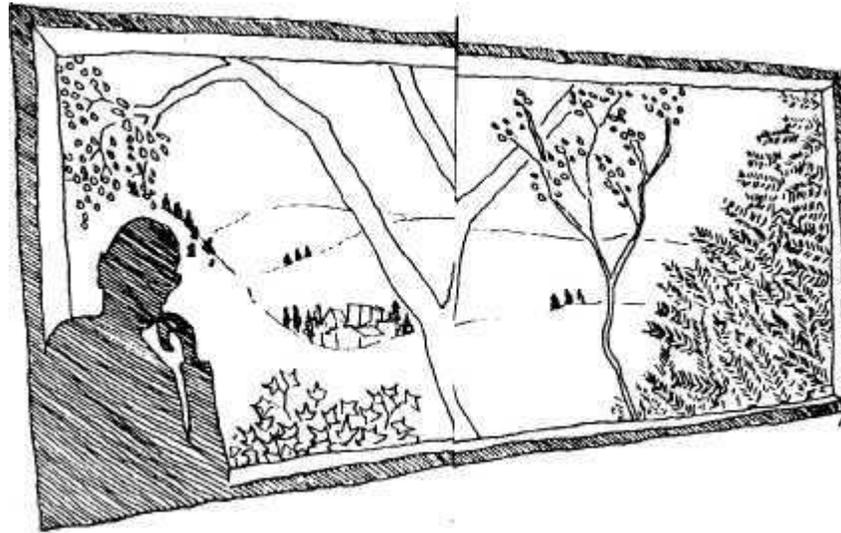


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by Bill W....

The Language of the Heart

MY WORKSHOP stands on a hill back of our home. Looking over the valley, I see the village community house where our local group meets. Beyond the circle of my horizon lies the one world of AA: eight thousand groups, a quarter of a million of us.* How in twenty-five years did AA get the way it is? And where are we going from here?

Often, I sense the deep meaning of the phenomenon of Alcoholics Anonymous, but I cannot begin to fathom it. Why, for instance, at this particular point in history has God chosen to communicate His healing grace to so many of us? Who can

say what this communication actually is — so mysterious and yet so practical? We can only partly realize what we have received and what it has meant to each of us.

It occurs to me that every aspect of this global unfoldment can be related to a single crucial word. The word is *communication*. There has been a lifesaving communication among ourselves, with the world around us, and with God.

From the beginning, communication in AA has been no ordinary transmission of helpful ideas and attitudes. It has been unusual and sometimes unique. Because of our kinship in suffering, and because our common means of deliverance are effective for ourselves only when constantly carried to others, our

channels of contact have always been charged with *the language of the heart*. And what is that? Let's see if I can communicate to you something of what it means to me.

At once, I think of my own doctor, William Duncan Silkworth, and how he ministered to me with the language of the heart during the last shattering years of my alcoholism. Love was his magic, and with it he accomplished this wonder: He conveyed to the foggy mind of the drunk that here was a human being who understood, and who cared without limit. He was one who would gladly walk the extra mile with us, and if necessary (as it often was), even the last mile of all. At that time he had already tried to help over twenty thousand drunks, and

From the Grapevine book AA Today, published on the occasion of AA's twenty-fifth anniversary

he had failed with nearly all. Only here and there had this dismal experience of futility been brightened by a genuine recovery. People wondered how he could go on, how he could still believe in the possibility of help for chronic alcoholics. Yet he did believe with a faith that never faltered. He kept saying, "Some day we'll find the answer."

He had developed some ideas of his own about what ailed drunks: They had an *obsession* to drink, a veritable and a destructive lunacy. Observing that their bodies could no longer tolerate alcohol, he spoke of this as an *allergy*. Their obsession made them drink, and their allergy was the guarantee that they would go mad or die if they kept it up. Here, in contemporary terms, was the age-old dilemma of the alcoholic. Total abstinence, he knew, was the only solution. But how to attain that? If only he could understand them more and identify with them better, then his educational message could perhaps reach into those strange caverns of the mind where the blind compulsion to drink was entrenched.

So the little doctor who loved

* Now thirty-seven years old, AA has about 17,000 groups and an estimated membership of 575,000.

drunks worked on, always in hope that the very next case might somehow reveal more of the answer. When I came to him, his more recent concepts and tactics had begun to produce slightly improved results. So he was encouraged, and he went after my situation with something of the enthusiasm and hope of a young doctor on his first critical case. He told me what an infernal malady alcoholism is, and why. He made no promises, and he did not try to conceal the poor recovery rate. For the first time, I saw and felt the full gravity of my problem. I learned, also for the first time, that I was a sick man emotionally and physically. As every AA today knows, this knowledge can be an enormous relief. I no longer needed to consider myself essentially a fool or a weakling.

This new insight, plus the little doctor's account of a few of his good recoveries, brought me a surge of hope. But above all, my confidence rested on the understanding, the interest, and the affection he so freely gave me. I was not alone any more with my problem. He and I could work it through. Despite several discouraging slips, I truly believed this for quite a while. And so did he.

But the hour finally arrived when he knew that I was not going to be one of his exceptions. He would have to begin to walk that last mile with my wife Lois and me. Characteristically, he found the courage

"Here was one drunk

gently but frankly to tell us the whole truth: Neither mine nor his nor any other resources he knew could stop my drinking; I would have to be locked up or suffer brain damage or death within perhaps a year.

It was a verdict I would not have accepted from any other person. He had spoken to me in the language of the heart, and so I was able to receive the truth he offered me. But it was a terrible and hopeless truth. He spoke in the name of science, which I deeply respected, and by science I seemed condemned. Who else could have driven home this indispensable principle on which every recovery depends? I seriously doubt that any other man alive could have done it.

Today, every AA member implants in his new prospect just what Dr. Silkworth so powerfully lodged in me. We know that the newcomer has to hit bottom; otherwise, not much can happen. Because we are "drunks who understand," we can use that nutcracker of the-obsession-plus-the-allergy as a tool of such power that it can shatter the new man's ego at depth. Only thus can he be convinced that on his own unaided resources he has little or no chance.

I was in precisely this state of inner collapse when, in November of 1934, I was visited by Ebby. He

talking to another. Here was hope indeed."

was an old friend, an alcoholic, and my sponsor-to-be. Why was it that he could communicate with me in areas that not even Dr. Silkworth could touch?

Well, first of all, I already knew that he himself was a hopeless case — just like me. Earlier that year, I had heard that he, too, was a candidate for the lockup. Yet here he was, sober and free. And his powers of communication now were such that he could convince me in minutes that he really felt he had been released from his drinking compulsion. He represented something very different from a mere jittery ride on the water wagon. And so he brought me a kind of communication and evidence that even Dr. Silkworth could not give. Here was *one drunk talking to another*. Here was hope indeed.

Ebby told me his story, carefully detailing his drinking experiences of recent years. Thus he drew me still closer to him. I knew beyond doubt that he had lived in that strange and hopeless world where I still was. This fact established his *identification* with me. At length, our channel of communication was wide open, and I was ready for his message.

And what was his message? All AAs know what it was: honesty with oneself, leading to a fearless moral inventory of character defects; a revelation of these defects to an-

other human being, the first humble and faltering steps away from isolation and guilt; willingness to face up to those we had harmed, making all possible restitution. A thorough housecleaning inside and out was indicated, and then we were ready to devote ourselves in service to others, using the understanding and language of the heart, and seeking no gain or reward. Then there was that vital attitude of dependence on God, or a higher power.

None of Ebby's ideas were really new. I'd heard them all before. But coming over his powerful transmission line, they were not at all what in other circumstances I would have regarded as conventional clichés for good church behavior. They appeared to me as living truths *which might liberate me as they had liberated him*. He could reach me at depth.

But in one respect I still backed away. I could not go for God, because I could not believe there *was* any God. Ebby sold me his other ideas at once, but not this one. I could not share his faith, as much as I had to admit its very evident result.

I had struck an impasse with which thousands of incoming AAs have since collided.

Mine was exactly the kind of deep-seated block we so often see today in new people who say they

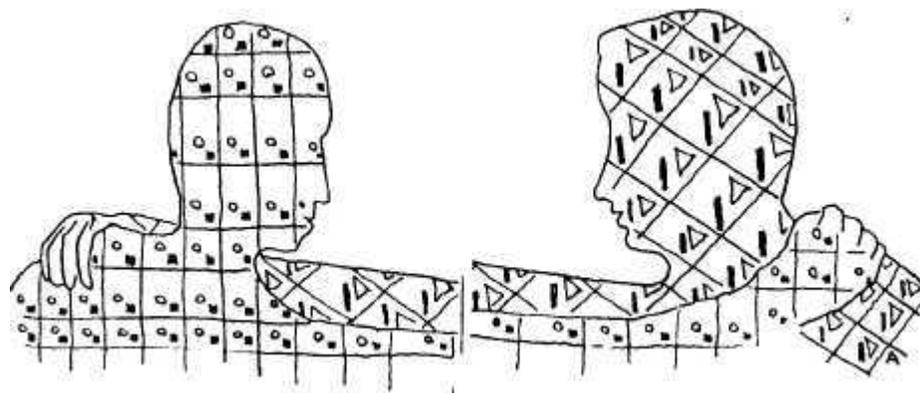
are atheistic or agnostic. Their will to disbelieve is so powerful that apparently they prefer a date with the undertaker to an open-minded and experimental quest for God. Happily for me, and for most of my kind who have since come along in AA, the constructive forces brought to bear in our Fellowship have nearly always overcome this colossal obstinacy. Beaten into complete defeat by alcohol, confronted by the living proof of release, and surrounded by those who can speak to us from the heart, we have finally surrendered. And then, paradoxically, we have found ourselves in a new dimension, the real world of Spirit and of faith. Enough willingness, enough open-mindedness — and there it is!

When my own time for open-mindedness and surrender finally came, that new world of Spirit burst upon me in a flash of overwhelming conviction and power. And as a result, freedom from obsession, faith in God, and a consciousness of His presence have remained with me ever since, regardless of subsequent ups and downs. The gift of faith instantaneously became built into me. My pride had paid a very high price. In despair, I had cried out, "Now I am willing to do anything. If there is a God, will He show Himself!" And He did. This was my first conscious contact, my first awakening. I asked from the heart, and I received.

With this illumination came the vision of a possible chain reaction,

one alcoholic working with the next. I was convinced that I could give to fellow sufferers that which Ebby had given to me, and for months afterwards I tried to carry the message. But nobody sobered up, and a wonderful lesson came out of the experience: I was painfully learning *how not to communicate*. No matter how truthful the words of my message, there could be no deep communication if what I said and did was colored by pride, arrogance, intolerance, resentment, imprudence, or desire for personal acclaim — even though I was largely unconscious of these attitudes.

Without realizing it, I had fallen pretty heavily into these errors. My spiritual experience had been so sudden, brilliant, and powerful that I had begun to be sure I was destined to fix just about all the drunks in the world. Here was pride. I kept harping on my mystical awakening, and the customers were uniformly repelled. Here was imprudence. I began to insist that every drunk should have a "bright-light uplift" just about like mine. I ignored the



fact that God comes to man in many ways. I had begun in effect to say to my clients, "You must be as I am, believe as I believe, do as I do." Here was the sort of unconscious arrogance that no drunk can stand! I loudly began to point out the sins of my prospects (mostly, of course, the sins I supposed I didn't have), and the prospects got sore and so did I. When they got drunk, I got mad. And here was hurt pride again.

My new Oxford Group friends (the religious group in which Ebby had made his first, but not final recovery) objected to the idea of alcoholism as an illness, so I had quit talking about the-allergy-plus-the-obsession. I wanted the approval of these new friends, and in trying to be humble and helpful, I was neither. Slowly I learned, as most of us do, that when the ego gets in the way it blocks communication.

I needed another big dose of deflation, and I got it. The realization dawned on me that for six months I had failed completely. Then Dr. Silkworth gave me this crisp advice: "Quit preaching, quit harping on

your odd spiritual experience. Tell your own story. Then pour it into those drunks how medically hopeless alcoholism is. Soften them up enough first. *Then* maybe they will buy what you really have to say. You've got the cart before the horse."

My meeting with Doctor Bob in Akron was my first successful rapport with another alcoholic. I followed Dr. Silkworth's advice to the letter. Doctor Bob did not, need spiritual instruction. He already had more of that than I did. What he did need was the deflation at depth and the understanding that only one drunk can give another. What I needed was the humility of self-forgetfulness and the kinship with another human being of my own kind. I thank God for providing it.

One of the first insights Doctor Bob and I shared was that all true communication must be founded on mutual need. Never could we talk down to anyone, certainly not to a brother alcoholic. We saw that each sponsor would have to humbly admit his own needs as clearly as those of his prospect. Here was the foundation for AA's Twelfth Step to recovery, the Step in which we carry the message.

Our next great adventure in communication was the book *Alcoholics Anonymous*. After four strenuous years, we had produced three small groups and less than a hundred recoveries. We knew we could communicate face to face. But it was

very slow going. As we prepared the book, we all wondered, "Could the written word carry the message?" Could the book speak the language of the heart to the drunk who read it? We didn't know; we simply hoped. But now we do know.

Alcoholics Anonymous appeared in 1939. At that time, there were one hundred drunks who had recovered in AA. And there were five million alcoholics and their families in America alone who had never heard of Alcoholics Anonymous. There were perhaps another twenty million sufferers in other parts of the world. How were we going to get the good news to even a fraction of all these? There was now a book about AA, but almost nobody outside the Fellowship knew about it.

It became apparent that we would have to have the help of press and radio, that we would need communication resources of every kind. Would these agencies really be interested? Would they be friendly? Would they be able to place a true image of AA before the alcoholic and his family and friends?

The answer turned out to be yes. In the fall of 1939, Elrick Davis, a fine reporter, wrote a series of pieces about us in the Cleveland *Plain Dealer*. These pieces embodied truly wonderful insight into what AA really is and what it can do, and within a few days *several hundred* alxies and their families literally swamped the small AA group in Cleveland with pleas for help. In

the next year, Jack Alexander wrote his famous *Saturday Evening Post* feature article on Alcoholics Anonymous, published in 1941. And for the first time we saw what communication in the language of the heart could mean nationwide.

The impact of his article upon the alcoholics of America, upon their families, and upon the general public was tremendous. There was an immediate deluge of calls for information and for help — not hundreds, but thousands. We were flabbergasted. It was evident that our recovery message could be transmitted all over the country — if we did our part.

As our Fellowship now entered its period of rapid growth, the Traditions of AA gradually took form. The Twelve Traditions communicate our principles of unity as the Twelve Steps communicate our principles of recovery. The Traditions show how an AA member can best relate himself to his group, the group to other groups, and AA as a whole to the world around us. They show what AA membership is; they reveal AA's experience in matters of authority and money; they guard against compromising alliances, professionalism, and our very natural desires for personal public acclaim. The Twelve Traditions were slowly evolved during an era when large-scale publicity was causing new groups to spring up like popcorn on a hot griddle. Many a power-driven ego ran hog-wild among us in those

days, and it was the Traditions which finally brought order, coherence, and effective functioning out of the noisy anarchy which for a time threatened us with collapse.

The Traditions are neither rules, regulations, nor laws. No sanctions or punishments can be invoked for their infraction. Perhaps in no other area of society would these principles succeed. Yet in this Fellowship of alcoholics, the unenforceable Traditions carry a power greater than that of law. For years now, we have seldom seen a serious departure from them. The example of the very few who have persistently ignored them has not caused others to follow suit. We obey our Traditions willingly because of the need for AA survival. We obey them because we ought to and because we want to. Perhaps the secret of their power lies in the fact that these life-giving communications spring out of living experience and are rooted in sacrificial love.

Even in the very earliest days of AA, we began to find that the kinship of having suffered severe alcoholism was in itself not enough. We saw that, in order to cross certain barriers, our channels of communication had to be broadened and deepened. For example, practically all of AA's first members were what we today call last-gasp or low-bottom cases. When the mildly afflicted or high-bottom cases began to turn up, they often said, "But we were never jailed. We were never in men-



tal hospitals. We never did those frightful things you fellows talk about. Maybe AA is not for people like us."

For years, we old-timers simply could not communicate with such folks. Then, out of much experience, a new approach was developed. To each new high-bottom, we emphasized the medical view that alcoholism is a fatal and *progressive* malady. We concentrated on the earlier periods in our drinking careers, when we were mild cases ourselves. We recalled how sure we were that "next time we could control ourselves" when we took a few drinks. Or how our drinking was the fault of unfortunate circumstances or the behavior of other people.

Then we took the prospect through the parts of our histories which proved how insidious and irresistible the progress of the illness is. We showed him how, years before we realized it, we had actually gone much beyond the point of no return so far as our own resources of strength and will were concerned. We kept pointing out how right the doctors are in their assessment of this malady.

Slowly but surely, this strategy began to pay off. The low-bottoms began to communicate at depth with

the high-bottoms. And the high-bottoms began talking to each other. As soon as any AA locality took in even a small number of high-bottom drunks, progress with this class of sufferer became very much faster and easier. It is probable that about half of today's AA membership has been spared that last five, ten, or even fifteen years of unmitigated hell that we low-bottoms know all too well.

In the beginning, it was four whole years before AA brought permanent sobriety to even one alcoholic woman. Like the high-bottoms, the women also said they were different. But as communication was improved, mostly by the women themselves, the picture changed. Today, our sister AAs are many thousands strong.*

The skid-row man said he was different. Even more loudly, the socialite (or Park Avenue stumblebum) said the same. So did the practitioners of the arts and the professions. So did the rich, the poor, the religious, the agnostics, the Indians, the Eskimos, the veterans, and the prisoners. But that was years ago. Nowadays, they all talk about how very much alike we alcoholics are when the chips are down.

By 1950, this one big question remained unanswered: Could we communicate overseas? Could AA transcend the barriers of race, language, religion, culture, and wars? What about the Norwegians, the

* According to a recent survey, about one-fourth of present-day AA members are women.

Swedes, the Danes, and the Finns? What about the Dutch, the Germans, the French, the English, the Scots, and the Israelis? How about the Africans, the Boers, the Aussies, the Latins, and the Japanese, the Hindus and the Mohammedans?

So Lois and I wondered a lot as we headed for Europe and Britain to see for ourselves that year. The moment we alighted in Norway, we knew that AA could and would go everywhere. We understood not one word of Norwegian. Scenes and customs alike were new and strange to us. Yet there was a marvelous communication from the first moment. There was an incredible sensation of oneness, of being completely at home. The Norwegians were our people. Norway was our country, too. They felt the same way about us. It shone in their faces.

As we journeyed from land to land, we had the same magnificent adventure in kinship over and over again. In Britain, we met with the most wonderful love and understanding. In Ireland, we were at one with the Irish. Everywhere, everywhere, it was the same. This was something much greater than people cordially meeting people. This was no merely interesting comparison of mutual experiences and aspirations. This was far more; this was the communication of heart to heart in wonder, in joy, and in everlasting gratitude. Lois and I then knew that AA could circle the globe — and it has.