time between the New York and Akron chapters: The New Yorkers embracing change and pragmatism, willing to eschew their formal religious affiliations and take on funding to facilitate the mass-growth needed to spread their gift. By contrast, The Akronites worried both changes threatened the entire foundation of their evangelical economy.

With the critical vote barely passed all three proposals were authorized. However, the Akron branch made it clear that they would not help in any material way: "...no one present volunteered to do much about these things."⁹⁷ If Bill and the New Yorkers wanted to rattle the foundations of the entire effort, they would have to go it alone. "If a lot of money was needed," Bill realized, "I had better go back to New York where there was plenty and raise it myself."⁹⁸ Schaberg's analysis suggests it's possible Bill wouldn't even have been able to wrest away a passing vote without explicit concessions: "He agreed that he would not try to raise those lavish funds in Ohio nor would he be expecting any kind of contributions to come from the Akron Fellowship."⁹⁹ Another bit of AA lore seems to be challenged here: *The Big Book* was not an enthusiastic, organic work of the two geographically split branches. The many miles between New York City and Akron were not the only thing separating them.

⁹⁶ IBID.

⁹⁷ IBID, 117. It's worth observing that "no one" here includes Dr. Bob Smith.

⁹⁸ IBID.

⁹⁹ Schaberg, *Writing the Big Book*, 27.

Between November of 1937 and the date of its publishing in April 1939, Bill Wilson took primary charge over the funding, drafting and publication of *The Big Book* in his quest to expand the gift economy of spiritual sobriety. As he'd argued to the Akron Squadron, a great deal of money would be needed if he, Dr. Bob or anyone else were to give their full attention to the growth of AA. The Big Book itself, let alone any paid missionaries or specialized hospitals, would similarly require robust funding. Upon his return to New York after the Akron vote, Bill leaned on his Wall Street chops and got to work seeking financiers. He was aided primarily in this effort not by his co-founder, Dr. Bob, but by the New York members and foremost, the first successful convert in New York City, Henry "Hank" Parkhurst.¹⁰⁰ Parkhurst was a former sales executive for Standard Oil who, like Bill, had lost professional standing and employment due to his drinking. In addition to his role in helping bring the project of *The Big Book* to fruition, Hank provides another example of the divergence in AA's two charter sects. In Hank's story (titled *The Unbeliever*) published in the first edition of *The Big Book*, he makes it clear that he did not buy into the concept of a Higher Power that could remove his desire to drink. In a distinctive, stream-of-consciousness style he describes Bill visiting him at Towns Hospital:

"Yes, he's an alcoholic all right. And then he told me he knew he was cured. Told me he was peaceful . . . (I'll never know peace again) . . . that he didn't carry constant fear around with him. Happy because he felt free. But it's screwy. He said so himself. But he did get my confidence when he started to tell what he had gone through. It was so exactly like my case. He knows what this torture is. He raised my hopes so high; it looked as though he had something. I don't know, I

¹⁰⁰ Schaberg offers extremely helpful background on Parkhurst and his role in creating the *The Big Book* that this project does not have the breadth to explore. See especially Chapters Nine and Twenty, as well as Appendices II, V and VIII in *Writing the Big Book*. Parkhurst's constant involvement in both the funding, ideation and editing of the *The Big Book* is explained throughout the wider text.

guess I was so sold that I expected him to spring some kind of a pill and I asked him desperately what it was. And he said “God.” And I laughed.”¹⁰¹

It seems unlikely Hank would’ve found easy acceptance in Akron, but working with Bill in New York, he got sober.

Along with another early New York member who was an atheist, Jim Burwell, Hank pushed Bill Wilson to further shy away from the brand of Oxford Groups-based religious sobriety that the Akronites clung to. Jim B.’s story penned for *The Big Book* (titled *The Vicious Cycle*) shows a critical feature of Bill Wilson’s leadership: no one was turned away for lack of belief. As Burwell writes, at the time he started meeting with the growing fellowship of the New York drunks in January 1938,

“...we were working on the principle of every drunk for himself; we had no real formula and no name. We would follow one man’s ideas for a while, decide he was wrong, and switch to another’s method...At our weekly meeting I was a menace to serenity those first few months, for I took every opportunity to lambaste that “spiritual angle,” as we called it, or anything else that had any tinge of theology...For a long time the only Higher Power I could concede was the power of the group, but this was far more than I had ever recognized before, and at least it was a beginning.”¹⁰²

Clearly Bill would need to appeal to the views of people like Hank and Jim when putting pen to paper to codify the gift of spiritual sobriety. The concept of a Higher Power would need to be spacious enough for all and indeed, perhaps even the group of drunks itself could fit the bill. In the vacuum created by the Akron Squadron’s lack of support for this expansion, more liberal

¹⁰¹ Parkhurst, Hank. *Alcoholics Anonymous*, first edition. 198. This segment is quoted in full. The ellipses are all Parkhurst’s. Hank’s story was subsequently removed from future editions of *The Big Book* because he relapsed and never achieved long-term sobriety again. He is nonetheless an instrumental figure in the history of AA.

¹⁰² Burwell, Jim. *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 227-229.

views were given room to bloom. Yet, another matter took precedence before even considering how to tackle the daunting project: how to pay for it.

Bill Wilson and his New York peers brainstormed who they might appeal to for the funding needed to fuel their planned expansion. Never to be accused of a lack of ambition, Wilson wrote, “We said to ourselves, “Why, this is probably one of the greatest medical and spiritual developments of all time. Certainly the rich will help us. How could they do anything else?” Then, too, the New York group had scraped up a couple of super-salesmen, people who thought exactly like I did.”¹⁰³ To their surprise, the response was nil: “Some of the wealthy exhibited mild concern and sympathy, but they were not really interested...Why should they try to revive a lot of down-and-out alcoholics who had brought their troubles upon themselves?”¹⁰⁴ Their immediate contacts exhausted, Bill and his peers were soon connected with the richest man in the world, John D. Rockefeller, Jr.¹⁰⁵ Although Hank P. was a former high-ranking executive for Rockefeller’s major profit producer, Standard Oil, the connection was made in a far more circuitous fashion. Greatly discouraged by the failure to find sympathetic funding quickly, Wilson called upon his brother-in-law Dr. Leonard V. Strong, an osteopathic physician.¹⁰⁶ While the pretext for the visit was discomfort owing to what Bill would later describe as “one of my imaginary ulcer attacks,” and to vent about his lack of success in finding financial backers, Kurtz

¹⁰³ Wilson, *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, 117. The “super-salesmen” mentioned most likely are Hank P. and Jim B.

¹⁰⁴ IBID.

¹⁰⁵ John D. Rockefeller’s wealth at the time of his death in 1937 was equivalent to 1.5% US GDP. His son had just taken over the family’s business empire when Wilson approached him for funding.

¹⁰⁶ Strong was one of Wilson’s only consistent allies throughout his drinking career and even funded stays at Towns Hospital. For background, see: Thomsen, *Bill W.*, 127-149.

notes that Bill "had chosen his listener well and perhaps craftily" due to Strong's prominent social profile and connections.¹⁰⁷

Bill wrote of this visit, "...I delivered a diatribe on the stinginess and short-sightedness of the rich. Ours was a movement that would doubtless sweep the world. What was wrong with people anyway?"¹⁰⁸ Dr. Strong introduced Bill to a colleague that had formerly been the New York City Health Commissioner, thinking perhaps a connection could be made to potential donors sympathetic to a public health issue like solving alcoholism. During this visit the idea of reaching out to The Rockefeller Foundation was raised, since the family was famously teetotaling.¹⁰⁹ Bill less than graciously quipped, "Well, how about the Prince of Wales!"¹¹⁰ Dr. Strong recalled at some point during this visit that he'd once taken Bible classes from a friend's uncle who was involved with the Laura Spelman Foundation, named for John D. Rockefeller Sr.'s late wife.¹¹¹ On the off chance that he was still involved with the family's charitable dealings, Leonard reached out to the Reverend William D. Richardson and successfully connected Bill with him. Before long Bill had secured an in-person meeting with Richardson, who now oversaw the personal charitable donations of Rockefeller, Jr. He explained the success of the spiritual gift of sobriety with one alcoholic working with another, its toeholds in New York and Akron and the need for financial assistance to share the message at scale.

¹⁰⁷ Wilson acknowledged the ulcer as pretext in *AA Main Events, 1937, Point 16*. As cited in Schaberg, *Writing the Big Book*, 37. Wilson also references the "imaginary ulcer" in *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, 35. The second quote is from Kurtz, *Not-God*, 65.

¹⁰⁸ Wilson, *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, 117.

¹⁰⁹ Rockefeller, Sr. was one of the most prominent backers of the temperance movement and prohibition. He funded and penned the forward to *Toward Liquor Control*, a prohibition-era study of alcohol regulation written by Raymond Fosdick in 1933.

¹¹⁰ Excerpted from audio recording of Bill Wilson speaking in Memphis, TN on 9/19/1947, 1:20:50 to 1:24:30. As cited in Schaberg, *Writing the Big Book*, 38.

¹¹¹ The foundation was later joined into the John D. Rockefeller Foundation. See: Schaberg, *Writing the Big Book*, 38.

Bill left the meeting feeling extremely enthusiastic at the prospect of Rockefeller's support and according to a letter written by Dr. Bob the following week, phoned Akron immediately after his meeting with Richardson to share the good news and let Bob that know his presence may be needed in New York shortly to pitch funding ideas to Rockefeller himself. Smith's letter also gives insight into the precarious state of his financial affairs by then. He wrote, "Our business here has all gone to pieces so I hardly think I should get East for a while...Let me know, Bill, if there are any recent developments because I feel I should have to do something shortly to correct this situation here, if possible."¹¹² The short- and long-term hopes of AA were thus pinned to the Rockefeller connection. Unfortunately, the imagined windfall would not come. Writing to Leonard Strong on Bill's behalf, Richardson said he'd met with four other men of influence in the Rockefeller sphere (while not mentioned explicitly, we might assume one was Rockefeller, Jr. himself) who all found "...the matter very important. They were all inclined to agree with me that, if possible, any organization of this project and anything that tended to professionalize or institutionalize it would be a serious matter and quite undesirable."¹¹³ He went on to say he'd like to lunch with Dr. Strong and Bill the following week, even though "...there is little more I would have to add."¹¹⁴ Richardson's concerns on professionalizing or institutionalizing the spiritual gift of sobriety were strikingly like those of the skeptical Akron Squadron.

Curiously, as Schaberg points out, it seems Bill only focused on the fact that he had another chance to meet with Richardson rather than the clear rebuke of his large-scale dreams.

¹¹² Letter from Bob Smith to William Wilson, 11/1/37. Stepping Stones Archive, WGW 102, Correspondence General – Smith, Robert Holbrook – Letters to WGW 1937 [4], Box 9, Folder 4. As cited in Schaberg, *Writing the Big Book*, 43.

¹¹³ Letter from William Richardson to Leonard Strong, 11/10/37. AA GSO Archives, Box 59, Folder A, Reel 28, 1937-2. As cited in Schaberg, *Writing the Big Book*, 43-44.

¹¹⁴ IBID.

He observes, “[e]ver the salesman, Bill surely interpreted this to mean that although he hadn’t yet closed the deal, he was at least halfway.”¹¹⁵ He again pitched Richardson the three-fold plan of *The Big Book*, paid missionaries and specialized hospitals when they met for lunch, but Richardson still wouldn't commit any Rockefeller funds. He did, however, offer to arrange a dinner to introduce Bill to more potential contacts. Bill wrote to Akron and rosily framed his progress to Dr. Bob. Soon Bob replied with excitement and his response makes clear he kept all news of potential funding close to the belt. He wrote, "Dear Bill !-- Glad to hear from you again and to learn that some interest is being evinced by the Foundation. I showed your letter to Paul, T. Henry and Clarace only."¹¹⁶ He went on to write that he would do his best to attend the meeting. While the specific reasons for Bob’s secrecy are not explicitly known, it stands to reason that he risked rocking the boat in the Akron fellowship by supporting Bill’s efforts overtly. He was also clearly on board with the full scope of Bill’s plans by this time, perhaps coaxed by his recent acknowledgement of financial problems. With both Bill and Dr. Bob’s livelihoods now entwined with that of the Program’s expansion, the dinner was planned for December 1937.

It seems the group of influential men assembled by Reverend Richardson were stirred.¹¹⁷ Following the only model they knew to work, each alcoholic took turns telling his story to the Rockefeller men of what it was like, what happened and what they were like after getting sober

¹¹⁵ Schaberg, *Writing the Big Book*, 44.

¹¹⁶ Letter from Bob Smith to Bill Wilson, 11/22/37. Stepping Stones Archive, WGW 102, Correspondence General – Smith, Robert, Holbrook – Letters to WGW 1937 (4), Box 9, Folder 4. As cited in Schaberg, *Writing the Big Book*, 45-46. Paul Stanley is the only alcoholic of three mentioned. T. Henry and Clarace Williams were sober Oxford Group members who hosted meetings for the Alcoholic Squadron. Wilson’s letter to Smith does not appear to have been saved, unfortunately.

¹¹⁷ Attendees for the Rockefeller group: Reverend Richardson, Albert Scott (head of an international engineering firm), A. Leroy Chipman (Manager of Rockefeller, Jr.’s real estate empire) and Frank Amos (Vice President of an NYC advertising firm). Attendees representing AA: Bill Wilson, Dr. Bob Smith, Hank Parkhurst, Fitz Mayo, Paul Stanley, Bill Ruddell, Joe Taylor and Ned Pointer (all charter AA members representing both NY and Akron) and Dr. William Silkworth. See: Schaberg, *Writing the Big Book*, 52-56 for context.

through spiritual means. As recorded by one attendee, Frank Amos, he and his religiously minded peers were impressed that "[t]he methods and the approach used are practical and spiritual but are not in accordance with any hard and fast dogma or rule of thumb procedure."¹¹⁸ However, concerns over professionalizing the work of what they deemed Christian goodwill prevailed. Bill Wilson wrote of the meeting that Albert Scott, head of an international engineering firm and the defacto leader of the Rockefeller group that night, all but quashed any hope of funding at the scale needed to pursue the full expansion planned. He recalled:

“Then Mr. Scott posed a question that is still heard in AA to this day ‘Won’t money spoil this thing?’ he asked... ‘Won’t money create a professional class? Wouldn’t professional members spoil the man-to-man approach that is now successful? Wouldn’t the management of a hospital chain, with all the property and money required, be a fatal diversion?’¹¹⁹

Bill and his super-salesmen pushed back: “We answered we had already pondered these perils ourselves but had finally concluded that to do nothing at all would be even more perilous... [a]t last impressed with our logic, our new friends began to yield. They admitted we did need money, at least *some* money.”¹²⁰ Considering these pleas, The Rockefeller group decided to fund an exploratory trip to Akron to consider creating one hospital which Dr. Bob would direct. This small, 30-50 bed concept massaged concerns over radical professionalization by being a sort of all-in-one rehabilitation and training center. As Amos wrote, "Their [Wilson and Co.] idea was that this could be used primarily for handling cases from outside Akron, which when cured, could go home and continue the work in their communities."¹²¹ While not the bold, national hospital chain originally envisioned, let alone a team of missionaries to dispatch, we see in this

¹¹⁸ Amos, *History of the Alcoholics*, 2.

¹¹⁹ Wilson, *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, 119.

¹²⁰ IBID. Italics are Wilson's.

¹²¹ Amos, *History of the Alcoholics*, 4.

concept both Wilson's pragmatism again at work as well as a focus on keeping Dr. Bob financially solvent. Were this plan adopted, a proof of concept could be tested at the same time Akron's AA leader was enabled to transition away from his flailing medical practice. It is also somewhat remarkable that with this pivot, Bill seemed to place Dr. Bob's needs above his own. While many parties expressed concern over the financial entanglements of AA's growth, this example suggests its primary founder was chiefly concerned with the program's overall security. It may be that Wilson also knew without Dr. Bob's support there would be little hope of keeping The Akronites in the fold.

Frank Amos was dispatched to Akron and during the trip met with several Oxford Group and Alcoholic Squadron members. He also scouted potential properties Dr. Bob recommended to consider as hospital sites. After two and half days, he returned to New York and compiled a written report and set of recommendations for Rockefeller to consider. Schaberg correctly points out that we are indebted to this record as it provides one of the only known third party observations of the early workings of Akron's program. Amos provided a list of seven key features, which showed requirements for membership in the Akron group at that time. Most notable is point #3: "Not only must he [an alcoholic prospect] want to stop drinking permanently, but he must remove from his life other sins such as hatred, adultery and others...[u]nless he will do this, absolutely, Smith and his associates refuse to work with him."¹²² Yet again, we see the distinctions between the Akron chapter's religiosity compared to the pragmatism of Wilson and his New York peers.¹²³

¹²² Amos, *Notes on Akron*, 2.

¹²³ By contrast, amongst the New York group it is well-established that both Hank P. and Bill Wilson himself conducted extra-marital affairs. Wilson even included his long-term mistress in his will.

Amos praised the workings of the program in his report to Rockefeller and made clear he was careful to make no representations to Dr. Bob or any other Akron members regarding funding. He then proposed three potential funding options for Rockefeller to consider. The first was the launch of a small hospital following the model pitched at the dinner in New York, which he estimated would cost between "\$75,000 to \$100,000 to purchase and equip" adding, "later some plan like this may be advisable, but in my opinion we are not ready to recommend this."¹²⁴ The second was a paired down plan to purchase a home for alcoholics transferred from care in Akron City Hospital to convalesce and be converted in. This should only be considered with "...the firm understanding that it must be self-supporting except perhaps for whatever would be supplied to Dr. Smith" as a paid administrator.¹²⁵

Last was the option most closely adopted by Rockefeller: "...to arrange on a confidential basis, with only a small but carefully selected committee knowing anything about it, a monthly remuneration for Dr. Smith for a period of at least two years until the whole proposition could get well going and perhaps be absolutely self-supporting in every way."¹²⁶ It is interesting to once again note the secrecy with which any potential compensation to Smith was considered. We may assume it was understood by Amos following his visit that introducing money into the picture was a thorny matter amongst the Akron drunks. It is more interesting that the clear consensus among the Rockefeller group continued to be that giving any sizeable amount of funding to the fledgling fellowship would be a mistake and risked destroying the gift economy of spiritual sobriety altogether. Rockefeller made his final decision on the matter, providing a one-time payment for \$5,000.00 with specific earmarks to fund only Dr. Bob's work in Akron. He

¹²⁴ IBID, 3.

¹²⁵ IBID, 4.

¹²⁶ IBID.

wrote to Reverend Richardson of the gift, "What has been accomplished according to these records in regenerating human life is almost miraculous. I do not wonder at your interest in the work... It is understood that the money can be spent during one, two, or three years as may seem to you wise, but that in any event you will not look to me for further contribution to this object."¹²⁷ Rockefeller could have easily funded every aspect of the major expansion dreamed of by Bill Wilson but he instead agreed with the counsel of his advisors that to professionalize this spiritual work would ruin its effect. With this response, any hope of the costly propositions of hospitals or paid missionaries was pushed off.

Richardson, Scott and Amos delivered the bad news to Bill Wilson. They also realized that an injection of \$5,000.00 specific only to Dr. Bob's work would likely require Wilson to abandon his own work with alcoholics in order to earn an income. They agreed to serve as trustees of "The Alcoholic Fund," which was envisioned as a short-term clearinghouse for potential donations made in support of Wilson's work until AA could pay its own way. Bill lamented that fundraising following the Rockefeller gift continued to lag, saying, "we didn't get one red cent, not one."¹²⁸ In April of 1938 he succeeded in securing \$500.00 from the owner of Towns Hospital, Charles Towns. This was divided up amongst Bill, Hank P. and Fitz M., and although a pittance split three ways, it represented the second contribution to their efforts. More piecemeal donations and loans further propped the group up. Bill took stock of where he and his peers were. Schaberg notes, "...his more ambitious plans were completely dependent on large donations from the rich...a book would take far less time to complete and it would cost them significantly less money to produce."¹²⁹ Wilson and Parkhurst also believed that with some

¹²⁷ Letter from John D. Rockefeller, Jr. to William Richardson, 3/17/38. AA GSO, Box 59, 1938, Folder B, Document 1938-15. As cited in Schaberg, *Writing the Big Book*, 86.

¹²⁸ AA Main Events, 1938, Point 13. As cited in Schaberg, *Writing the Big Book*, 98.

¹²⁹ Schaberg, *Writing the Big Book*, 102.

publicity, a finished book would sell in volume great enough to fund the wider growth of AA. So, the decision was made for Wilson to shift his primary focus to producing content for the book while Hank continued to pursue donations to support The Alcoholic Fund. Hank also ideated "The One Hundred Man Corporation" by which shares in the forthcoming book could be sold.¹³⁰ Once again, no assistance or support would be coming from Akron.

Bill Wilson was not an author by training. Yet with his grander schemes for sharing the gift of spiritual sobriety blocked by lack of funding, he found himself backed into a corner. No one else had stepped forward to provide the means to share the gift of recovery at scale, let alone maintain the living expenses necessary to support his work with alcoholics. So, he began to write. Once again, he leaned on the lessons learned from his successful work with others: he told his own story first. Entitled "Bill's Story," it remains the first chapter in *The Big Book* in the current, 4th edition. It begins with Bill recounting a memory from his time in England in World War I. While visiting Winchester Cathedral his "attention was caught by a doggerel on an old tombstone: "Here lies a Hampshire Grenadier / Who caught his death / Drinking cold small beer. / A good soldier is ne'er forgot / Whether he dieth by musket / Or by pot." Ominous warning – which I failed to heed."¹³¹ He proceeds to describe his return home from the War at age 22, subsequent schooling and courtship of his wife and his progressive drinking throughout.

"The great boom of the twenties was seething and swelling," he writes, "Drink was taking an important and exhilarating part in my life. There was loud talk in the jazz places uptown.

¹³⁰ This is another topic that cannot be done justice in the scope of this project. For more information see: Schaberg, *Writing the Big Book Book* Chapter 15, 289-314. Several thousand dollars were ultimately raised and provided modest funding to Wilson and his New York peers during the writing of *The Big Book*.

¹³¹ Wilson, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 1.

Everyone spent in thousands and talked in millions.”¹³² Then came the stock market crash of 1929.

“Abruptly in October 1929 hell broke loose on the New York Exchange. After one of those days of inferno, I wobbled home from a hotel bar to a brokerage office. It was eight o’clock -- five hours after the market closed. The ticker still clattered. I was staring at an inch of the tape which bore the inscription XYZ-32. It had been 52 that morning. I was finished and so were many of my friends.”¹³³

Over the next two years, he "began to waken very early in the morning shaking violently. A tumbler full of gin followed by a half dozen bottles of beer would be required if [he] were to eat any breakfast.”¹³⁴ When during financial calamity all around him he lucked upon a job in 1932, he "...went on a prodigious bender, and that chance vanished.”¹³⁵ The cycle continued, through more lost work, failed promises to his wife and himself to quit and several hospitalizations. The account moves on to describe his fateful meeting with Ebby Thacher in 1934 and Bill’s conversion experience at Towns Hospital. It continues describing the fellowship growing around him of men and women freed of their addiction through the gift of spiritual sobriety. The chapter concludes:

“An alcoholic in his cups is an unlovely creature. Our struggles with them are variously strenuous, comic, and tragic. One poor chap committed suicide in my home. He could not, or would not, see our way of life. There is, however, a vast amount of fun about it all. I suppose some would be shocked at our seeming worldliness and levity. But just underneath there is a deadly earnestness. Faith has to work twenty-four hours a day in and through us, or we perish. Most of us feel we need

¹³² IBID, 3.

¹³³ IBID, 4.

¹³⁴ IBID, 5.

¹³⁵ IBID.

look no further for Utopia. We have it with us right here and now. Each day my friend's simple talk in our kitchen multiplies itself in a widening circle of peace on earth and good will to men."¹³⁶

His personal experience recorded; Bill faced a more difficult task. He needed to explain how the economy of spiritual sobriety worked in terms that would not alienate either its current membership in New York or Akron, let alone the many unknown drunks whom the book may reach in lieu of personal contact.

Bill settled on the title "There is a Solution" for the second chapter of *The Big Book*. In it he chose to address the tensions between New York and Akron head on, looking to thread a needle between the devoutly religious and atheists alike that could get sober through spiritual means. A 1940 letter uncovered by Schaberg captures his personal beliefs in deference to his pragmatism:

"By degrees I find that I have become a rather Orthodox Christian. But I do not find, at least within our group, that I can better serve God by demanding anyone agree with me. If I can be used to help people find a consciousness of the Presence of God I hope I shall please Christ quite as much, if I still permit each individual to attach his own label to that experience. Of course this is no final conclusion on my part. I may be entirely wrong, but I fancy Christ Himself would prefer the hottentot happily aware of God and usefully serving Him, then He would the most orthodox were he in a state of useless drunkenness. I think Christ would be interested in Christian results rather than Christian professions."¹³⁷

Allowing for heavily gendered language and use of a derogatory term as a vestige of his time, there is remarkable flexibility in this perspective. The standard of success for Bill was spiritual

¹³⁶ IBID, 16.

¹³⁷ Letter from Bill Wilson to McGhee Baxter, 10/30/40. AA GSO Box 54, Reel 25, Folder G, Richmond, VA, pp. 23-24. As cited in Schaberg, *Writing the Big Book*, 137. "Hottentot" was by Wilson's time used as a generalized term connoting savagery or primitivism amongst African people, instead of its original reference to the South African non-Bantu indigenous people of Khoi. It is, therefore, racist.

sobriety and it mattered little to him what “God” meant to another so long as the former was achieved. In fact, for the psychic change needed to overcome alcoholism, it was critical that each drunk define a Higher Power as they understood it. With a big tent in mind, Bill begins the chapter describing the fellowship’s composition as “...average Americans... many political, economic, social and religious backgrounds. We are people who would not normally mix.”¹³⁸ Still, he writes, “[t]he tremendous fact for everyone of us is that we have discovered a common solution...This is the great news this book carries to those who suffer from alcoholism.”¹³⁹ After a lengthy description of what makes an alcoholic powerless over drink, he returns to his focus:

“*There is a solution.* Almost none of us liked the self-searching, the leveling of our pride, the confession of shortcomings which the process requires for its successful consummation. But we saw that it really worked in others, and we had come to believe in the hopelessness and futility of life as we had been living it. When, therefore, we were approached by those in whom the problem had been solved, there was nothing left for us but to pick up the simple kit of spiritual tools laid at our feet. We have found much of heaven and we have been rocketed into a fourth dimension of existence of which we had not even dreamed.”¹⁴⁰

To realize the gift of spiritual sobriety, one can believe whatever one needs to, Wilson promised. If one is simply willing to surrender a failed life, driven by self-will, and try out the “simple kit of tools” available, a whole new way of living --a fourth dimension-- is possible.

Upon completing the first two chapters of *The Big Book*, Bill came to a yet another pragmatic realization. No matter how well he may summarize the arguments for and benefits of spiritual sobriety, the most powerful aspect of the developing program was the camaraderie developed in peer-to-peer communication, one drunk sharing his experience with another. In

¹³⁸ Wilson, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 17.

¹³⁹ IBID.

¹⁴⁰ IBID. 25.

order to bridge the divide between interpersonal and written communication to unreached alcoholics, Bill knew they'd need to include personal stories from several AA members in the book. If his own story couldn't reach someone, perhaps another's could. He could likely count on New York members to participate but securing accounts from Akron would amount to receiving endorsement from the wary Squadron. Bill was thoughtful in his approach, knowing that the road to incorporating Akron in this work ran through Dr. Bob.

He wrote to Bob throughout the summer of 1938, providing drafts of his writing, progress reports on fundraising efforts and proposing another of Hank P.'s ideas: the creation of a nonprofit organization that would manage proceeds from the sale of the future book, as well as any other donations.¹⁴¹ As Schaberg suggests, dangling funding for Dr. Bob's hospital was perhaps the best way to ensure unity. In June Bill wrote, "What would you say about the formation of a charitable corporation to be called, let us say 'Alcoholics Anonymous'? Money coming in from the book could be handled through it as well as any funds arising from contributions...The trustees of this corporation could administer any other enterprises we might want to engage in; such for instance, as sanitariums."¹⁴² Here we see not only one of the first uses of what became the program's formal name, but also Wilson flexing the power of his position. He no doubt wanted to fund hospital(s) for Dr. Bob to oversee, but he also understood the politics involved to maintain harmony with the Akron chapter. We do not have the benefit of knowing the specific content of telephone discussions held between the two men that summer,

¹⁴¹ Amos notes "[t]hrough the efforts, particularly of Messrs. Wilson and Parkhurst, small sums of money have been secured by gifts and loans from outside sources, and plans were made in the Spring of 1938 to start a definite campaign amongst people who it was believed would be interested in this movement, and who would be able to contribute toward it." See: Amos, *History of The Alcoholics*, 7.

¹⁴² Letter from Bill Wilson to Dr. Bob Smith, [June 22,23 or 24], 1938. AA GSO, Box 59, 1938, Folder B, Document 1938-25 to 1938-30. As cited in Schaberg, *Writing the Big Book*, 233.

but we know they took place.¹⁴³ By August Bob was on board with whipping stories for *The Big Book* as noted in a letter sent to him from Bill. In it, Bill gave specific directions for what he needed from such accounts. "About the stories, I should say that everyone should write whatever length they want to; the more, the better...The idea is that a chance word or phrase may be the most telling point of the story..."¹⁴⁴ This participation secured; Bill could continue to focus on drafting the core content of *The Big Book*.

In chapter 3, entitled "More About Alcoholism", Wilson covers in greater depth colorful details of what alcoholism looks like and the powerlessness of the condition. He also offers a simple litmus test to the doubting drunk who may encounter his writing: "We do not like to pronounce any individual as alcoholic, but you can quickly diagnose yourself. Step over to the nearest barroom and try some controlled drinking...It will not take long for you to decide, if you are honest with yourself."¹⁴⁵ In chapter 4, entitled "We Agnostics", Wilson addresses in greater depth the need for a Higher Power to help an alcoholic achieve what self-will cannot.

Acknowledging that for many it may be a tall ask, as it had been for him, he begs readers to keep an open mind. He points out:

"...the twentieth century readily accepts theories of all kinds... We have numerous theories, for example, about electricity. Everybody believes them without a murmur of doubt. Why this ready acceptance? Simply because it is impossible to explain what we see, feel, direct and use, without a reasonable assumption as a starting point...Everybody nowadays, believes in scores of assumptions for which there is good evidence, but no perfect visual proof."¹⁴⁶

¹⁴³ See: Schaberg, *Writing the Big Book*, 233-234.

¹⁴⁴ Letter from Bill Wilson to Bob Smith, 8/7/38. AA GSO, Box 59, 1938, Folder B(1), Document 1938-106. As cited in Schaberg, *Writing the Big Book*, 234.

¹⁴⁵ Wilson, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 31-32.

¹⁴⁶ IBID, 50.

He then promises the path is wide for all who are willing to seek a --any-- Higher Power:

“In our personal stories you will find a wide variation in the way each teller approaches and conceives of the Power which is greater than himself. Whether we agree with a particular approach or conception seems to make little difference. Experience has taught us that these are matters about which, for our purpose, we need not be worried. They are questions for each individual to settle for himself.”¹⁴⁷

Having made the case from personal experience and conceptual argument for why one should be open to a spiritual solution to alcoholism, Bill moves on the most important content in *The Big Book*, aptly titling chapter 5 “How It Works”. For the first time he codifies the practical principles one should follow to get sober, thereby officially offering the gift of spiritual recovery in writing. The trouble was, while some general practices were common between the New York and Akron drunks, there had never been a formal agreement of what exactly *must* be done. Until that point there had been the luxury of working with another person and embracing a trial-and-error approach. In written form, the spiritual gift of sobriety would need to be explicitly summarized. Gearing up for this task, Bill met with New York members to review the common consensus of how The Oxford Groups’ model of conversion first imparted by Ebby Thacher was currently being used. Once again, by nature of refusing to participate in the proceedings, The Akron group was not consulted. Bill and the New Yorkers came up with 6 general “steps” they agreed maintained sobriety: acknowledging powerlessness over alcohol; making an inventory of defects and sins; confessing harms done to others; making restitution for those harms; committing to helping other alcoholics; and practicing prayer and meditation with a Higher Power.¹⁴⁸ Reviewing these general principles, Wilson began to write what became the “Twelve

¹⁴⁷ IBID, 50.

¹⁴⁸ For background, see: Kurtz, *Not-God*, 69

Steps." "Our steps would need to become more explicit" he wrote, "There must not be a single loophole through which the rationalizing alcoholic could wiggle out... thus we could get the distant reader over the barrel, at the same time we might be able to broaden and deepen the spiritual implications of our whole presentation."¹⁴⁹

The passage that follows encompasses the Steps and is often read at the start of AA meetings to the present day. It is included here in full:

“RARELY HAVE we seen a person fail who has thoroughly followed our path. Those who do not recover are people who cannot or will not completely give themselves to this simple program, usually men and women who are constitutionally incapable of being honest with themselves. There are such unfortunates. They are not at fault; they seem to have been born that way. They are naturally incapable of grasping and developing a manner of living which demands rigorous honesty. Their chances are less than average. There are those, too, who suffer from grave emotional and mental disorders, but many of them do recover if they have the capacity to be honest. Our stories disclose in a general way what we used to be like, what happened, and what we are like now. If you have decided that you want what we have and are willing to go to any length to get it - then you are ready to take certain steps.

At some of these we balked. We thought that we could find an easier, softer way. But we could not. With all earnestness at our command, we beg of you to be fearless and thorough from the very start. Some of us have tried to hold on to our old ideas and the result was nil until we let go absolutely. Remember that we deal with alcohol - cunning, baffling, powerful! Without help it is too much for us. But there is One who has all power - that One is God. May you find him now. Half measures availed us nothing. We stood at the turning point. We asked His protection and care with complete abandon.

Here are the steps we took, which are suggested as a program of recovery:

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol - that our lives had become unmanageable.

¹⁴⁹ Wilson, *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, 127.

2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.
4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.
8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.
12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

Many of us exclaimed, "What an order! I can't go through with it." Do not be discouraged. No one among us has been able to maintain anything like perfect adherence to these principles. We are not saints. The point is, that we are willing to grow along spiritual lines. The principles we have set down are guides to progress. We claim spiritual progress rather than spiritual perfection. Our description of the alcoholic, the chapter to the agnostic, and our personal adventures before and after make clear three pertinent ideas:

- (a) That we were alcoholic and could not manage our own lives.
- (b) That probably no human power could have relieved our alcoholism.
- (c) That God could and would if He were sought."¹⁵⁰

In finally committing this passage to writing Wilson felt "greatly relieved," and after numbering the new steps he noticed "...they added up to twelve. Somehow this number seemed significant. Without any special rhyme or reason [he] connected them with the twelve

¹⁵⁰ Wilson, Alcoholics Anonymous, 58-60.

apostles.”¹⁵¹ For the first time there existed a formal summary of how the program of spiritual sobriety worked. There was enough reference to the foundational conversion and meditation preached by The Oxford Groups to maintain coherence for The Akron fellowship, and enough roominess in its spiritual boundaries to enfold religious skeptics. While there could be no getting around the act of surrender to a Higher Power as a necessary means of triggering an entire psychic change, it was as seeker friendly as Wilson believed possible.

Chapters 6-10 serve as a practical instruction manual which flesh out the Twelve Steps. They include descriptions of what to do when working each step, the importance of working with other alcoholics in order maintain one’s own sobriety and advice for family members and employers of alcoholics that wish to understand their problem and encourage recovery. The final chapter, entitled “A Vision For You”, reviews the content covered in the book and assures the reader that sobriety and a new spiritual life is possible, even if they find themselves isolated from members of the fellowship at present. The gift of spiritual sobriety will continue to spread, Wilson writes, to alcoholics everywhere. “High and low, rich and poor, these are future fellows of Alcoholics Anonymous. Among them you will make lifelong friends. You will be bound to them with new and wonderful ties, for you will escape disaster together and you will commence shoulder to shoulder on your common journey.”¹⁵² The personal stories section of *The Big Book* follows, beginning with the story of Dr. Bob, and as of the 4th edition, including the stories of 41 other members.¹⁵³ While it took nearly two years to sell the first run printing of 4,650 copies,

¹⁵¹ Wilson, *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, 127.

¹⁵² Wilson, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 152.

¹⁵³ This section contains the only major revisions between the four editions published as of the writing of this project. It has been updated to either remove stories from members who failed maintain long-term sobriety, or to add stories that reflect the growing diversity of membership.

sales very quickly skyrocketed thereafter, and Bill Wilson realized his dream. The gift economy of Alcoholics Anonymous was canonized.¹⁵⁴

.....

When Bill Wilson was visited by Ebby Thacher in 1934 he was a hopeless, agnostic drunk. Disillusioned by the state of the world around him and its rapid acceleration into modernity, he'd embraced oblivion over hope. By the time he died in January of 1971, Wilson had seen Alcoholics Anonymous grow into an international fellowship and the Twelve Steps spin off into several other spiritual programs. The gift economy he launched has continued to grow exponentially in 82 years and as of 2018 accounted for over 2.1 million active AA members spread across more than 120,000 different groups worldwide.¹⁵⁵ As of 2017, *The Big Book* had been printed in 69 languages with editions in 21 additional languages under various stages of completion.¹⁵⁶ *The Big Book* is ranked #10 in The Library of Congress' "Books That Shaped America List".¹⁵⁷ Its 40 millionth copy was sold in 2020.¹⁵⁸ Its sales provided for the growth of AA's General Service Office and Bill Wilson and Bob Smith's livelihoods until their deaths.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁴ "A Guide to Collecting *Alcoholics Anonymous Big Book*": <https://www.abebooks.com/books/guide-to-collecting-alcoholics-anonymous-big-book/> (Retrieved March 2021). First printings are currently for sale ranging \$12,500.00 - \$100,000.00. An original manuscript sold at auction in 2018 for \$2.4 Million:

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/retropolis/wp/2018/03/09/lost-for-decades-the-alcoholics-anonymous-original-manuscript-will-be-auctioned-for-millions/> (Retrieved March 2021).

¹⁵⁵ Alcoholics Anonymous GSO Fact File: https://www.aa.org/assets/en_US/m-24_aafactfile.pdf (retrieved March 2021).

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¹⁵⁸ AA Press Release Announcing 40 Millionth Copy: https://www.aa.org/press-releases/en_US/no_page/alcoholics-anonymous-celebrates-85-years-with-the-2020-aa-online-international-convention- (Retrieved March 2021).

¹⁵⁹ All shareholders besides Wilson and Smith were bought out in 1940 and royalty agreements were struck, with 80% ownership of *The Big Book* being given to AA GSO, 10% each to Wilson and Smith. At the time of Smith's death, 5% of his ownership was relinquished to Wilson. See Wilson, *The Language of the Heart*, 145-150 for details on the 1940 transaction. Lois Wilson received 13.5% of Bill's shares upon his death, with his mistress receiving the

Plans for paid missionaries and AA hospitals never came to fruition and in Wilson's ultimate estimation, this was just as well. Though he sought in vain the funding needed to launch such grandiose plans, he conceded in 1945 that "[m]uch money would have meant a large staff of professional AA therapists or "do-gooders," and promoters plus money would surely have meant ballyhoo on every subject under the sun from prohibition to communist Russia. Internally, if we still existed at all, we would have been torn apart by political controversy, religious dissension."¹⁶⁰ By steering clear of any such controversy, Bill Wilson was able to share the gift of inclusive, spiritual sobriety while sidestepping religious, political and cultural upheaval. Not to be overlooked, he also kept himself sober for the rest of his life.

Before closing out his contributions to the *The Big Book*, Bill Wilson offered a final benediction. It encapsulates his life's work and compels sober alcoholics to ever further the economy that saved them:

"Our book is meant to be suggestive only. We realize we know only a little. God will constantly disclose more to you and to us. Ask Him in your morning meditation what you can do each day for the man who is still sick. The answers will come, if your own house is in order. But obviously you cannot transmit something you haven't got. See to it that your relationship with Him is right, and great events will come to pass for you and countless others. This is the Great Fact for us. Abandon yourself to God as you understand God. Admit your faults to Him and to your fellows. Clear away the wreckage of your past. Give freely of what you find and join us. We shall be with you in the Fellowship of the spirit, and you will surely meet some of us as you trudge the Road of Happy Destiny. May God bless you and keep you--until then."¹⁶¹

remainder. See "The Changing World of Alcoholics Anonymous" from 2/21/88 *New York Times*: <https://www.nytimes.com/1988/02/21/magazine/the-changing-world-of-alcoholics-anonymous.html>

¹⁶⁰ Wilson, *The Language of The Heart*, 11.

¹⁶¹ Wilson, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 164.

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