

Harry Tiebout Maintaining Sobriety

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The topic I have selected has interested me for many years. AA is faced with a dual responsibility. It first must bring its message to newcomers, and second, see that the message exerts a continuing influence upon its members. As I see it, when the message is truly received, a miracle is worked. Whether that change comes slowly or in a rush, the shift to sobriety is nothing short of miraculous.

In my paper at St. Louis, I discussed that aspect of AA. I talked about hitting bottom, surrender, and ego reduction. All of which contributed to the interchange that has made sobriety possible. I also warned that the problem of keeping sober still lay ahead. Today, I shall devote my remarks to the concern we all have for the problem of maintaining sobriety once it is achieved. No one can afford to rest on his laurels. Sobriety to be preserved must be earned by good works and hard. Sobriety is never handed to one on a silver platter.

This problem of no small moment to all in AA. The years have passed, and the length of sobriety of many members has

stretched into a very respectable number of years. The question of preservation of the non-drinking state is increasingly before us as time marches on. The answer as you all know is not always favorable.

Here and there one sees and hears that the old-timer who lasted 10 to 15 years without trouble is back once again in the rat race of alcoholism. The number is not alarming, nor do I think it represents a trend, but it happens with sufficient frequency and apparently over a wide enough area to make it a matter worthy of serious concern and consideration.

My paper will have three sections. The first will present my understanding of the workings of the AA program. The second will describe the downfall of sobriety, the ego, and how it may be identified. The third will discuss humility, which is the arch opponent of the ego. On the basis of these three sections, I shall endeavor to offer some comments on the AA scene.

The first section has to do with how sobriety succeeds initially. Here I shall repeat much of what I said before about hitting bottom, surrender, and ego reduction. Summarizing my thinking, I believe that the person, if and when he succeeds in becoming a member of AA, has first: undergone a conversion or personality change, which has occurred because he has second: hit bottom, which has produced third: a surrender by his previously entrenched ego. This can be put into something of an equation which reads hitting bottom plus surrender equals conversion or personality change. Basic to all such thinking is the fact that in this new state may be found the capacity to feel and to have humility. What then is this ego, this downfall of sobriety?

Without going into the long technical discussion about its source, let me in the second section give you some feel for the inner attitude that I have in mind about the nature of this ego, which is the villain in the drama, of the alcoholic. To start with, let

me illustrate my ideas with a story that goes back a number of years. The dangers of ego, in the sense I am using it here, was just becoming apparent to me and to all my patients, One day one of them said, "You know, I just heard X say something that has been bothering me like the dickens. I wonder how you feel about it." He then added that he, my patient, was at a meeting with X in which they were discussing the program and that X had stated that he would only speak if he were the third speaker. Continuing my patient said, "that sounds suspiciously like ego to me. What do you think?" I agreed but we both found it hard to believe because X was the spark plug and leading light of his group, and as solid an AA citizen as one could imagine. Yet within a year of his boldly claiming that special spot this man was drinking, and in two years he was dead of complications brought on by his continued use of alcohol.

Obviously, this man suffered from a case of big-shot-ism. As most of you fully realize, egos in AA are dime a dozen. (laughter) Many of them are out in the open. They constitute the power boys, who often get things done but just as often are the cause of endless headaches because of their very forcefulness. They are not noted for their patience.

Of equal importance and certainly a far greater frequency are the individuals whose egos are hidden even from themselves. The following incident makes this point quite simply I think. It concerns a patient who had been protesting vigorously that she couldn't have a big fat ego because she loathed all persons who showed any evidence of that kind of thinking and feeling; that she had no use to anyone who thought herself or himself superior; putting on airs as though he were among the blessed. After she had finished proving that she was not ego-ridden, I asked her a couple of questions. The first was, "Which way do you look when you loathe someone?" After some wiggling, she said, "I look down", and then I asked her, "Where does that put you?" Her answer was an explosive pop. There was a long

pause, and the patient began to talk, "My goodness. You can feel up about not being up. That is an awful fact. Where does this thing end? How can you be sure about anything you feel? You are thinking of stuff like this all the time. Gracious, you are not as smart as you think you are!" Then of course adding, "Are you?" as she looked at me questioningly with a note humbleness in her voice.

It was apparent that the wind had been knocked out of her sails and that she had dropped way down from being up. She was having the first-hand contact with humility. For her, the word ego had taken on a new dimension. It meant no aggressive pushing ahead but an inner state of mind in which her ego was in full flower despite her conscious denial of its presence.

It was marked by attitudes which on the surface seem blameless, if not downright praiseworthy. Just like the snob who abhors snobs, she found herself hooked with her capacity to look down her nose and loathe. Her ego has sneaked in in a totally unexpected fashion. She was beginning to take an inventory that might be more than a list of words. She was beginning to feel some truths about herself. This ego can cause one profound trouble. Elusive, disowned, its presence can be denied with the utmost sincerity. It takes considerable digging in large doses of honesty before this inner self can be reached and its quietly stubborn way, it can ruin our best intentions.

The sad truth is that the ego is always more visible in others than in ourselves. We can delight in puncturing the pomposities of others. We can laugh at the saying of the Chinese philosopher, Lao Tse, who had this gem to offer, "He who feels prick must have been a bubble." We can recognize the wisdom of deflating inflated egos, but all too often, the target is someone else. When it is ourselves, our aim can be notoriously bad.

The ego then it is to be seen as the driving force which seeks to dominate and feel comfortable only when it is able to maintain a non-underdog position. It may recoil at any obvious display of big-shot-ism but down inside where the feelings count, it can be touchy as a sore thumb. It is not an accident that the numbers of my specialty are called head shrinkers. (Laughter)

Our next task is to consider the evidence which shows that the ego has gone . That evidence can be summed up in one of two words, humbleness, and humility. When either is present, the ego has departed. I make no effort to distinguish between these two words. Using them as synonyms to identify a state of mind with that certain characteristics.

The problem basically is how does one feel when one feels humble. The answer to that question lies in an understanding of what I call a state of being up and a state of being down. Both of these states are familiar to you all. When one is up, one is gay, cheerful, and animated. A person in such a state may be up on his toes in high gear or perhaps up and at 'em. He is all for action, progress and improvement, getting somewhere and is rendered acutely uneasy whenever his advancing is in any way impeded . Perhaps more than he knows, he seeks to make life a pink cloud. In a deep sense, he lives off hope, and any ingredient which keeps telling him that someday his ship will come in and his worries will be over.

For him, surrender is a completely shattering experience and impossible to contemplate. It mainly means renouncing the will to live - the force that keeps him going. The person in the upstate seldom questions its validity. It seems the epitome of health and well-being. Down on the other hand is the exact opposite. In the state of being down, the individual is not gay, lacks attitude, drive and finds life a dreary bore Such phrases as "Down in the mouth" or "down in the dumps", successfully picture the down frame of mind. It is a state of mind to be avoided and smacks little of health.

In keeping with most everyone else, for years, I viewed the upstate with kindly eyes and the down one be the enemy of mankind. Then AA entered my life and the whole new series of facts were forced upon me. I heard of a pink cloud, an upstate if ever there was one, yet clearly not necessarily a healthy one. Even more confusing, I heard of humbleness and humility which were certainly part of a downstate that were essential to sobriety. Finally, to my surprise, I realized that being sober meant being sober-minded with no trace of being up. These were incontrovertible facts which seemed to fly in the face of all logic. Yet facts they were and some sense had to be made out of them.

The question was, how can one lose the upstate, without plunging into a down which is crippling, and surely a miserable form of existence. The answer to that question lies in a recognition of the fact that the word down does not have the mean down and out. It can also mean down to earth.

This down is a very rare one too. The down-to-earth individual has his feet on the ground. They can spot the pink cloud for the up element it has and can distrust its airy and insubstantial quality. The man with his feet on the ground is a solid citizen going nowhere, interested in nothing spectacular, but able to live every 24 hours as a contributing member of the human race.

Here is a very different down from a depressed and unhappy sort of down which formerly has been envisioned. Here was a down that stood for substance, for lasting value. A down which could not be deplored. This kind of down meant health and real well-being. Not the ephemeral kind which lifts the individual slightly off this Earth. Down could mean being humble and free from a lot of giddy notions about ourselves. They could mean the end of ego and all the unrest associated with that part of our nature. In a very deep and profound sense, down could mean

that we were able to accept ourselves for what we are. No longer do we have to be up looking down with scarcely concealed loathing. We are down, we can look up, maybe even to a deity who has never looked down on us.

We can now talk about humbleness. In the light of our discussion of up and downstate, we can realize that humbleness is the downstate that puts its appearance whenever the individual descends and stops on Earth rather than plunges on through to the lower regions. The humble person is down but his feet on solid ground. The former fears of what will happen to him if and when he drops from his high estate vanish as he experiences the comforting realization that he can let the gods fight among themselves. All he needs to do is to stay where he is and learn to live.

In so many words, humbleness or humility is a downstate that is livable, and not a downstate which is filled with rancor, unhappiness, and a constant need to escape from its strangling clutches. In true humbleness, the discontent, the restless urge to get away, all disappear, and an inner stillness makes its presence felt.

The ego in the genuinely humble person is in abeyance. Sufficiently, so no longer to color the psychic picture for the moment at any rate. It is accurate to say that true humility is the real evidence that the ego has gone or is no longer influencing the individuals' thoughts or feelings. The next question is now clear. How can this down to Earth state of mind, which is the real sort of humbleness, be induced, and then maintained? Both of these questions are worth inspecting.

The first, how is humbleness induced, is of course known to you all. Hitting bottom is the key, it brings the individual into contact with Earth, usually with a resounding clap. The use of the word bottom suggests quite neatly where the hitting is applied.

For the fortunate, it can spank them into some measure of sense. The whole art of engineering the individual so that they hit the bottom is a fascinating matter about which to conjecture.

You all can tell me more about how it happens than I possibly can. You all have been through the mill and may have seen many others through the same rough time. Nothing I have to say will match your first-hand experiences to the nature of the forces within which finally produce a breakthrough leading to hitting bottom

and surrender. Before this group, any extended discussion of hitting the bottom and its role in producing sobriety is wasted time.

Therefore, let me pass on to the much trickier problem of maintaining the down-to-earth sober person. It is one thing to knock a person off his pedestal. It is a much more difficult task to keep him from climbing right back on again. Since the considerable portion of my practice is devoted to helping AA members develop their capacity to stay humble or down on Earth. Out of my experience, three points seem to have a particular pertinence for this audience. The first is a need to recognize that the ability to remain on Earth is not under the control of the will because it is as impossible to will yourself to be humble, as it is to lift yourself up by your bootstraps.

The very effort to will humbleness is in itself an act of sheer arrogance. It is an attempt to dictate how one should feel. One can only hope and pray for the desired feelings to come along. One can just not order them to be present, the feelings have an independence, which must be respected. The second point for consideration is that as people we have forces within us which

can carry us off the Earth so suddenly and so quickly that we are totally unaware that anything has happened to us.

To climb back on pedestals can go completely unnoticed. The old-timers who insisted on a preferred position could still talk AA and be convincing to themselves and others. My patient had spotted the returned ego, but the victim of that return was totally innocent of the fact. If so charged he would have flatly asserted his humbleness and would have been quite honest, although, of course, quite inaccurate. The problem of the unnoticed return of the ego is widespread.

The individual who enters AA after the hitting bottom has his own experience which provides him with a genuine feeling of humility. Then a tragic thing often happens. The memory lingers but the humility slowly seeps away. Finally, the individual is back in the memory of being humble but his ego has staged a comeback, quite without his having the slightest awareness of the truth. When the comeback has occurred, the individual can get up and say in all sincerity, "I am the most humble man in this room."

That statement made at a meeting in Greenwich received a salutary horselaugh. Although the speaker was obviously puzzled by it. Perhaps later on the impact of what he said sank in and brought him down a peg or two. Let us hope so for his sake. The third point I wish to discuss the problem of remaining humble concerns the actual ways and means by which humbleness is preserved. Taken for granted this automatic return of the ego, the question resolves itself to the problem of how to stop this process of ego re-inflation.

Obviously, no foolproof formula exists. The pitfalls are too many. Attendance at meetings, 12-step work, repeated inventories, and improving our conscious contact with a higher power, are all helpful and may be depended on in most

instances. However, the unwary individual may get trapped in ways in which he least suspects. Time does not permit a full discussion of many snares that lurk for the unsuspecting. One dangerous spot is so common and so pervasive, but I must bring it to your attention. I refer to the ease with which we can surround ourselves with virtue.

We all have the capacity to give ourselves "A" for effort and thus pat ourselves on the back. An act which feeds our self-esteem and furnishes the ego with a heady diet. A patient dreamed of doing what was right and followed that dream with another in which she saw herself all wrapped up in a lovely golden cake. The perfect symbol for the individual who is all wrapped up in herself and emitting a golden glow.

Although not aware of it, she was in obvious danger. Any person self-conscious of her inner glow would have no trouble planting a halo on her head with all the inflationary aspects of such an adornment. Like many another, she was being forced to realize that with her, virtue was its own reward and how she loves to gobble up that reward. She can profess all the humility in the world, but down inside where it counts, she pictures herself in a golden cake.

All she could do when the impact of her dream was laid before her was to smile a bit secretly and remark, "I guess it is harder to be humble than you think. You just do not know you had such silly ideas down inside of you and the worst of it is, I am afraid that you are telling me the truth about myself. I guess the smart thing to do is not to dream." I have no answer to this problem of giving ourselves "A" for effort. Like a snob who abhors snob wants to give oneself "A" for effort, for not giving oneself "A" for effort.

My advice to patients is to keep their fingers crossed and hope that this self-glorification does not take place. There is no

conscious way of dictating that it will not occur. Awareness, hopefully, can be helpful. Beyond that, all one can do is to pray. The second certainty about maintaining humbleness may seem very unenlightening, and leaves one groping for answers, a state of mind which makes many people unhappy.

Let me point out that the individual who feels that he has the answers must be very careful or he will be in trouble. To have the answers puts one right back in the driver's seat, able to cope with anything and a far cry from being humbled, and aware that one does not know everything nor need to in order to get along. In fact, one indication of humility is a willingness to forgo absolute certainty in the consciousness that a man's life is but a humble one.

There are many many things he cannot understand and does not need to. A Higher Power does exist and can be trusted. A humble person can leave it there. He does not have to be in on the know about everything. And I wish to make some comments on the AA scene in the light of my remarks about humility and its place in the life of the alcoholic. Having been alerted by AA to the significance of humbleness, I could begin to see it from a wider perspective. I could recognize that humbleness is not confined to individuals but organizations may have a problem of keeping humble.

AA is no exception. Succeeding where others have failed, it was logical for some members to assume that they had special know-how which often made them act as though they were the only person on the beat when it came to handling alcoholics. Such an attitude did not endear them to others who too were interested in helping alcoholics. In the eyes of others, the humility so much talked about seem strangely missing. In fact, sometimes it was not present. Looking upon this fact, I realized that the group must be humble. That it too, unless it is very

careful, can wrap itself in the glow which makes it sacrosanct and untouchable.

Any organization can develop notions that need correcting. AA can well examine some of its attitudes and practices. How often have I heard members say and I quote with some accuracy, "My job is to help the drunk who comes to us. What is the use of all is fancy, New York stuff? We do not need any assistance from the outside. We can do a job right within our rank." "That is where the alcoholic gets his help." That self-sufficiency and those remarks require no comment. For a long time, such thinking influenced a large and often vocal group among the AA membership.

Coupled with that belief was a second, namely that the group could help and that anyone who did not help was himself not ready for AA. As a result of such thinking was that the drunk that did not respond was written off as a poor prospect. Thereby absolving the group from any responsibility for the failure to interest him in AA. Such absolving keeps the group's ego intact. This intactness or really lack of group humility has been manifest in recent years. The reason for this change is time.

The years that have shown that AA is not the only answer to alcoholism. Still, the best by all odds is by no means the 100% solution. Moreover, other approaches have their successes so that AA has no longer a corner on recovery. In other words, as time passes, experiences taking the first flush of the rosy hope which the success of AA had generated. Now, AA is no longer the one answer. AA has to take its place alongside others who are concerned about drunks.

AA must now accept a much humbler place than formerly. A much healthier position, since, once one can recognize confreres, one can live with them on a give and take basis and perhaps absorb something from them. An important element in

maturing is the ability to listen and to learn. Fortunately, the success of AA has in a sense served as its own corrective. Being the most promising of all remedies for helping the alcoholic, AA has had to bear the brunt of treatment. Then you have to take on all comers and feeling like everyone else with a very considerable percentage.

It is now obvious that AA is the answer for some people at a certain time in their drinking career when that particular time is reached. AA can serve magnificently and does.

We will still face a whole series of questions. First, what about the people who have not reached that critical stage when they are susceptible and responsive to the offerings of AA? Second, has AA any responsibility for helping individuals reach that critical stage? Third, is that a job for others or for faith? Fourth, should AA both as an organization, and through its individual members join hands with others who are tackling the problem?

These questions were not asked to be answered but to stimulate your thinking. I wish however to close my remarks with an incident from my practice which bears on the last question, the joining of hands with others. I shall tell how I was a part of a two-stage miracle. The recipient of those miracles was a man whom I saw at the insistence of his wife. He was reluctant, defensive, and even surly but he did talk revealing effect of drinking which seemed pretty grim to me. Finally, at the end of the hour, he warmed up sufficiently to ask me a question. It was, "Do you think my drinking is serious?"

Anxious to avoid any long lecture. I limited myself to the observation "I am not sure, but I'd hate to be in your shoes." The scene now shifts. It's five years later and I am slated to give a talk at an AA meeting. As I enter the room, a man comes up to me, stretching out his hand and breathing saying as he did so, "You do not know me but my name is X and I saw you over five

years ago and you told me you did not want to be in my shoes. Enlightened by that, I said "what happened since then?" He replied, "I have been in AA for four years going on five. After our talk, I thought about what you said about shoes. It is like I could not get it out of my mind. So, eight months later, I decided to go to an AA meeting, and I have been going ever since."

Now, I submit that I must be a miracle worker if in one interview. I get a person like that to join AA. Of course, it took eight months before my miracle came off, and without AA, my miracle could have never occurred. At the same time, I insist that the miracle of AA would have not taken place if I had not fortuitously said the right thing. Setting into motion some doubts and fears which resulted in him to his going to a meeting ready for the miracle of AA to work its blessing. Surely, it was a two-stage miracle. Mine, mostly by luck AA because the path to help out the alcoholic has been carved out of the experience of you, and your associates.

Neither miracle could have happened alone. That man's rescue was a joint enterprise. Neither myself nor AA was self-sufficient. Without AA, my interview would have not been led to nothing but meaningless stewing, and nothing else. Without my remarks, AA would have not seen the man. Each was essential for the other. The recognition of such mutual need is both ego reducing and humbling. In pursuit of one's own interest in activities, it easy to lose sight of others and go alone.

The fact that I was asked to come on this program is evidence that AA is mindful of its relationship to others, apart from itself. Maintain the awareness that you are but one of the instruments whereby the alcoholic can be helped, and you will have no trouble remaining humble either as individuals or as an organization.