

The Power of Hopelessness -By Fr. Bill Wigmore

Forty-one years ago, Bill Wilson gave an A.A. talk on the 33rd Anniversary of his sobriety. In it, he identified clearly the forces that came together in his life to bring about the "psychic change" Carl Jung had identified as being necessary for recovery from chronic alcoholism. Recovery rested, Jung had said, on an individual's experience of a deep sense of absolute and complete hopelessness.

When Wilson wrote Step One, I believe, it was this sense of total defeat or hopelessness that he was attempting to convey to fellow sufferers. In that 1968 talk, he spoke of the definition of alcoholism he had learned from his personal physician Dr. William Silkworth, author of the Doctor's Opinion in the Big Book. Wilson writes that (Silkworth had defined alcoholism as) *"the obsession that condemns you to drink against your will and true interests, even -unto destruction, and the bodily sensitivity that guarantees madness and death if you drink at all."*

Following three hospital detox stays, each rapidly followed by relapse, Silkworth had declared Bill a lost and hopeless case advising his wife to prepare for the fast approaching end. Then came the famous visit from Ebby, a fellow alcoholic whose drinking was as bad or worse than Bill's. Wilson sensed a way out, but a way that demanded reliance on God and not on his self. He was in a quandary. Like most of us, Bill was a skeptic when it came to a real belief in God's intervening in his situation; but the spiritual pressure cooker in his soul had begun to boil. Three weeks later it exploded in a "spiritual experience." Bill shouted, *"God if you exist, show yourself to me. I'm ready to do anything! Anything!"* Somehow the barrier that had existed for years between Bill and his God was removed. God didn't move, but Bill most surely did. Bill sensed God's presence and knew immediately, he was a free man.

The day following that "white light" experience, Wilson doubted the reality of what had happened to him; perhaps it was only a hallucination. But then Ebby brought Bill a copy of William James' Varieties of Religious Experiences. On page after page he read of cases wherein men and women had experienced similar "spiritual experiences." Some of them were even drunks like himself. Bill noted in his talk that, *"These gifts of grace, whether they came in a rush or very gradually, were all founded on a basis of hopelessness. The recipients were people who in some controlling area of life found themselves in a situation that could not be gotten over, around, or under. Their defeat had been absolute, and so was mine."*

Many years ago, I developed a roleplay exercise to help alcoholics and addicts experience an internal sense of this Step One feeling of hopelessness. The client is asked to imagine he is standing in the middle of a road and coming straight at him, going 95 mile an hour is a huge Mack truck. The truck is now only six inches from hitting him and he is asked, *"What would you either do or say?"* About half the clients respond, *"Stop"* I call that *the alcoholic answer!* What chance does a truck like that have of stopping when it is so close to its victim and traveling at that rate of speed? I ask the group watching this exercise unfold and they respond, *"None! He's road kill"* (we're much better at seeing the hopelessness of others than our own).

But then I repeat the scenario. Sometimes I repeat it over and over again. I'm always amazed at how the roleplay client attempts to get *"over, under or around"* that truck in just the manner Wilson had described above. They duck to get under it - they jump out of the way to avoid it - if going right doesn't work then maybe next time they'll go left. When they finally get exhausted or enlightened, I'm never sure which, they arrive at the only answer possible in such a scenario: They shout, *"Help!"* or they say, *"God help me!"* I assure them either answer is correct. Just so long as they realize the reality of their own hopelessness and experience inside the turning to a source of power greater than themselves.

The human ego has an almost infinite capacity to bypass reality. But life has its own ways of grinding us down and bringing us to the gates of a different reality. In the Big Book it is called the Great Reality, the 4th dimension of our own existence. It exists inside each of us and awaits our call. It provides hope for the hopeless. It always has and it always will. Rarely have we seen a person fail to find it who has experienced his own hopelessness and made the call.