The Next Frontier: Emotional Sobriety

A letter Bill W. wrote to a friend in depression, printed in the AA Grapevine in January 1958. He was twenty-three years sober. The bracket after "Last autumn" is the Grapevine's reprint editor's.

I think that many oldsters who have put our AA "booze cure" to severe but successful tests still find they often lack emotional sobriety. Perhaps they will be the spearhead for the next major development in AA — the development of much more real maturity and balance (which is to say, humility) in our relations with ourselves, with our fellows, and with God.

Those adolescent urges that so many of us have for top approval, perfect security, and perfect romance — urges quite appropriate to age seventeen — prove to be an impossible way of life when we are at age forty-seven or fifty-seven.

Since AA began, I've taken immense wallops in all these areas because of my failure to grow up, emotionally and spiritually. My God, how painful it is to keep demanding the impossible, and how very painful to discover finally, that all along we have had the cart before the horse! Then comes the final agony of seeing how awfully wrong we have been, but still finding ourselves unable to get off the emotional merry-go-round.

How to translate a right mental conviction into a right emotional result, and so into easy, happy, and good living — well, that's not only the neurotic's problem, it's the problem of life itself for all of us who have got to the point of real willingness to hew to right principles in all our affairs.

Even then, as we hew away, peace and joy may still elude us. That's the place so many of us AA oldsters have come to. And it's a hell of a spot, literally. How shall our unconscious — from which so many of our fears, compulsions and phony aspirations still stream — be brought into line with what we actually believe, know and want! How to convince our dumb, raging and hidden "Mr. Hyde" becomes our main task.

I've recently come to believe that this can be achieved. I believe so because I begin to see many benighted ones — folks like you and me — commencing to get results. Last autumn [several years back — ed.] depression, having no really rational cause at all, almost took me to the cleaners. I began to be scared that I was in for another long chronic spell. Considering the grief I've had with depressions, it wasn't a bright prospect.

I kept asking myself, "Why can't the Twelve Steps work to release depression?" By the hour, I stared at the St. Francis Prayer . . . "It's better to comfort than to be the comforted." Here was the formula, all right. But why didn't it work?

Suddenly I realized what the matter was. My basic flaw had always been dependence — almost absolute dependence — on people or circumstances to supply me with prestige, security, and the like. Failing to get these things according to my perfectionist dreams and specifications, I had fought for them. And when defeat came, so did my depression.

There wasn't a chance of making the outgoing love of St. Francis a workable and joyous way of life until these fatal and almost absolute dependencies were cut away.

Because I had over the years undergone a little spiritual development, the absolute quality of these frightful dependencies had never before been so starkly revealed. Reinforced by what Grace I could secure in prayer, I found I had to exert every ounce of will and action to cut off these faulty emotional dependencies upon people, upon AA, indeed, upon any set of circumstances whatsoever.

Then only could I be free to love as Francis had. Emotional and instinctual satisfactions, I saw, were really the extra dividends of having love, offering love, and expressing a love appropriate to each relation of life.

Plainly, I could not avail myself of God's love until I was able to offer it back to Him by loving others as He would have me. And I couldn't possibly do that so long as I was victimized by false dependencies.

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The letter, continued.

For my dependency meant demand — a demand for the possession and control of the people and the conditions surrounding me.

While those words "absolute demand" may look like a gimmick, they were the ones that helped to trigger my release into my present degree of stability and quietness of mind, qualities which I am now trying to consolidate by offering love to others regardless of the return to me.

This seems to be the primary healing circuit: an outgoing love of God's creation and His people, by means of which we avail ourselves of His love for us. It is most clear that the current can't flow until our paralyzing dependencies are broken, and broken at depth. Only then can we possibly have a glimmer of what adult love really is.

Spiritual calculus, you say? Not a bit of it. Watch any AA of six months working with a new Twelfth Step case. If the case says "To the devil with you," the Twelfth Stepper only smiles and turns to another case. He doesn't feel frustrated or rejected. If his next case responds, and in turn starts to give love and attention to other alcoholics, yet gives none back to him, the sponsor is happy about it anyway. He still doesn't feel rejected; instead he rejoices that his one-time prospect is sober and happy. And if his next following case turns out in later time to be his best friend (or romance) then the sponsor is most joyful. But he well knows that his happiness is a by-product — the extra dividend of giving without any demand for a return.

The really stabilizing thing for him was having and offering love to that strange drunk on his doorstep. That was Francis at work, powerful and practical, minus dependency and minus demand.

In the first six months of my own sobriety, I worked hard with many alcoholics. Not a one responded. Yet this work kept me sober. It wasn't a question of those alcoholics giving me anything. My stability came out of trying to give, not out of demanding that I receive.

Thus I think it can work out with emotional sobriety. If we examine every disturbance we have, great or small, we will find at the root of it some unhealthy dependency and its consequent unhealthy demand. Let us, with God's help, continually surrender these hobbling demands. Then we can be set free to live and love; we may then be able to Twelfth Step ourselves and others into emotional sobriety.

Of course I haven't offered you a really new idea — only a gimmick that has started to unhook several of my own "hexes" at depth. Nowadays my brain no longer races compulsively in either elation, grandiosity or depression. I have been given a quiet place in bright sunshine.

— Bill W. *· © Copyright, AA Grapevine, January 1958*

Twenty questions

Tom B. of Charlotte built a talk on the letter and asked these, yes or no, in this order. "If you answered several of these questions in the affirmative, you're probably emotionally unsober to some degree." Three of them run the other way.

- ☐ *Do you accept criticism well?* yes / no
- ☐ *Are you usually hurt or angered by criticism?* yes / no
- ☐ *Do you have a difficult time accepting compliments?* yes / no
- ☐ *Do others think more highly of you than you do of yourself?* yes / no
- ☐ *Do you depend on others to make you feel good about yourself?* yes / no
- ☐ *Does what others say about you unduly influence your feelings and beliefs about yourself?* yes / no
- ☐ *Do you often do a good job and know it, but don't feel good about it?* yes / no
- ☐ *Do you often feel like a loser, even though you know you're a good person?* yes / no
- ☐ *Do you often put yourself down?* yes / no
- ☐ *Looking honestly at your life, do you treat yourself very well?* yes / no
- ☐ *Do you treat others better than you treat yourself?* yes / no
- ☐ *Do you do nice things for others in order to get attention or compliments?* yes / no
- ☐ *When you express love for someone, are you hurt when he or she doesn't respond in kind?* yes / no
- ☐ *Do you often feel afraid, even though you know everything's okay?* yes / no
- ☐ *Do you often feel you're not enough?* yes / no
- ☐ *Do you often feel you're falling short of what you should be and what you should do?* yes / no
- ☐ *Does it bother you a great deal when you know that someone dislikes or disapproves of you?* yes / no
- ☐ *Do you often refrain from doing or saying what you know you should, for fear of how others may react to it?* yes / no
- ☐ *Do your feelings depend on how your significant other is treating you?* yes / no
- ☐ *Do you feel you're a good person no matter what others may think?* yes / no

At the table

"If we examine every disturbance we have, great or small, we will find at the root of it some unhealthy dependency and its consequent unhealthy demand."

THE LAST DISTURBANCE

Bill's sentence

Write the last time you were disturbed, great or small: what happened, and what you felt.

Under it, the dependency: what were you looking to that person or that circumstance to supply? Prestige, security, approval, romance, being right, being needed, being left alone?

Under that, the demand: what were you demanding they do, or be, so that you could have it?

THE SURRENDER

"with God's help"

1. Say the dependency out loud to one other person. Tom B.: tell another, and give them leave to tell you when they see the pattern again.
2. Ask God to remove the demand, the way Step Ten asks at once for the selfishness and the fear to be removed.
3. Then do what Bill did in his first six months and what the Twelfth Stepper in the letter does: give the thing you were demanding, to someone, without any demand for a return. Anonymously, Tom says, if you can manage it.

BILL'S SYNDROME

the letter

- dependence, almost absolute, on people or circumstances for prestige, security "and the like"
- fighting for them when they are not supplied to specification
- depression when defeat comes
- dependency meaning demand: "a demand for the possession and control of the people and the conditions surrounding me"

TOM'S SYNDROME

the talk

- seeking approval, acceptance and emotional security from someone or something else
- seeking reassurance constantly, and it is never enough
- depending on another to fill all your needs
- feeling like a victim and blaming others when they are not filled
- trying to possess and control another to make sure they are
- all of it unconscious, automatic and habitual, like a tape that plays when a button is pushed

Bill W., "The Next Frontier: Emotional Sobriety", AA Grapevine, January 1958, © AA Grapevine, Inc., reprinted whole · the questions are Tom B.'s, from the talk on the tapes · bigbook.it/emotional-sobriety