

BILL W., CAN YOU HEAR ME?

A few weeks ago, I met an incredible person, a priest who runs a comprehensive re-entry program in New York for prisoners returning to society after incarceration, most of whom have substance abuse problems in addition to their criminal records.

We were discussing how and whether it would be possible to shift the recovery paradigm from illness to health, from the idea that these people have a life-long disease that must be controlled, to the idea that these people have a core of wisdom and resiliency that, once tapped into, would free them from addictions for life. Such a shift was appealing to him, highly intriguing, and also in keeping with his sense of humanity and the remarkable strength of the spirit.

“There is no way, though,” he said, “that I could separate my program from AA. I need them. I am highly dependent on reliable volunteers. The recovery model they use isn’t what holds me to it. It’s the fellowship model.” Then he went on to explain that anywhere in the country, anywhere in the world, a released prisoner assigned to Alcoholics Anonymous knows that there will be “someone to meet the bus, someone to be a friend, someone to take an interest.”

I had never thought of that, Bill W., and I was awestruck by the vision of what a powerful and compassionate global organization has emerged from your dream of recovery for all people suffering from addictions. It reminded me of the power of all our dreams, and of how the simplest dream, if it is positive and in service to mankind, takes flight to transcend even the dreamer’s most fervent hopes.

At first, I thought there was no point pursuing the conversation. The completeness of that fellowship model is not replicated in any other organization that I know of, and would be nearly impossible to replicate, as it has invented itself, over time, from the core belief of the AA program that people need “a buddy” to stay in recovery.

But I couldn’t get it off my mind. I kept thinking about that picture, all over the world, men and women, clutching their small packet of belongings, frightened and alone, wondering what lies ahead for them and haunted by what lies behind them, getting out of cabs, and off buses and trains, looking around, worried, until they see someone looking around, too, and realize that must be their buddy. I thought about how much it means to each of us to have a buddy in life, at least one person who is caring and forgiving, who has no expectations of us and no fear of our weaknesses, who understands our deepest insecurities as well as our strongest intentions. It kept playing itself out in my mind, how

this fellowship would speak to the soul, how it would sustain people, because it originates from the power of unconditional love.

And then I developed a dream of my own, Bill W. I want to share it with you. In your time, your dream saved so many souls from incarceration, from being labeled “evil” or “demonic,” from being shunned as immoral, or of weak character. Your dream gave them the dignity of a disease, something that had gone wrong inside of them, something that was out of their control yet still resonant to a higher power, something they could learn to live with and something they could adapt to and have a functional, productive life. Yes, it meant a life of required meetings and of constant reminders that they were not like everyone else, that they were Suzy or Joe or Peter or Helen or Max or Carol, and they were an alcoholic. But it was possible, in your dream, for an alcoholic to find pride in recovery and sustain it. You took away the shame and offered hope.

That was a beautiful dream, Bill W., and it has created something wonderful in the world.

But I ask you to imagine something more, another dream, built on the same fundamental ideal that people who have been labeled as something can move beyond that label and find dignity, hope, confidence, recovery – and freedom.

I’m speaking for myself now, just one person who has been incredibly blessed in life to find out that unconditional love is deeper than dependency.

I used to think that being a “buddy” to someone meant listening to their sad tales and feeling sorry for them when they were down, pulling them back up when they needed a helping hand, acknowledging how difficult their life had been and letting them know how hard it is for anyone to get over the kinds of things that have happened to them, staying on top of them when they were struggling and giving good advice and good philosophy to them, worrying about them, and also being willing to stand up and give them a piece of my mind if I thought they needed it.

I was never a member of AA, Bill W., but I was a workaholic and a success junkie and addicted to my expectations. My life was filled with people for whom I couldn’t do enough, and for whom, no matter what I did do, it wasn’t sufficient. My life was filled with people for whom I felt sorry. And my life was also filled with people on whom I made demands, but whose responses never left me feeling any more whole. My life was filled with people who felt sorry for me. We were buddies. We cared for each other. We spent an enormous amount of time in commiseration and self-absorbed self-examination. We thought we were “damaged” or “hurt” or “stressed” by life, and we were doing the best we could to keep each other propped up and moving ahead day by day. We went to a lot of meetings, too, and we stood up and cheered for each other each time one of us announced, “My name is _____, and I’m the president of ...” Or “the chairman of ...” Or “the recipient of ...” Or “the winner of ...” Or “the best of ...” You get the idea. It’s all

the same. We had ourselves on our minds most of the time. We were dependent on our buddies to keep us from stumbling under the weight of our own self-image.

Our form of dependency lacked both the humility and the compassion of the fellowship that forms through AA, Bill W., because unlike your members, we didn't call what we had a disease. We thought we wore an external symbol, and carried an internal burden, of achievement. We were sick with self-importance and didn't know it.

Nonetheless, what I saw, as my new dream unfolded, Bill W., is that both forms of fellowship are focused on weakness, not on strength, and created to answer a need, on the assumption that everyone is always needy. I saw that the disease model, if you want to call it that, keeps our minds on what's wrong with us, and our hearts in fear that whatever it is will consume us. It's a terror, all right. It holds us in thrall to our own worst nightmares. It sucks our souls and spits away the creative energy of life.

Now, can you hear me, Bill W? Here it is. My dream. What if, all over the world, in towns and cities and hamlets and waystations, the buddies found each other in health and strength? What if they learned something simple, something that explains why nothing more than the way we think in the disease model enforces a lifetime of meetings and self-flagellation? And what if, instead of meeting to share their stories of sad downfalls and near-misses, of relapses and renewed efforts, of struggle and achievement tempered by caution because the disease could strike them down at any moment, of resignation to their fate bolstered by knowledge that they can take life day by day ... What if instead they held meetings to share what they were learning about their own and others' innate health? What if they shared stories of how they recognized the stuck and rusted lock of their imaginations holding them prisoners, and how they broke free from the cell block of self-limiting thoughts? What if they shared stories that illustrated how anyone, anywhere, no matter how long they've been trapped in their own insecurity, can find the key to releasing their wisdom and unlocking the capacity to create a new life from the formless energy that is the spirit we share before we shape it into our individual ideas about life?

What if they began to notice that "the disease" was no more powerful than any idea, a long-held thought that obscured the light of their innate ability to transcend the particulars of habitual thoughts in the experience of thinking new thoughts? What if they turned their focus away from what was wrong with them to what was right with them, to the gifts they had and how to share them with the world? What if the buddy system became a network of *independency*, of truly unconditional love, the attraction of affinity rather than the distraction of dependency, the stepping stone to freedom from any addiction, even the addiction to needing a buddy, even the addiction to meetings and self-monitoring? What if people looked outward, to life itself and all of us connecting to make it increasingly more beautiful, instead of inward to the details of their own life so far?

What if all that energy, all that love, all that compassion, all that drive to save us from ourselves were focused on creating positive change, on envisioning a healthier world, on bringing out the health in all people? What if this huge, planetary, generous and well-intentioned organization you started, Bill W., became the vehicle for transmitting a new message of well-being? What if restraining the power of disease was abandoned in favor of releasing the power in health?

AA. Absolutely Anything could happen!

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