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Cunning, Baffling, Powerful

Bill Wilson's Struggle with Addiction

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Addiction***

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Preface

Alcoholic Anonymous' characterization of addiction raises the question how as deeply flawed a human being as William Wilson, universally known as Bill W., could have founded a program that literally saved millions of lives. Rather than answering this, perhaps unanswerable question, it might be the case that only a man as deeply flawed as Bill W. could have created Alcoholic Anonymous. Of course, Wilson didn't do it alone; yet, without him there would be no Alcoholics Anonymous.

Only a man passionately committed to being number ONE and just as passionately wishing to be a member among members, a worker among workers, could have understood the torment of the alcoholic soul.

A complex man with a compelling story. Bill Wilson's life has an intrinsic fascination in and of itself. But beyond its subject's drama, lies the issues it brings up, particularly around the causes and treatment of alcoholism and addiction in general. Bill himself downplayed the cause being less interested in the why than in the how of recovery. But we are. The mystery of the self-poisoning of a human being is central to Bill's story. And its exploration is an intrinsic part of our story of Bill's life.

Alcoholism is said to be a biopsychosocial disorder. This dramatization of Wilson's struggles illuminates all of these aspects of the disease.

And I believe addiction, in one way or another, is intrinsic to the human condition. We are all trapped by compulsions, chemical or otherwise. In Eugene O'Neill's (1946) great play,

“The Iceman Cometh,” there is a reiterated cry, “Hickey, what have you done to the booze? It’s lost its magic.” O’Neill raises the question of whether or not human beings can live without the “pipe dreams,” concomitant with drunkenness. O’Neill’s answer is no. Bill Wilson faced a similar dilemma when the booze lost its magic for him. He created a whole movement in an attempt to answer this question positively. Whether he succeeded or not is for you, the reader, to decide.

Two hundred years ago the British Naval physician, Thomas Trotter (1804), opined that alcoholism—in his words inebriety—was the result of heredity and premature weaning, temperament and early trauma. Wilson’s life certainly supports Trotter’s unlikely intuition.

An update on Trotter’s brilliant guess is the “self-medication hypothesis”—men and women drink consciously or mostly unconsciously to medicate anxiety and depression. Aside from the fact that alcohol is the wrong medicine—a pharmacological disaster—there is a more basic, an ontological, flaw in the attempt to self-medicate. Whatever underlying pathology we seek to escape it is a futile attempt to medicate the human condition; to obviate the need for O’Neill’s “pipe dreams.” The evidence suggests that we can’t do that. The best we can do is to come to terms with the human condition. Bill Wilson knew that, and that knowledge was both a curse and a blessing.

Like his fellow New Englander, Robert Frost (1940), Bill Wilson had a “lover’s quarrel with

the world.” You are about to eavesdrop on that quarrel.

Cunning, Baffling, Powerful

Bill Wilson's Struggle with Addiction

Characters:

Narrator/Chorus	Dr. Bob Smith
Bill Wilson	Dr. William Silkworth
Gilman (Gilly) Wilson	Ebby Thacher
Fayette Griffith (Gramps)	William James
Emily Wilson	Headmaster
Lois Wilson	Male Nurse
Dorothy (Dotty) Wilson	Children's Voices

[Stage directions are read by Narrator/Chorus]

(Projection of a New England Village, could be a Norman Rockwell picture, on one side

of the stage; projection of green mountains on the other. As the audience walks in, Charles Ives' New England Holidays Symphony is heard)

Narrator/Chorus: We are on a mountain in Vermont in 1905. Gilly Wilson is speaking to his son, the 9-year-old Billy, who is just off stage to our right.

(Gilly repeatedly takes a sip from the jug in his hand)

Gilly: Billy, look up at that sky. At those stars millions and millions of miles away. They were there long before we were, and they will be long afterward. There's all the beauty and mystery of the universe. Just look up and let it sink in. *(Exits and the adult Bill enters)*

Bill: I'll never forget that night. When we came down from the mountain the wagon took us back to the house. I didn't know at the time, but that was his goodbye. I didn't see him

again for 10 years and he didn't have much to say then. (*pause*)

My parents were very different. My father was easy going, a natural leader. He was a foreman in one of the marble quarries that were the main industry in East Dorset. They worked the vein until it gave out and almost everyone turned to farming. My dad's crew provided the marble for the New York Public Library and the Soldier's and Sailor's Monument on Riverside Drive. He was both responsible and irresponsible. He wasn't an alcoholic, but he sure drank a lot. He bought me my first gun, I still have it, and taught me all kinds of wood skills. It was just awful when he left.

My mother was another story. Brilliant, determined, cold, almost always angry, and not at all social. She punished me a lot. I'll never forget the time she took me behind the shed and made me take down my pants and lie across her knee, and spanked and spanked and then spanked my bare backside some more with a hairbrush. I don't remember

what I did wrong, but she was in a rage. It must have really hurt, but I don't remember the pain. What I remember is feeling helpless and deeply, deeply shamed by being exposed in front of her. Every time I've felt shame, and I have had all too many experiences of shame, I remember being taken behind that shed.

(Enter Narrator/Chorus)

Narrator/Chorus: *(to Bill)* Sure you were shamed by having to take your pants down yet I can't help but wonder if you weren't also aroused, deepening your shame. *(exits)*

(Bill looks puzzled)

Bill: Mom became a very successful Osteopathic Physician. It wasn't until I was middle aged, and she was verging on old age, that I developed a more or less normal relationship with her. It was never warm.

For a while after the shed, things went very well. A lending library opened in town and I

owe mom a lot for getting me into books.
I've never stopped reading.

Then it happened.

(Enter Emily Wilson and Dotty Wilson, Bill's younger sister)

Emily: Kids, get your coats on. We're going on a picnic to Dorset Pond.

Bill: A picnic. We never go on picnics. Somethings wrong, I can feel it. Something awful is going to happen.

Emily: Stop the silliness, we're going to have a wonderful time.

(At Dorset Pond Emily is lying out sandwiches. She stops arranging the food and jumps up)

Emily: I have something to tell you kids. Your father is not coming back and I'm going to study in Boston. Dot is coming with me and you will stay with your grandparents.

Bill: No! No! No! You can't do it! (*No response*)
Mom, please no.

(Exit Emily and Dotty)

When we got back, I climbed up a tree.
Almost burrowing into the crotch of several
limbs high up and refused to come down.
Not even my grandfather, who I always
obeyed, could get me down.

(Enter Gramps)

Gramps: Billy get out of that tree. (*silence*) Come
down.

Bill: I won't.

Gramps: I said come down.

Bill: I won't.

Gramps: Damn. (*exits*)

Bill: Was it hours or days? I don't know; before I
left my refuge and returned to earth.

(Bill exits; Narrator/Chorus enters)

Narrator/Chorus: Bill's mother and sister left. No one in East Dorset was or ever had been divorced. Nobody but Bill's parents. Then the real shame - shame and guilt - descended on the already depressed Billy.

(Exit Narrator/Chorus; enter Bill. Mocking voices are heard from off stage)

Voices: You have no parents. They left you. Hahaha! They are divorced. Your mom and dad don't want to live with you. Who gets divorced? Sinners and lowlifes. You have no parents. Hahaha!

Bill: I felt shame like I never felt before. And guilt, it was my fault. They wouldn't have divorced and left if it wasn't for me. Shame and guilt, twin demons, that still pursue me. I didn't have a word for it, but I was in a deep depression. The kind of depression that is "darkness visible." I collapsed and did nothing. It was a pattern that I would repeat

many times. Great spurts of energy, then nothing. Guilt and shame

(Bill exits; Narrator/Chorus enters)

Narrator/Chorus: Bill's grandparents were good people who loved him. Unfortunately, his grandfather in his 60s didn't want to raise another child. His son Clarence had died a year before from TB, and the idea of Bill replacing Clarence was repugnant to him. He managed to be good to Bill, buying him a chemistry set and taking him to see Buffalo Bill when he brought his show to Rutland, and his feelings towards him were real enough, but he just wasn't Clarence. Grandpa never got over losing Clarence and Bill knew it. Then came a break in the gloom.

(Narrator/Chorus exits; Grandpa enters)

Grandpa: Billy, why don't you go upstairs and look in the attic for Clarence's old violin. You just might be able to play it.

(Exit Grandpa)

Bill: I did. It was battered and in awful shape, but I made a bridge for it and bought wires in the general store to use as strings and taught myself to play. Grandpa had an early victrola and I used to listen to Mischa Elman and other great violinists, and I thought maybe I can be that good. That was crazy of course, I was a very mediocre violinist. I was thrilled when I realized that Clarence's violin was actually playable as a result of my efforts. And not only that, I taught myself well enough that my playing actually sounded like music. I couldn't get over my own success. Eventually I played at country dances and people seemed to like it well enough.

And books, always books. Like I told you, I got that from my mother, but I made it my own. And I had a knack with tools, which grandpa encouraged. And then the Vermont woods. Yes, books, tools and the Vermont woods got me through my childhood. Without them, I wouldn't be here.

A year or two later, Gramps showed me a picture in a book of an Australian boomerang and explained what it was and how it worked. By then, even though he was always in the background, Grandpa's missing Clarence didn't get in our way so much. As soon as I saw that boomerang I knew I had to make one, even though I knew no American had ever done it. I tried all kinds of woods, all kinds of shapes, used all of the tools we had, but it never worked. I threw it out and it always just hit the ground. Then one night, I was looking at my headboard and it looked like the perfect wood for a boomerang. I got a saw and cut out a boomerang from the headboard. And I managed to get it to work, it actually turned around and came back. I was thrilled, thrilled beyond what I can tell you. And Grandpa was too.

Since then, I've thrown many things into the universe. Some of them have come back and some haven't. From then on, I had to win, I had to be first in whatever I did. Oh, I know underneath was the exact opposite – terror of

failing, but as a kid I didn't know it. I was very much alone. In school I had competitors but no friends. Looking back, in spite of the violin and the boomerang, it was pretty bleak. I've never really gotten over that feeling of not belonging. Of being an outsider. I did have one friend, Mark, who was several years older and explained to me all about class differences. I didn't know what he was talking about. I guess he was reading political stuff. But then he explained, and it did make sense. The summer people. Vermont was a summer resort by then. The Equinox Hotel in Manchester just south of us attracted rich people who would come every summer. Eventually they build houses along Manchester's Main Street. When I realized the summer people looked down on us, Mark's words registered. I had never thought about any of that before but now every time I saw expensively dressed women coming out of one of the mansions in Manchester, I cringed. There was no way they would ever have any time for me. And, like I told you,

the native kids, I was never really friends with them.

Mark was more of a mentor than a friend, but we stayed close for decades. Eventually he became the village postmaster, and a well-known character in East Dorset. Good thing I had Grandpa.

(Enter Grandpa)

Grandpa: Billy, it's the fiftieth anniversary of the battle of Gettysburg. There's going to be a reunion of the men who fought that battle. And a memorial service for those who died there. I'm going. Do you want to come with me? I was there you know.

Bill: Do I want to? *(hugs Grandpa)* I can't wait.

(The Battle Hymn of the Republic is heard as Bill and Grandpa visit the battlefield at Gettysburg; projection of a Matthew Brady photo of the wounded and the dead)

Grandpa: Vermont men died disproportionally to their numbers in the Civil War, especially at Gettysburg.

(Adult Bill enters)

Bill: As we walked around the battlefield, I sensed a bond between the survivors. They were truly a band of brothers. Even at that age, I knew it was ridiculous to want to be part of their tribe, yet I yearned to have what I sensed they had. Gettysburg touched me. It said something about America – especially about Vermont that I still treasure.

Grandpa: Much Vermont Blood was spilled stopping Pickett's charge, which if it hadn't been stopped, would have opened a path for Lee to take Washington. The valor of those men saved the Union. I had friends among those dead, I easily could have been one of them, two generations earlier. Ethan Allen and his Green Mountain boys took Fort Ticonderoga from the mightiest empire in the world, making possible America's

experiment with democracy. Lincoln's words, about America being the "last best hope of mankind," always brings tears to my eyes.

Bill: Then President Wilson came and gave a speech – I don't remember what he said – and we left. (*Projection of Winslow Homer's Reaper*) I felt that I could never participate in such greatness or be a part of it. I took two things away from Gettysburg. A belief in the sacredness of American democracy; and an envy of the closeness, the special bond, between the veterans.

Narrator/Chorus: (*to audience*) Back home, Bill relapsed into a deep depression. (*exits*)

(*Enter Grandpa and Emily Wilson*)

Emily: Bill, you can't play the violin and throw your boomerang all of the time. That's all you do. Otherwise, you just sit there staring into space doing nothing. We don't know what to do with you, but this can't go on.

Grandpa: We can't afford it, but we are sending you to the Burr and Burton Seminary.

(Exit Emily and Grandpa)

Bill: Burr and Burton was another experience of being different. There were very few Vermonters at that school, they were mostly rich kids from Boston and New York, and even the Midwest. Once more, I didn't fit, and I didn't connect. But I did excel. I was going to be number one, and within a year or so, I was. I was first violin of the school orchestra, I was captain of the baseball team, and I was head of my class. The rich snobby kids didn't exactly get to like me, but I think they respected me. Things were going unbelievably well. Then I fell in love. Rather unusual for those days, the school was co-ed, and Bertha Banford was gorgeous. Vivacious, charming, full of life – and I think she loved me. I was completely won over, I no longer cared about violins or boomerangs, or anything else. All I care about was finding ways to spend time with her. One day she

told me she had to go to New York for an operation; it was nothing very serious. Just some growth that had to be removed. I guess what we would call these days a benign tumor. And off she went. I missed her but wasn't at all concerned.

(Bill exits; Headmaster enters speaking to the assembled students)

Headmaster: Boys and girls, I have terrible news. Your classmate, Bertha Banford hemorrhaged during an operation in New York. The doctors couldn't stop the bleeding and she died.

(Bill screams, then keeps screaming as he runs out)

(Enter Narrator/Chorus)

Narrator/Chorus: Bill's depression this time was really serious. From the leader in everything, he went to the bottom. Failing all of his classes, ceased playing sports or music, or

doing anything else. Once again, the family didn't know what to do. They withdrew him from school and saw him just mope around the house. And mope, and mope and mope. Eventually there was another family conference.

(Enter Grandpa and Emily)

Emily: We have to do something about him. Bill is twenty times as much trouble as Dottie. Always something. I've never seen him this bad. I know it was terrible when that girl didn't make it, but its time he snapped out of it.

Grandpa: Last time it helped when we sent him off to school.

Emily: It's worth a try. Let's enroll him in Norwich University.

Narrator/Chorus: Norwich was Vermont's military college. Years later, Bill told Lois, his wife, that he had his first sexual experience at age

13 with one of the summer help at the Equinox. The odds of a healthy young girl dying from minor surgery is so unlikely that I can't help but wonder if Bertha's well-connected parents arranged a "therapeutic" abortion that went south. I have no evidence to support my conjecture, but it would explain the intensity and duration of Bill's grief.

(Exit Emily and Grandpa; Narrator/Chorus exits; Bill enters)

Bill: On the train to Norwich, something utterly uncanny happened to me. My heart pounded wildly, I couldn't catch my breath, I was sure I was dying. It went on for quite some time. Nobody knew about such things in Vermont in those days, but that was a panic attack. The first of many. When I got to Norwich, I had lots of trips to the infirmary. Each time they would check me out, say nothing was wrong, and send me back to my dormitory. But something was wrong. The sheer terror of those attacks still echoes in my mind. It

was awful, just plain awful. And no one gave a damn.

Norwich was nothing like Burr and Burton. I certainly wasn't functioning at my best. And all of the triumphs I had had at school, no matter how hard I tried, were never repeated. I wasn't first violin, I didn't make the football team, I didn't make the baseball team. No matter what I tried, I failed. My grades were terrible and naturally, I wasn't part of any clique. Alone once more. By the summer, I was marginally better. Then a miracle happened. I met Lois. It was at Dorset Pond.

Dorset pond is Emerald Lake State Park now. The lake's deep, deep green is from the marble from the abandoned mines leeching out into the water, and from the reflection of the firs that surround it.

Narrator/Chorus: (*speaking to audience*) If you're ever in the neighborhood, you should really visit Emerald Lake State Park. It's

unbelievably beautiful and extremely peaceful.

(Narrator/Chorus exits)

Bill: Lois' family had a couple of "camps" on the lake (and she had a sailboat). We would sail back and forth through that glorious green in the often-bright sun, and dive into the luscious water. Lois was from a very different background. She was summer people, had grown up playing with Lincoln's grandchildren, his son having built a summer home in Manchester. Her father was a very well-to-do physician, and he not only had the camps on the lake, but a magnificent house in Manchester and a house in Brooklyn. My attraction to Lois had nothing to do with her social position or her wealth. In fact, they were a barrier with my fear of rejection. But Lois didn't seem to care about any of that. Native or not, she was attracted to me. Lois saved me. She picked me up as the most tender of mothers would pick up an infant. All my adult life, I found women, especially

Lois, who mothered me, nursed me, took care of me, believed in me, loved me. I didn't exactly come out of my depression, but Lois lifted me up a long way, almost back into something like normalcy. I was not the most desirable of suitors, and I knew it. Yet her family ignored the class differences between us and made me feel welcome. Perhaps they were starting to worry that Lois, five years older than I, might wind up as a "spinster". Even if true, they genuinely liked me. It took a long, long time before I felt at ease in their home. In the fall I went back to Norwich. My mother had dreams of me being an engineer and wanted me to take the entrance exams to MIT, I did and failed them. It didn't do much better back at Norwich. I was barely passing when WWI broke out. The whole school was commissioned, and I became a lieutenant. Lois and I set a wedding date before I could be sent to war. Neither of my parents were at our wedding. We got married in the Swedenborgian Church in Brooklyn. By then the panic attacks had stopped, though they

reoccurred many times in my later life.
(*Exits*)

(Enter Narrator/Chorus; enter Lois)

Narrator/Chorus: Bill is leading his men in a drill on a New England base as Lois watches with rapt attention. The drill ends and Bill joins Lois.

Bill: I signed up to serve in the artillery, in a shore battery, the safest assignment I could get. I'm so ashamed. I'm nothing but a coward.

Lois: Stop it. It's not true.

Bill: I couldn't stand the thought of being killed and leaving you, so I chose safety over defending the country I love. Lois, you don't know what it's like to be filled with shame, not the kind of shame I feel.

Lois: Bill, you were magnificent on the parade ground. Your men adore you.

Bill: That doesn't make me any less of a coward. I can lead, I guess I got that from my father. Doesn't mean much. I know I can never live up to the heroism of the veterans of Gettysburg, including Grandpa.

Lois: I would rather have you survive this war.

(Bill and Lois exit; Narrator/Chorus enters)

Narrator/Chorus: First Lieutenant Wilson was assigned to a base near Newport Rhode Island. The owners of Newport's 50 room summer "cottages" felt it was their patriotic duty to entertain the officers. Bill was more terrified that he might use the wrong fork than he was at trench warfare.

(Narrator/Chorus exits; Bill re-enters)

Bill: Lois' home, her father's house in Brooklyn, was overwhelming enough. I don't have words for what I felt in a Newport mansion until the butler offered me a "Bronx cocktail." Vermont was a dry state, not that

that stopped anyone from drinking – except me. I never drank. That Bronx Cocktail was magical, transformative. My social fears, my self-consciousness, my sense of inferiority, my tongue-tiedness all disappeared. I felt a part of things. It was absolute magic. From then on, I never passed up an opportunity to drink. For the first time, I felt I was a part of things. No longer tongue-tied, at ease, I spoke to men and women – joking, flirting – oh god was it wonderful.

(Bill exits; Narrator/Chorus enters)

Narrator/Chorus: I don't know much about pharmacology, biochemistry, or genetics but I do know that many of those who become alcoholics have Bill's reaction to their first drink. Not that different from what alcohol does for everyone – lowers inhibition, reduces anxiety, induces feeling of being part of the crowd - you say. I don't think so. People like Bill experience all of that, but at a different level of magnitude. Psychologists would say that love of drink is reinforced in

a way it is not for most folks. I've seen many who long for that instant euphoria and go on and on looking for it in a bottle never finding it – well maybe finding it every 10th or 20th time, even though it's never quite the same as the first time. Nevertheless, the seemingly random reinforcement keeps the quest going, sometimes all the way to the grave.

(Narrator/Chorus exits; Bill and Lois enter holding hands)

Lois: Why do you drink so much?

Bill: It's a war. Everyone parties.

Lois: I love you so, I don't like to nag. It's OK for you to party with the boys, just cut back a little.

Bill: No reason to do that. I'm fine.

(They exit; Narrator/Chorus enters. Sounds of "Over There" are heard)

Narrator/Chorus: Bill was having a “good war” until he was ordered to ship out across an ocean filled with German submarines. He got to England where he lucked out once more. He was assigned to a base near Winchester Cathedral. It was more like being a tourist than being a soldier. Of course, Bill visited Winchester Cathedral.

(Narrator/Chorus exits; Bill enters at Winchester Cathedral)

Bill: I had some sort of spiritual experience looking out from the cliffs at Newport before I shipped out. I was with Lois. We were terrified by my going off to the war and perhaps into combat. The sun was just setting. Our gloom was superseded by a growing feeling of duty and patriotism that turned into exultation. Exultation and the joy of sacrifice. I never forgot that experience, it was unbelievably peaceful. Now, far from Newport, I walked inside Winchester Cathedral. I felt, within those walls, a tremendous sense of presence. I thought of

France, of sacrifice, of suffering, of death, of oblivion. Then my mood veered sharply as the atmosphere of the place began to possess me and I was lifted up into a sort of ecstasy. I somehow had a mighty assurance that things were, and would be, alright. It was much like my experience in Newport, except this time a notion of the supernatural and of God kept crossing my mind. My sense of some sort of sustaining presence in that place was quite overpowering. Of course that didn't stop me from getting drunk that night.

(Bill exits; Narrator/Chorus enters)

Narrator/Chorus: The war ended; Bill was discharged. Like millions of others, he both felt gratitude and a sense of triumph. And was simultaneously disoriented. With no degree and no profession, his future was a terrifying blank. It was the roaring 20s. Warren Harding had won the presidency big by promising a return to “normalcy.” And President Calvin Coolidge proclaimed, “the business of America is business.” Never

mind that tens of thousands Ku Klux Klanners had marched on Washington and farm foreclosures were at an all-time high.

Bill had much in common with an iconic figure, Jay Gatsby, of the 20s. Both infinitely ambitious outsiders, determined to be Number One. Sure, he bounced checks, left unpaid bar bills, and ignored the suffering he was inflicting on his wife. Yet there was enough of his Vermont upbringing, his sense of rectitude, to stop him from becoming overtly criminal. Or he could have become a prohibitionist – a sort of male Carry Nation smashing the saloons now become speakeasys – trying to destroy an inner demon externally. But he didn't do that either. What he did do was drink – and join the Wall Street frenzy.

(Exit Narrator/Chorus; Bill enters)

Bill: Never getting close to the slaughter, I adored France, astonished by the French capacity to

drink around the clock, yet never get drunk.
We Yanks don't have the knack.

Narrator/Chorus: It was the roaring 20s and Bill certainly roared, paling around with the rich and powerful on Wall Street. They say a rising tide floats all boats; it certainly did float Bill's. He soon was, if not one of, at least pals with, the kings of the Street. For the moment he was doing very well, albeit losing more than one lucrative opportunity after another, by drinking on the job.

(Bill and Lois enter arguing in an opulent apartment)

Lois: Bill, we don't need so much space. The expense – it scares me.

Bill: We can afford it. We own lots of GE and it keeps going up, up and up. We're worth a hell of a lot.

Lois: Bill not so long ago, we couldn't afford a one room apartment. We would have been on the

street if my parents hadn't taken us in.

Bill: Don't rain on my parade. I'm in now – the biggest names on the Street give me tips and cut me a slice. Have I ever bought a losing stock? No! This apartment is OK – but not quite first rate. When I break down the wall separating ours from the one next to it, and bring the two apartments together, it will knock the socks off our friends, not to mention my business associates. Lois, I need it to entertain the guys who will take me to the top.

Lois: Bill, please don't.

Bill: You don't know the Street the way I do – I'm telling you, stop worrying. We're going to be rich, really rich.

Lois: (*wavering*) You know I can never say no to you. Break down the wall.

(They embrace)

Bill: Let's celebrate. (*Bill pours two large glasses of whisky. He downs his, Lois sips hers*) (*sound of the wall being broken through. Bill pours himself another drink*).

(pause)

(Projection of newspaper headlines, "Market Crashes – Stocks in Freefall)

(Bill and Lois exit; Narrator /Chorus enters and speaks to audience)

Narrator/Chorus: I won't bore you with all of the details of the Wilsons' decline. They lost the palatal apartment; Lois went to work as a salesgirl at Macy's; there were smaller and smaller apartments, then a return to Lois' family home. Now there was more desperation in Bill's drinking. It didn't take much for him to black out night after night. Eventually he would stumble home having no idea where he had been or what he had done. Sometimes covered with vomit, his pants urine soaked. The shakes got worse

and worse. For a while, somehow, he got jobs – in spite of the depression – they never lasted. Now his reputation preceded him, nobody would hire him. Lois miscarried three times and Bill was too drunk to mourn. Bill was even too drunk to pick up the law degree he earned at night.

(Narrator/Chorus exits; Bill enters, he pours a drink then, in the midst of this total desolation, the phone rings. It is Ebby Thacker, Bill's Manchester drinking buddy. Bill has a drink in his hand as he speaks on the phone.)

Bill: Ebby, you're in town. Come over right now, we'll have a drink. You have no idea how glad I am to hear from you. I'm very lonely. Lois is off at work. I just pace and pace.
(Cheers up) Come over right away

(Bill, disheveled, opens the door to a neatly dressed sober Ebby. They sit down. Bill pours some drinks)

Bill: (*crestfallen*) You're not drinking?

Ebby: (*calm and low key*) No.

Bill: Oh, come on. I was thrilled when you called. I was hoping it would be like old times. Drinking together, I wouldn't be so damn lonely. Remember the time we got blitzed, rented a plane and landed it on the Manchester golf course? They tried to put you in a booby hatch. Damn it, take a drink! At least say something. What the hell has happened to you?

Ebby: Remember Rolland?

Bill: Sort of. Met him a couple of times at parties. Found God. What's he have to do with us?

Ebby: Calm down and I'll tell you.

(Bill pours himself another drink; tries to hand one to Ebby who spurns the gesture)

Bill: You're not the Ebby I know. (*pauses*) What the hell, tell your story.

Ebby: Rolland was a real heavy hitter.

Bill: I couldn't keep up with him.

Ebby: Well the booze got the best of him, he just fell apart. But with all that money, he went to the best psychiatrists in the world.

Bill: So?

Ebby: He flew to Zurich and went into treatment with Carl Jung. After an apparently very successful treatment, Rolland left Jung feeling elated. A few weeks later, he was a falling down drunk.

Bill: I'm not interested in Rolland's problems. I hardly knew him.

Ebby: Bill, will you let me finish my story?

Bill: (*reluctantly*) Ok.

Ebby: Rolland went back to Zurich for another consultation with Jung, who told him that he was hopeless. He would either die or end his

life in a asylum. Rolland pleaded with Jung, “Doctor, isn’t there some hope for me?” Jung relented, saying, “well there is one thing that can save you. A spiritual awakening.”

Bill: (*sarcastically*) He made a decision for Christ and went to heaven?

Ebby: No, no. Nothing that dramatic. Rolland left Zurich dazed and despairing. Somehow, he heard about the Oxford Movement and started to go to their meetings. I ran across him in New York and listened to his story. Rolland told me that since joining the Oxford Movement, he lost all desire to drink. As he put it, “I’m not booze fighting anymore, I just have no desire.” I was really moved.

Bill: (*pouring himself another drink*) Come on, when you talk this way, I feel I’ve lost my best friend. I walked out of church when I was 12 and haven’t been back since. Couldn’t stand the bullshit.

Ebby: I’ll be going now. Can I visit you again?

Bill: What the hell. If you want to.

(Exit Ebby; Bill now quite shook)

Bill: Alone again *(cries)*

(Bill exits; Enter Narrator/Chorus)

Narrator/Chorus: Bill did go to a few meetings of the Oxford Group. Even took Lois to one. It didn't help. Bill just kept going downhill. He had several stays at a pricy drying out establishment – Towns Hospital on Central Park West. Dot's physician husband paid. It helped for a few months, then he would pick up a drink and was worse than ever. *(exits)*

(Enter Lois and Bill)

Lois: Bill, you have to go back to Towns.

Bill: *(sarcastically)* Whatever you say.

Narrator/Chorus: Bill entered Towns Hospital and is now bedridden, going through the agonies of withdrawal.

(Enter Dr. William Silkworth)

Silkworth: I'm prescribing more chloralhydrate.
Try to sleep. *(exits)*

Narrator/Chorus: It's the next day

(Silkworth re-enters)

Bill: Doctor, after you left last night, I just couldn't stand it. The chloralhydrate didn't help. My body shook, I thought for sure I was going mad. Then I thought of Ebby and the peace he had found. I don't believe in that holy roller stuff. Nevertheless, I called out, "if there be a God, let him show himself." Suddenly, my room blazed with an incredibly white light. I was seized with an ecstasy beyond description. Every joy I have known palled by comparison. Then I saw a mountain, climbed to its summit where a great wind blew. A wind not of air, but of spirit. It just blew right through me. Then I had a blazing thought, "you are a free man."

Dr. Silkworth, have I gone over the edge?

(Enter Lois, followed by William James and the Narrator/Chorus)

Lois: Bill, you are different. Something has changed. You're going to be alright.

Bill: *(to Silkworth)* Doctor, you never talk about yourself. Yet I know that you too are one who has known the night. I trust you – tell me, have I gone mad?

Silkworth: No. I don't know what happened to you. I do know that you are infinitely better than you were yesterday. I've seen similar transformation in other alcoholics, it's rare but it does happen.

James: *(picking up a book on Bill's night table)*
You're reading Varieties of Religious Experience?

Bill: I'm trying. It's difficult.

James: It's my most important work. An even greater contribution than my Principals of

Psychology.

Bill: My friend Ebby told me to read it.

Silkworth: You remember what I told you about alcoholism?

Bill: Sort of.

Silkworth: Alcoholism is a disease. An allergy of the body and an obsession of the mind. Not the moral failing you think it is. Besides being false, that belief only induces intolerable guilt and shame. And you know what alcoholics like you do with such painful feelings – drink. So not to have to feel them. And round and round we go.

Narrator/Chorus: Doctor, what are you talking about? Telling an alcoholic that he has a disease that makes him drink. Hearing that, he will drink even more. It's a great theory doctor. It gives the drinker an excuse to stay drunk around the clock, what else can he do having a disease that makes him drink?

Silkworth: (*annoyed*) Oh go away! (*pause*) I've never known an alcoholic who accepted my disease theory and who used it as a rationalization - an excuse for drinking.

Bill: I don't know if I'm crazy, I do know I feel different – hopeful – transformed.

James: It's important that you know that. Lois sensed it, so did Silkworth. That's all that matters.

Bill: (*to James*) In your book you wrote that the worst kind of melancholia is panic fear. Oh you're so right. I've lived with it for years.

James: I too have known panic fear. Being in very low spirits, I couldn't get the thought out of my head that there was nothing stopping me from becoming utterly idiotic like the patient I had seen in the asylum during my medical studies, sitting on a kind of shelf, staring into nothing. I realized the discrepancy between us was only momentary. For weeks

tormented by this image, I couldn't stand to be alone.

Bill: You too?

(James snaps out of his reverie, becoming a professor again)

James: Don't judge your experience, I don't. You'll see, if you continue to read my book, that dozens have had similar experiences. Some like you, in a blazing moment. A Damascus experience I call it, like the one that Paul had on the road to Damascus. For others, it's nothing so dramatic. It's more like an educational experience.

This isn't a moment to worry about the trustworthiness of your experience or its meaning. It is yours indelibly. You need not judge it. What's significant about your experience last night isn't determined by its "truth value" – whatever that may be, but by its "cash value." But epiphanies fade. You will need to convert your Damascus experience into an educational one.

Bill: How do I do that?

James: It will come. *(pause)* We both worship the “Bitch Goddess” success. She’s a whore, be wary of her. She’s as poisonous as drink.

Bill: I can’t worry about that now. One failure after another, it’s the story of my life. I need some success.

James: I suppose you do. Let me leave you with a formula. Achievement divided by ambition, less than one misery, more than one happiness.

(James exits; Narrator/Chorus enters)

Narrator/Chorus: The “cash value” of Bill’s experience at Towns can’t really be calculated. Bill never drank again. *(pause)* Bill read the Varieties of Religious Experience over and over and always acknowledged the crucial role William James played in his recovery and in the founding of Alcoholics Anonymous.

(Narrator/Chorus exits; Lois enters)

Bill: Lois, I don't have a job. Nobody will hire me. We're broke. We can't pay the mortgage. Even the minimum the bank agreed to, and I don't give a damn about any of it. I just want to help alcoholics like Ebby and James and Silkworth helped me. We'll get by somehow.

Lois: Of course we will. Don't forget, I still have a job.

Bill: For now, all my time will be dedicated to working with alcoholics. I'll work thought the Oxford Movements groups like Ebby does. Lois, I know I can do it. My failures are behind me. I just need you to support us for a few years. Then I'll look for work.

Lois: Bill, as long as you are sober, and I know you will be, do whatever you want. What a splendid thing to do – reclaim the dead, the lost, the hopeless. I believe in you. Don't worry, I earn enough for us to get by.

(Bill embraces Lois, weeping; they exit)

(Enter Narrator/Chorus)

Narrator/Chorus: Soon Dr. Burnham's mansion was more or less of a flop house. An exhausted Lois returning from work served coffee to men, whose reasons for being there were hardly spiritual.

(Narrator/Chorus exits; enter Bill and Lois)

Bill: The Oxford people didn't know how to talk to drunks. None of the men I bring home are able to maintain sobriety. (pause) Lois, the bank is threatening to foreclose. Another Wall Street friend offered me a business opportunity in Akron, Ohio. I'm going to take it. I'll be back in a few weeks. Do I have a decent suit?

Lois: I'll make you respectable. Just go and close the deal. I know you will.

Bill: What did I do to deserve you? You are always there for me.

(Enter Narrator/Chorus)

Narrator/Chorus: Bill did go to Akron and the deal fell through. For the first time since he left Towns, alcohol is talking to Bill as he paces up and down in front of his hotel bar.

(Narrator/Chorus exits)

Bill: *(speaking to Lois on the phone)* Darling, it didn't work out. I came all this distance for nothing. I'm going into a deep hole, like the one I was in when we first met. *(pause)* No I won't drink. Damn I can't get out of this alone. I need another alcoholic to talk to. I'll look in the church directory here in the lobby and ask for help. Don't worry, I'll find another alcoholic to talk to. I love you – goodbye. *(hangs up the phone)*

(Bill leaps up, almost walks into the hotel bar. Steps back to look at the directory, makes

another call.)

Bill: Please don't think I'm crazy. I'm alcoholic, not drinking at the moment, and alone in Akron. I need another alcoholic to talk to. *(pause)* Yes, that's right. Who? *(pause)* Dr. Bob Smith? You'll send someone to the hotel to take me to his home? I can't thank you enough.

(Exit Bill; enter Narrator/Chorus)

Narrator/Chorus: Bill not only talked to Dr. Bob, he moved in, stayed for days. Neither man has ever revealed what they spoke of. They must have bared their souls telling their drinking stories, and Bill of his recovery.

(Bill and Dr. Bob emerge from Dr. Bob's home. There is a scalpel in Dr. Bob's shaking hand)

Bob: I'm needed at the hospital; I'm scheduled for surgery to do a hemorrhoidectomy.

Bill: Here's a bottle of Beer, drink it. It will stop the shakes.

Narrator/Chorus: I'm glad it won't be my ass.

(All exit)

(Several years later, Bill and Bob enter; Shaker hymn, "The Gift to Be Simple" is heard)

Bob: That beer was my last drink. Unlike you Bill, I've never lost the desire. It's not constant. It doesn't torment me every day, and even when it does, I don't give in to it. No burst of white light for me, I didn't need it. I always believed in God. The problem was that He didn't believe in me until you told me your story. Your story was my white light, it opened the door and I walked through it, pouring out all of my guilt and shame. You, Bill, play three-dimensional chess. Not me. I'm a simple man and want to remain one. Every day I stay in the hospital when my work is done and talk to the men in the detox

unit there. No preaching, I just tell them my story. You'd be surprised how many get and stay sober after hearing me talk. I do edit a little. Emphasize how much better my life is, leaving out the residual cravings.

(Bob and Bill exit)

(Enter Bill, Lois and Narrator/Chorus)

Narrator/Chorus: Like all foundation myths this one isn't quite true. Ebby never managed to stay sober long, and Bill rescued him time and again. Rowland, although more rational, also had many "slips." Some triggered by the deaths of two of his sons in combat in WWII. He never joined AA, left The Oxford Movement, returning to the Episcopal Church. Carl Jung doesn't make it as a hero in my eyes. Breaking with Freud over the centrality of sex in his theories, while emphasizing spirituality in his, didn't stop him from sleeping with his patients. More seriously, Jung wrote of a Jewish mentality, as opposed to an Aryan one, just as the Nazis

were taking power. For all this, Jung did undeniably play an important role in the founding of AA.

The AA program needed Bill, the Wall Street operator, and Bob, the straightforward physician. Between them, they developed the AA program as we know it. Progress was slow but steady. More and more groups sprang up, and a significant percentage of their members were in stable recovery. Bill wrote what many consider a masterpiece – Alcoholics Anonymous, known as the Big Book. It didn't sell until the Saturday Evening Post ran a feature story on the Program, then things exploded. Bill and Lois never had to worry about money again.

I never thought Bill was much of a writer. I could be wrong. The Big Book has sold hundreds of thousands of copies and has been translated into seventy languages. Then he wrote 12 Steps and 12 Traditions, a sort of constitution for AA. His friend, the writer Aldous Huxley, considered it the best piece

of social engineering of the twentieth century.

Bill: Eventually I had to leave the Oxford Movement. They never had much success with drunks. I was determined that our approach wouldn't make the same mistakes. The Oxford Movement tells people what to do. Alcoholics can't accept that. AA has only suggestions. Oxford preaches; we share. Oxford is into absolutes – absolute purity, absolute this and absolute that, absolute honesty and so forth. Our slogan is “progress not perfection.” Oxford emphasizes converting the “leading men” in a community; we're radically democratic. Oxford is hierarchical; we are egalitarian.

Oxford advertises their membership, especially their stars – we need no stars to recruit members. We are a program of attraction. I took the best of the Oxford movement and either left behind or made alterations of the rest. For me the straw that broke the camel's back as far as the Oxford

Movement was concerned, was when their leaders – we have no leaders, our leaders who rotate are “but servants” - under their head Frank Buckman, decided to recruit Hitler and other Nazi leaders. Buckman even said, “Hitler was maximum” – Oxford’s highest praise. After that, I wanted nothing to do with the Oxford Movement.

Narrator/Chorus: Bill, that sounds like you at your best. But that’s not the whole story. You’re constitutionally incapable of being a follower of Buckman or anyone else. You have to be Number One. You’ve had to be Number One all your life.

Bill: There is much truth in what you say but you know that I detest being the leader of AA.

Narrator/Chorus: You love it.

Bill: I just want to be a member, like any other member. I don’t want to lead; I want to belong. (*weeps*) I’ve never belonged, not even to AA.

Narrator/Chorus: That's not true.

Bill: (*visibly shaking*) Damn you!

(Both exit)

Narrator/Chorus: The Oxford movement mandated belief in a patriarchal transcendent God. AA believes in “God as you understand Him” – anything that helps escape from the prison of self: the anabolic (creative) forces in the universe; something more personal and supportive; something pantheistic; or something transcendent. It doesn't matter as long as it's a force outside of yourself. No Dogma here.

(Exit Narrator/Chorus; enter Bill and Lois)

Bill: Lois, Yale is offering me an honorary doctorate.

Lois: How wonderful!

Bill: I'm going to turn it down.

Lois: Please don't. You earned it.

Bill: I want that Yale degree so badly. I can taste it. It's not like the offer to be on the cover of Time Magazine. That would have made me famous for a week, then instantly forgotten. I gained far more by refusing to be on the cover – people won't forget that. It wasn't something I cared about. I care about a Yale degree, but I can't accept it – to do so would set a horrible example – breaking anonymity for personal gain.

Lois: I think you're wrong. It doesn't matter what I think – you'll do what you want anyway.

Bill: Maybe I can turn my refusal into something positive. Like I did in the early days, when I thought Rockefeller would bankroll a chain of treatment facilities and he turned me down.

Lois: I remember you were crushed.

Bill: I got over my disappointment and made being “self-supporting” through our own contributions and never becoming “professional” keystones of the Program. Rockefeller did me a huge favor – maybe this will turn out the same way. *(pause)* Damn, I want that degree. *(pause)*

I always had conflicted feelings towards wealth. Resenting the Manchester summer people even as I aspired to be one of them.

Lois: I’m so glad you didn’t get the Rockefeller money – you would have wound up operating a string of treatment centers. *(pause)* You do have a lot of wealthy friends.

(Bill laughs; both exit)

Narrator/Chorus: Bill was someone now. He had the sort of success he had striven for all of his life – he was definitely Number One. He finally had what he wanted. Perhaps not, he sank into the worst depression of his life.

(Narrator/Chorus exits; Bill and Lois enter)

Lois: Bill, you can hardly move, nothing seems to get through to you. You can't go on like this. You can't get out of bed in the morning. When you manage to get to your office, you just sit there and stare into space. Staring down, with your head on the desk. I'm terrified – I don't know what to do.

Bill: (*angrily*) Spying on me?

Lois: I get calls from the office.

Bill: It wasn't as bad when we lost your father's house and were homeless, sleeping in the AA clubhouse on 23rd Street.

Lois: Call Tiebout, he understands alcoholics.

Bill: Why not Silkworth?

Lois: He doesn't have a private practice.

Bill: Don't nag, I can't stand it. The leader of the Program can't call a shrink. It would really hurt our cause. Who wants to join a

movement whose leader is so crazy he needs a psychiatrist.

Lois: That's just an excuse. Nobody needs to know.

Bill: I'll call.

(Lois and Bill exit; Narrator/Chorus enters)

Narrator/Chorus: Unfortunately, Tiebout had the therapeutic tact of a bull in a China shop. Even if he was on to something, it didn't do Bill any good. Bill stayed with him for quite a while and then found another shrink. That didn't help either. Tiebout thought alcoholics, including Bill, suffered from infantile grandiosity and what was needed was "ego deflation in depth." It is true that Bill struggled with compensatory grandiosity his whole life. And Thibault echoes James here, with his ratio of ambition to achievement. Unfortunately, Tiebout's style of ego deflation was punitive and judgmental. He certainly failed to alleviate Bill's depression.

(Narrator/Chorus exits; enter Bill and Lois)

Lois: I have some bad news. Bob is gone.

(Music – “Sing God a Simple Song” from Leonard Bernstein’s Mass)

Bill: *(sobbing)* I would have never gotten out of that Akron hotel sober if not for him. There would have been no Alcoholics Anonymous without him *(continuing to sob)*. He was a good man in a way I can never be. A friend, always there. Even while cancer was killing him; he was always there to put the brakes on when I spun out of control.

(Bill exits)

Narrator/Chorus: Some years later, Bill is returning from the rustic studio he built on the hill behind his home. As he walks in, Lois embraces him.

Lois: I am so proud of you.

Bill: *(laughs)* You’re always proud of me.

Lois: The way you re-worked the Oxford Movement's steps to recovery making them livable, actually doable, is just marvelous.

Bill: The first two are the key – admitting that you are powerless when it comes to alcohol – surrendering – and then “coming to believe” a power, however you conceive it – can restore your sanity. First surrender and then hope. People don't understand admitting powerlessness, they think it's humiliating. That makes me angry. It's a paradox – admitting powerlessness empowers.

Lois: How many steps will you have?

Bill: I don't know.

Lois: What are you working on now?

Bill: This one about promptly admitting it when you're wrong.

Lois: (*laughs*) You must have my father in mind.

Bill: Your father? He never had a drinking problem.

Lois: No, but he never, ever admits he is wrong about anything. He's not easy to live with.

Bill: I never had a problem with him. Of course, he's not my dad. I'm really attracted to your father's Swedenborgian beliefs – the blend of humanism and mysticism really talks to me.

Lois: Your hero William James' father was also a Swedenborgian – a strange coincidence.

Bill: No coincidence. Swedenborg is all over the pages of Varieties of Religious Experience.

Lois: We never joined the Swedenborgian Church or any other.

Bill: I'm suspicious of organized religion.

(Enter Narrator/Chorus)

Narrator/Chorus: This reminds me of your boyhood experience of having competitors, but no friends. Of course you're never going to join a church – any church – they are the competition. *(Bill exits) (pause)* Bill's fame

continued to grow, as did AA. So did the burden of leading it.

Late in his life, Bill wrote to Jung, telling him about Rolland and his interactions with Ebby. And how Jung himself had played a role, albeit in an indirect way, in the establishment of Alcoholics Anonymous. Jung wrote back a letter, in which he punned in Latin – alcohol in Latin is spiritus – we use the same word for the highest religious experience as well as for the most depraving poison. The helpful formula therefore is spiritous contra spiritum. According to Jung “Spiritum Contra Spiritous” is the formula for recovery from alcoholism. Bill treasured that letter, it still hangs, framed, in AA headquarters.

(Narrator/Chorus exits; Bill and Lois enter)

Bill: I’m going to resign from the management of the Program, I will turn it over to the “group consciousness” of our entire Fellowship. I

want it to be the most democratic, least hierarchical organization in history.

Lois: Great dream Bill as well as a wise decision. You designed the structure, now it is time to let the Fellowship see it through. And the Fellowship will be safe, even from you.

(Bill laughs)

(Bill and Lois exit)

Narrator/Chorus: The rest of Bill's life became one endless experiment. Just as James' Varieties of Religious Experience profoundly moved Bill, so did Aldous Huxley's Doors of Perception.

(Enter Bill and Lois)

Bill: There's nothing like it. LSD takes me places I've never been – not even when I saw the white light at Towns. It may be a chemical cure for addiction.

Lois: I tried it, it did nothing for me.

Bill: My depression lifted after my first “trip.” Now there is a whole reaction claiming LSD is a dangerous, addictive drug. And there is enormous pressure to outlaw it. The law is going after its promoters. There is so much vitriol directed at me, for my promoting it as a chemical path to spiritual experience for AA members. Lois, it is the only thing that lifted my depression.

Lois: You’ve always had critics. Ignore them. Anything that helps you, that I’m for.

Bill: If my use of LSD hurts the Program, and it looks like it will, I have to stop.

Lois: Bill, don’t.

(Bill and Lois exit; Narrator/Chorus enters)

Narrator/Chorus: Bill gave up LSD. He soon found another panacea.

(Bill enters)

Bill: I found the answer – it’s a vitamin, not a drug.

It may be the answer to the mystery of how Silkworth’s allergy actually works. It looks like it is going to turn out that alcoholics suffer from a vitamin deficiency.

Narrator/Chorus: Always the promoter. Bill relentlessly promoted Niacin to anyone who would listen. And more than a few didn’t want to listen.

(Narrator/Chorus exits)

Bill: *(to an unseen audience)* Niacin will change your life. *(starts coughing and gasping for a breath)*

(Exit Lois; enter Narrator/Chorus)

Narrator/Chorus: Bill had been a chain smoker forever. Even as his emphysema worsened, he continued to sneak cigarettes – between puffs of oxygen. Niacin didn’t help.

(Narrator/Chorus Exits; enter Lois)

Lois: Darling: You can barely get across the room;
you have to go back to the hospital.

Bill: (*coughing and gasping for breath*) Call an ambulance.

Narrator/Chorus: Lois is seen standing outside the hospital room where Bill is dying. (*Music – “Just My Bill” – from Jerome Kern’s Showboat*)

Lois: I’ve been called an “enabler,” or worse by people I don’t even know; whom I’ve never met. They condemn me for that on public platforms and in print. They say I am a horrible example for wives living with drunks; maybe I am? I don’t know what’s best for other women. All I know is that I love Bill and never seriously thought of leaving him.

They tell me he would have had a better chance to “hit bottom” if I had left him. I don’t believe it. I’m convinced he would have died if I had. He had so deteriorated

that I didn't recognize the man that I married.

I am bound by a sacred oath, "for better or for worse; for richer, for poorer; in sickness or in health; until death do us part."

Oh, I did leave and go back to my parents' house many times, never for long. Bill would plead and to tell the truth, I wanted to go back. Bill's ultimate recovery had nothing to do with anything I did or didn't do. He had a spiritual awakening and that is what transformed him.

Even after he was stably sober, it wasn't easy for me to not live in his shadow. He was so big, big in every sense of the word. Just as I had had moments of fury and resentment while he was drinking, I did during his years of recovery. At one point when he was consumed by the movement he had started, I threw a shoe at him, shouting, "you and your meetings." And I started AL-ANON to help myself and others shift their focus from their "alcoholic" to their own growth. For all the

pain, there was so much we shared I would have missed out on if Bill had survived my leaving him and he recovered without me. Our adventures, our love of nature, our skinny dipping in mountain streams, our sharing the heartbreak of my multiple miscarriages, listening to Bill tell a story as only he can, our quiet winter nights around the fire, our discussions of Swedenborgian philosophy, our playing Beethoven duets – me on the piano, Bill on the cello, our experiments with the Ouija Board and belief in the occult, our sailing on the Hudson with a makeshift sail that had once been a towel, our world travels, our virtual homelessness until we acquired (with the assistance of an AA member) our beloved home. And for me the chance to play a role, however ancillary, in creating a movement that changes lives.

Bill was always attracted to beautiful women, and they to him. I was an old white-haired woman; he was still a handsome viral man. What was I to do. I knew it was ego and sensual pleasure, not love, that lead him

to doing whatever he did. And I knew he would never leave me. So, I accepted it. My friends told me to throw him out. I didn't want to, and I didn't.

Bill's relationship with Helen Wynn, editor of the AA Grapevine, was different. After she bought a house near ours, it became a sort of menage-a-trois. Bill spending many nights there, leaving me alone. That was cruel and I seriously considered divorce. In the end, I accepted that too. Bill insisted on leaving Helen 10% of the royalties from Alcoholics Anonymous, arguing I would have plenty of money while Helen had none. I was deeply hurt. I argued with Bill to no avail and wound up accepting that too.

I'm not saying being married to the sober Bill was easy. Far into his recovery, he did things that hurt me deeply. Somehow, they don't seem very important now.

Yes. Bill, drunk or sober, was a difficult mate; and an utterly marvelous one.

Bill wrote in his autobiography that there was something unhealthy in his relationship with women – meaning mostly with me – that they had too much of a little boy looking for a mother to protect and sooth. I didn't and I don't like that he wrote that. Even if it's true, it doesn't matter. I just plain don't care. We had so much that was mutual, rich, and sustaining, that I was perfectly content to pick him up when he stumbled.

Narrator/Chorus: (*at the end of the stage*) Bill is lying in bed, gasping for air as he repeatedly places an oxygen mask over his nose. A Male nurse stands next to him, as a sorrowful Lois enters and looks on.

Bill: (*to nurse*) For God's sake, give me a drink.

Nurse: I can't do that.

Bill: A shot or two of whiskey.

Nurse: I'm afraid not.

Bill: You bastard (*lunges at him, tries to throw a punch*). It's Lois, she won't let me do fucking anything.

(Bill drifts off mumbling, perhaps in delirium. He wakes up and with great effort speaks.

Bill: Please, please, give me some whiskey.

Nurse: I can't.

(Bill tries to speak again but he can't. Nurse goes over to him.)

Nurse: He's gone.

(Lois sobs and runs out; Nurse exits. Narrator/Chorus moves to center stage)

Narrator/Chorus: The founder of Alcoholics Anonymous dying words, "give me a drink." Beyond irony. How can we understand it? The rantings of an oxygen-deprived brain without emotional meaning? Alcoholism – cunning, baffling, powerful, reasserting itself? A return of the repressed? The

revenge of the Bitch Goddess? A self-destructive impulse that couldn't be denied? A reflexive response to excruciating pain? The most abusive of self-punishments obliterating his entire life's work? Dr. Bob would say, "for god's sake, keep it simple," as any AA member could tell you, it was the result of Bill stopping going to meetings. We'll never know.

Chain smoking right up to his death, was that all of the above? Or an untreated transfer of addictions? The sheer addictive power of nicotine that simultaneously stimulates and relaxes. A misguided attempt to suck in the emotional nurturance he never got from his mother? We'll never know that either. The thousands of mourners who filled St. John's Cathedral in New York, the National Cathedral in Washington, and St. Martin-in-the-field in London, knew little or nothing about William Wilson's lifelong struggle with his demons – shame, guilt and depression - nor did they care. What they did know is that Bill W. somehow wove

inspiration from the Vermonter's who fought and died for freedom at Fort Ticonderoga and Gettysburg; the radically egalitarian democratic self-governance ethos of New England town meetings, the wisdom of William James who taught Bill not to judge spiritual experiences; and that their truth value doesn't matter, their "cash value" does; and that experiences - like Paul's, on the road to Damascus - fade and must be sustained by a structure and a practice - into a tapestry of rare beauty and utility.

And they knew that Bill's judgment was unerring when it came to The Program. He kept learning from the failure of other movements. Bill knew that the Washingtonians, who had great success with alcoholics, but then ceased to be because of their involvement with politics and social issues, that had nothing to do with recovery from alcoholism; that the Oxford Movement, of which Bill had been a member, didn't have much success with alcoholics because they preached and talked down, rather than

sharing their own experience, and that their insistence on absolutes – absolute purity, absolute honesty – didn’t work. And what Bill learned and applied saved AA, he learned to do the opposite for instance, turning the Oxford Movements absolutes into AA’s “progress not perfection”; dropping Oxford’s insistence its members be “maximum” reformulating Oxford’s rigid path to recovery into AA’s “suggested twelve steps”; flipping Oxford’s emphasis on recruiting the “leading” members of a community, advertising their “star” members into “principals before personality” and a code of anonymity; writing AA’s radically egalitarian, democratic “constitution” into the form of “12 Traditions.” From Dr. Silkworth, he learned that “alcoholism was a disease – an allergy of the body and an obsession of the mind” and made that a keystone of the Program. And most important, Bill learned from his relationships with Ebby Thacker and Dr. Bob the transcendent power of human beings sharing their faith, hope and experience. And he

learned from Dr. Bob the spiritual value of the simplicity he wasn't quite capable of. From Tiebout the necessity of Ego deflation for recovery, reframing it without Tiebout's Calvinistic, punitive judgement. Like a magpie he borrowed from everyone. So it didn't matter how little or how much the mourners knew of Bill's personal struggles, of the sources of his inspiration, or the brilliance of his synthesis. What they did know, was that he created a program that provided a path to recovery not only from the various addictions, but from the curse of guilt and shame transforming them into responsibility. Bill created something that was quintessentially American, yet universal. The presence of thousands at Bill's many memorials, more than anything else, was an expression of their gratitude.

Bill would have been uncomfortable with all of the fuss, while secretly enjoying it. For myself, I can only hope that at last he became, "just another struggling drunk" which he longed to, but never could, be.

(Exit Narrator/Chorus)

*(Projection of the Serenity Prayer of
Alcoholics Anonymous)*

*“God grant me the Courage to change the
things I can; the Serenity to Accept the
things I can’t and the Wisdom to know the
difference.”*

(Curtain)

Author's Note

Here are a few of my thoughts about the therapist's relationship to A.A.

1. It is unwise to push patients who are not open to the idea towards attending A.A. Meetings. A referral in the form of a gentle suggestion is the best approach. Therapists must take a middle stand toward the Program, neither proselytizing for it, not dismissing it as untrained, unwanted competition. Participation in a 12-Step Program is not the only path of recovery from alcoholism; although it works for many. George Valliant's (1983) book *The Natural History of Alcoholism* concluded - and Valiant had much evidence - that the most common outcome of alcoholic drinking was death or spontaneous recovery without either professional or self-help. That still leaves a huge number of pathological drinkers who would benefit from either professional or self-help or both. The more severe the

patient's psychopathology, the less likely he or she is to benefit any form of self-help. Unfortunately, professional treatment also has a very uncertain outcome. The usual way to treat an addiction is top down. That is to first deal with the addiction and then with whatever residual psychopathology there may be. In the case of patients with severe psychopathology this just won't work. The psychopathology must be addressed first.

2. The alcoholics grandiosity must be confronted empathically but firmly.
3. The therapist needs to insist on the seriousness of the pathological drinking and the dire consequences of continuing the drinking behavior. In most cases the patient should be told that "cutting down" in one way or another just won't work. The alcoholics chances of becoming a "social drinker" are nil. The therapist saying something like "you have a bad disease, but that doesn't make you a bad person" can be highly therapeutic. As is saying, "you are not responsible for having a disease; you are responsible for

treating it.” Ideally, treatment should evolve from being highly directive; then as the patient stabilizes in recovery, gradually becoming more “analytic.” As the patient becomes more capable of self-reflection, the therapist should create more space between him or her and the patient. For many alcoholics, the drinking life has been all-consuming, and they feel lost as sober persons. It’s an unfamiliar state they don’t know how to manage and it is key that the therapist helps the recovering person finds ways to experience sobriety as “normal.” Exploring the patients’ possible meaningful activities is highly therapeutic. It is used as a middle ground between directive interventions and analytic explorations.

4. Jung was essentially right in his thoughts about “spirituality” and its being a necessary replacement for “spirits.” Taking Spiritual in its broadest terms, helping patients find something they can believe in and strive towards can be transformative. While having a “spiritual awakening” is not a pre-requisite

for recovery from alcoholism as Wilson thought, when it does occur it is certainly effective. In this area, all the therapist needs to do is be open to the spiritual dimension of life. Whether that takes the form of immanence, transcendence, or whatever speaks to the recovering person.

5. In many cases, drinking starts as a form of self-medication and ends in physiological and psychological dependence. It is helpful for a therapist to explore the degree in which alcoholic drinking has been a misguided attempt at self-medication and to illicit what conditions are being medicated. And that is worth doing, however futile, the attempt at self-medication may be. It almost always eventuates an exacerbation of the psychopathology, and that is also something that should be brought to the patient's attention.
6. Both psychotherapy and the A.A. steps have the same goal, albeit they are pursued in very different ways. In terms of Melanie Klein's (1975) developmental theory, the goal is

moving from the “paranoid – schizoid” position to the “depressive position.” In terms of ego psychology both the Program and therapy help patients move from Symbiosis with a drug, alcohol, to separation and autonomy (Mahler et. al. 1975).

Recovery is very much a process of individualization. If you look at people in a detox or rehab unit, they are strikingly similar developmentally and emotionally, yet if you look at the same people two or three years out from detox and rehab, they don’t look the same at all (Levin 1981). This is a long and torturous path best taken with firm empathic support, most often provided by a professional therapist, though not always so.

7. Shame plays a crucial role in the dynamics of addiction. In Bill Wilson’s case, it was both antecedent and consequential; and then causal of one determinant of his depressions. It is vital that the therapist deal with the addicts’ shame in all its facets. This can be tricky – discussing shame can be shaming, and the therapist must be careful not to add

an additional layer to the already all too powerful and all-pervasive shame already present.

The 12-step programs, such as A.A., have an ingenious way of mitigating shame. They reframe it through a change in identity from “drunk,” “failure,” “sot,” “hopeless bum,” “asshole” to an identity as a healer via membership in a society of healers who help one another recover.

The therapist doesn’t have this option in quite the same form. Yet successful therapy has been regarded as a retelling of the story that we tell ourselves about ourselves. Not all alcoholics chose to use Alcoholics Anonymous as a therapeutic tool, so in their case the reframing is very much the work of psychotherapy. So, the therapist too enables a change in the identity that ameliorates shame.

8. Approximately twenty percent of alcoholics are psychopathic. Their problem is the absence of shame, not too much shame.

Obviously, the therapist must treat this subset of alcoholics differently. For the majority of alcoholics, the psychopathic - or nearly so - behavior that so often accompanies active alcoholism is the consequence of pathological drinking and tends to remit in recovery.

9. Lastly, alcoholism as it progresses is isolating. Re-integration into some sort of community – religious, political, athletic, ethnic, social, recreational or whatever – or into a 12-step program – is for most an essential element of recovery. Bill Wilson’s tragedy, if we are to regard one side of him as tragic, was essentially in never belonging. Not in the village of East Dorset, not in Manchester, not in his boarding school, not in college, not in Wall Street and finally, and most tragically, not in A.A.. As de Tocqueville (1854) observed two centuries ago, Americans are joiners – joiners of all sorts of voluntary organizations. The recovering alcoholic has lots of options, and the therapist should encourage taking advantage of such options

without pushing. It is most helpful to address the patient's fears of rejection, which are sometimes, but not usually, insurmountable and stand as the strongest obstacle to reintegration into community. Having said that, it is also true that schizoids should remain schizoid. An unknown percentage of recovering persons have a strong schizoid side that needs to be respected. It is crucial for the therapist to distinguish those with schizoid traits that are basic to their personalities. In which case, they should be left standing, and those who use schizoid defenses that can be confronted, understood, and worked through.

It is a bitter irony that, for alcoholics, the use of alcohol, the social lubricant par excellence, eventuates in isolation and the loss of whatever meaningful relationships the drinker started out with. It is significant that Bill Wilson's complaint to his friend Ebby wasn't that he had lost control of his drinking, but that he was "lonely."

It is an interesting question whether anti-depressants, had they been available, would have helped Bill. At the time, the only anti-depressants were MAO (Monoamine Oxidase) inhibitors that were rarely prescribed. They are dangerous, in so far as, if the person taking them eats foods that contain the wrong amino acids, the result can be fatal. At any rate, none of Bill's psychiatrists prescribed them.

The other possibility would have been amphetamines – psycho-stimulants - which build tolerance and can become addictive. Obviously, not a good choice for someone with Bill's history.

The tri-cyclic anti-depressants such as Elavil and SSRIs (selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors) such as Prozac were decades away. So it is impossible to say if anti-depressants would have helped Bill Wilson.

It's worth noting that Sigmund Freud and William Wilson, although products of radically different cultures, and whose values and beliefs differed, had much in common (Freud 1937; Wilson 1976). Both believed that we take out demons all the way. Both struggled with serious emotional problems including anxiety and depression. Both were fascinated by the occult and the paranormal. Both experimented with drugs – Freud with cocaine; Wilson LSD. Both had to find ways to prevent their grandiosity from becoming self-destructive and/or destructive to the movements they founded. Both died of the consequences of their addiction to nicotine. Freud from cancer of the jaw; Wilson from emphysema. Both had the political skills to build successful movements. Both believed that the ultimate answer to psychopathology, including addiction,

would be pharmacological. Each in their own very different ways found a path not to escape the human condition, but to understand, and to some extent ameliorate it. To that degree, both were liberators.

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About the Author

Dr. Levin has been kissed by a wolf, petted a jaguar, climbed Kilimanjaro, plunged into a crevasse on Alaska's Mount Denali, and looked down on Everest's base camp from 18000 foot Kala Pitar, all while writing eighteen books, carrying a heavy caseload of psychotherapy patients in Manhattan and Long Island and teaching at the New School for Social Research in New York's Greenwich Village. His teaching at the New School has been wide ranging. He directed and taught in a program to train addiction counselors for over 25 years, as well as teaching "cross-over" philosophy-psychology courses, the first of which was "Reason and Passion in Western Thought: Plato, Spinoza, and Freud," followed by "Anxiety and the Nature of Reality," "Theories of the Self," and "Our

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Dr. Levin has been featured on a range of media, including over a hundred radio shows, and on television on Chris Matthews’ “Hardball,” NBC’s “Dateline,” and Danish, Spanish and German TV.

Dr. Levin was educated at the University of Pennsylvania, McGill University, and New York

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Although primarily about addictions (including sexual addiction) and their treatment, Dr. Levin's writings have also covered a wide range of other topics, including narcissism, childlessness and chronic depression, as well as

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