

# Harry Tiebout

## Alcoholism: The Ego Reducer

Talk before the AA International Convention in St. Louis, 1955

Under ordinary circumstances, I should thank the man who introduced me for his very nice remarks, but also for years I've been teaching the need for ego reduction, and I'm not sure that my ego got sufficiently reduced by the introduction.

When the invitation came to speak before this group I immediately said, "Yes, I want to go." For many years, as you all know, I have been associated with A.A., and all the experiences that I had had came flashing through my mind, and I had so much to say that I didn't know quite where to begin. With your permission, I'm going to use a manuscript, so that the points I want to make will not be forgotten.

At an A.A. meeting the speaker as a rule identifies himself as an alcoholic and then proceeds to tell his story, sprinkling wisdom or humor, or both, as he goes along. I shall also tell my story, although I am less sure of matching either the wit or the wisdom of the A.A. speakers.

I joined A.A. by proxy in 1939 when a patient of mine became a member of the New York group. Well do I remember my first meeting. It was tense with excitement. A.A. was going on the air for the first time. One of the members, trying to rehabilitate himself, had talked with Gabriel Heatter, who, on hearing his story, suggested that he, the A.A. man, appear on the program "We The People." This was the night and it was far too thrilling and special for settling down to a regular meeting.

The actual event was a bit of a letdown. The man from A.A. spoke briefly of his experiences, Gabriel Heter asked a couple of pointless questions and it was over. A.A., however,

had taken a step toward making itself known, not a very big step, to be sure; but one of the many which finally led to its present position on the national and international scene.

Later I attended other meetings, more orthodox in character, and as I did, I developed the conviction that the group had hit upon a method which solved the problem of excessive drinking. In a sense, it was an answer to my prayers. After years of butting my head against the problem of treating the alcoholic, One could now begin to hope.

In retrospect my first two or three years of contact with A.A. were the most exciting in my whole professional life. A.A. was then in its miracle phase. Everything that happened seemed strange and wonderful. Hopeless drunks were being lifted out of the gutter. Individuals who had sought every known means of help without success were responding to this new approach. To be close to any such group, even by proxy, was electrifying.

In addition, professionally, a whole new avenue of [treating the] problems of alcohol had opened up. Somewhere in the A.A. experience was the key to sobriety. Here was the first authentic clue after many years of fruitless effort. Needless to say, The possibilities ahead were most intriguing. Perhaps I could learn how A.A. worked and thus learn something about how people stopped drinking. All of which meant that I shared in the general excitement of those days. I could see some daylight ahead. My future in this regard was now clear. I would try to discover what made A.A. tick.

In this quest for understanding I would never have gotten beyond first base if it had not been for Bill and many of the early members. A study of the Twelve Steps helped a little, but of far greater importance were the many insights already possessed by Bill and the others into the process through which A.A. brought about its results. I heard of the need to hit bottom, of the necessity for accepting a higher Power, of the indispensability of humility. [These were] ideas which had never crossed my professional horizon and certainly had never influenced my nonprofessional thinking or attitudes. Revolutionary as they were, they nevertheless made sense, and I found myself embarked on a tour of discovery. I began to recognize more clearly what hitting bottom really implied, and I began to do what I could to induce the experience in others,

always wondering what was happening inside the individual as he went through the crisis of hitting bottom.

Finally, fortune smiled upon me again, this time from another patient. For some time she had been under my new brand of psychotherapy, designed to promote hitting bottom. For reasons completely unknown, she experienced a mild but typical conversion which brought her into a positive state of mind. Led by the newly found spiritual elements, wek though they were, she started attending various churches in town. One Monday morning she entered my office, her eyes ablaze, and at once commenced talking. "I know what happened to me! I heard it in church yesterday. I surrendered."

With that word "surrender" she handed me my first real awareness of what happens during the period of hitting bottom. The individual is fighting an admission of being licked, of admitting that he was powerless. If and when he surrendered, he quit fighting, could admit that he was licked, and could accep that he was powerless and needed help. If he did not surrender, a thousand crises could hit him and nothing would happen. The need to induce surrender became the new therapeutic goal.

The miracle of A.A. was now a little clearer, for reasons still obscure the program and the fellowship of A.A. could induce a surrender which could in turn lead to a period of no drinking.

As might be expected, I too had a thrill of my own. I was getting in on what was happening, all of it an enjoyable experience. Still questing eagerly, I shifted my therapeutic attack. The job now was to induce surrender. WHen I tried to cause that, I ran into a whole nest of resistances to that idea. Totally new territory to be explored. As I continued my tour it became ever more apparent that in everyone's psyche there existed an unconquerable ego which bitterly opposed any thought of defeat. Until that ego was somehow reduced or rendered ineffective no likelihood of surrender could be anticipated.

The shift in emphasis from hitting bottom, to surrender, to ego reduction, occurred during the first five or six years of my initial contact with A.A. I well remember the first A.A. meeting to which I spoke on the subject of ego reduction.

A.A., still very much in its infancy, was celebrating a third or fourth anniversary of one of the groups. The speaker immediately preceding me told in detail of the efforts of his local group, which consisted of two men, to get him to dry up and become its third member. After several months of vain efforts on their part, and repeated nose dives on his, the speaker went on to say, "Finally I got cut down to size, and I've been sober ever since," a matter of some two or three years then.

When my turn came to speak I used his phrase, "cut down to size," as a text around which to weave my remarks. Before long, out of the corner of my eye, I was conscious of a disconcerting stare. It was coming from the previous speaker. Looking a little more directly I could see his eyes fixed on me in open-eyed wonder. It was perfectly clear that he was utterly amazed that he had said anything that would make sense to a psychiatrist. The look of incredulity never left his face during my entire talk.

The incident had one value in my eyes. It showed that two people, one approaching the matter clinically, and the other relying on his own intuitive report of what had happened to him, both came up with exactly the same observation: the need for ego reduction.

During the past decade my own endeavors have centered primarily upon this problem of ego reduction. How far I have been able to explore the territory is not at all certain. I have made, however, a little progress, and in the minutes remaining I shall try, first, to acquaint you with some of my findings, and second, to relate them to the A.A. scene as I see it.

As I have already stated, the fact of hitting bottom to produce a surrender which cut the ego to size was evident fairly soon. In time two additional facts manifested themselves. The first was that a reduced ego has marvelous recuperative powers. The second was that surrender is an essential disciplinary function and experience. The first is merely repeating a fact known to you

all. It is common knowledge that a return of the full-fledged ego can happen at any time. Years of sobriety are no insurance against its resurgence. No A.A., regardless of his veteran status, can ever relax his guard against the encroachments of a reviving ego.

Recently one A.A., writing to another, reported that he was suffering, he feared, from “halotosis,” an obvious reference to the smugness and self-complacency which so easily can creep into the individual with years of sobriety behind him. The assumption that one has all the answers, or the contrary, that one needs to know no answers, but just to follow A.A., are two indicators of trouble. In both, open-mindedness is notably absent.

Perhaps the commonest manifestation of the return of ego is witnessed in the individual who falls from his pink cloud, a state of mind familiar to you all. The blissful state is a logical aftermath of surrender. The ego, which is full of striving, just quits, and the individual senses peace and quiet within. The result is an enormous feeling of release, and the person flies right up to his pink cloud and thinks he has found heaven on earth. Everyone knows he is doomed for a fall. But it is perhaps not equally clear that it is the ego slowly making its comeback which forces the descent from the pink cloud into the arena of life, where, with the help of A.A., he can learn how to become a sober person and not an angel.

I could go on with many more examples familiar to you all, to show you the danger of ever assuming that the ego is dead and buried. Its capacity for rebirth is utterly astounding and must never be forgotten.

My second finding, that surrender is a disciplinary experience, requires explanation. In recent articles I have shown that the ego, basically, must be forging continuously ahead, and that it operates on the unconscious assumption that it, the ego, should never be stopped. It takes for granted that it is right to go ahead. And in this respect it has no expectation of ever being stopped and hence no capacity to adjust to that eventuality. Stopping says in effect, “No, you cannot continue,” which is the essence of disciplinary control. The individual who cannot take a stopping is fundamentally an undisciplined person.

The function of surrender in A.A. is now clear. It produces that stopping by causing individuals to say, "I quit. I give up my headstrong ways. I've learned my lesson." and truly feel, "Thy will, not mine, be done." When that is true we have become in fact obedient servants of God. The spiritual life, at that point, is a reality. We have become members of the human race.

I have now presented the two points I wished to make, namely, first, the ego is revivable, and second, surrender is a disciplinary experience.

I next wish to discuss their significance to A.A. as I see it. Primarily, they say quite simply that A.A. can never just be a miracle. The single act of surrender can produce sobriety by its stopping effect upon the ego. Unfortunately, that ego will return unless the individual learns to accept a disciplined way of life, which means that a tendency for ego comeback is permanently checked.

This is not new to A.A. members; they have learned that a single surrender is not enough. Under the wise leadership of the founding fathers, the need for continued endeavor to maintain that miracle has been steadily stressed. The Twelve Steps urge repeated inventories, not just one, and the Twelfth Step itself, a routine reminder that one must work at deserving sobriety. Moreover, it is referred to as Twelfth Step work, which is exactly what it is. By that time the miracle is for the other fellow.

The Traditions are also part of a non-miracle aspect of A.A. They represent, as Bill has said, the meanings and the lessons of experience. They serve as guides for the inexperienced. In reality, they check the ways of the innocent and the unwary. They bring the individual down to earth and present him with the facts of reality. In their own fashion they say, "Pay heed to the teachings of experience or you will court disaster." It is not without reason that we talk with a sober voice of experience.

My stress on the non-miracle elements of A.A. has a purpose. When I first made my acquaintance with A.A., I rode the pink cloud with most of its members. I, too, went through a period of disillusionment and, fortunately for me, I came out with a faith far stronger than

anything a pink cloud can supply. Mind you, I'm not selling miracles short. They do loosen the individual up. I know however, now, the truth of the Biblical saying, "By their fruits ye shall know them." Only through hard toil and labor can lasting results be obtained.

As a consequence of the need for work to supplement any miracle, my interest in the non-miracle features is strong. I can accept more truly the necessity of organization and of structure to curb as well as to guide. I believe there must be meetings like this one to provide the sense of belonging to a big working organization, of which each individual is but a part. And I believe that any group or individual who fails to participate in the enterprise of the organization is rendering himself and his group a disservice by not submitting to the disciplinary values inherent in those activities. He may be keeping the ego free of entanglements but he is also keeping himself unstopped. His chances of remaining sober are not of a high order. He is really going it alone and may be needing another miracle, which may not come off the next time.

In closing, let me reaffirm my proxy membership in A.A. I have been in on its glowing start and I have shared in its growing pains. And now I have reached the state of deep conviction in the soundness of the A.A. process, including its miracle aspects. I have tried to convey to you some of my observations on the nature of that process. I hope they will help in making the A.A. experience not just a miracle but a way of life which is filled with eternal value. A.A. has, I can assure you, done just that for me. Thank you.