

Introduction

In this conference I would like to talk about "spiritual experience" or "spiritual awakening" in the AA Program.

In the Second Appendix to the *Big Book* this description is presented for spiritual experience or spiritual awakening.

The alcoholic...

... finally realizes that he has undergone a profound alteration in his reaction to life; that such a change could hardly have been brought about by himself alone. What often takes place in a few months could seldom have been accomplished by years of self-discipline. With few exceptions our members find that they have tapped an unsuspected inner resource which they presently identify with their own conception of a Power greater than themselves. Most of us think this awareness of a Power greater than ourselves is the essence of spiritual experience. Our more religious members call it "God-consciousness." (Big Book, pp 567-568)

I want to talk about this "spiritual experience." I prefer to call it a "spiritual awakening." In the appendix on "spiritual experience" the Big Book explains that for some people this spiritual experience is in the nature of a sudden and spectacular upheaval... for some an immediate and overwhelming "God-consciousness," followed at once by a vast change in feelings and outlook... For many if not most alcoholics this "spiritual experience" or "spiritual awakening" is a slower process over a period of time. The Appendix then continues"

Quite often friends of the newcomer are aware of the difference long before he himself is. He finally realizes he has undergone a profound alteration in his reaction to life; that such a change could hardly have been brought about by himself alone. (BB, p 567)

Let's examine this "spiritual awakening."

I Who Are You?

We need to first ask the question... Who are you?

How do you refer to yourself?

How do you answer the question, "Who are you?"

A Child of God...

A seminary professor was vacationing with his wife in Gatlinburg , TN. One morning, they were eating breakfast at a little restaurant, hoping to enjoy a quiet, family meal. While they were waiting for their food, they noticed a distinguished looking, white-haired man moving from table to table, visiting with the guests. The professor leaned over and whispered to his wife, 'I hope he doesn't come over here.' But sure enough, the man did come over to their table.

From the Desk of Donald Ware, C.P.

'Where are you folks from?' he asked in a friendly voice.

"Oklahoma" they answered.

'Great to have you here in Tennessee,' the stranger said. 'What do you do for a living?'

'I teach at a seminary,' he replied.

'Oh, so you teach preachers how to preach, do you? Well, I've got a really great story for you.' And with that, the gentleman pulled up a chair and sat down at the table with the couple.

The professor groaned and thought to himself, 'Great ... Just what I needanother preacher story!'

The man started, 'See that mountain over there? (pointing out the restaurant window). Not far from the base of that mountain, there was a boy born to an unwed mother. He had a hard time growing up, because every place he went, he was always asked the same question, 'Hey boy, who's your daddy?' Whether he was at school, in the grocery store or drug store, people would ask the same question, 'Who's your daddy?'

He would hide at recess and lunch time from other students. He would avoid going into stores because that question hurt him so bad. 'When he was about 12 years old, a new preacher came to his church. He would always go in late and slip out early to avoid hearing the question, 'Who's your daddy?' But one day, the new preacher said the benediction so fast that he got caught and had to walk out with the crowd.

Just about the time he got to the back door, the new preacher, not knowing anything about him, put his hand on his shoulder and asked him, 'Son, who's your daddy?'

The whole church got deathly quiet. He could feel every eye in the church looking at him. Now everyone would finally know the answer to the question, 'Who's your daddy?'

'This new preacher, though, sensed the situation around him and using discernment that only the Holy Spirit could give, said the following to that scared little boy.. 'Wait a minute! I know who you are! I see the family resemblance now; You are a child of God.'

With that he patted the boy on his shoulder and said, 'Boy, you've got a great inheritance. Go and claim it.'

'With that, the boy smiled for the first time in a long time and walked out the

door a changed person. He was never the same again. Whenever anybody asked him, 'Who's your Daddy?' he'd just tell them, 'I'm a Child of God.'

The distinguished gentleman got up from the table and said, 'Isn't that a great story?'

The professor responded that it really was a great story!

As the man turned to leave, he said, 'You know, if that new preacher hadn't told me that I was one of God's children, I probably never would have amounted to anything!' And he walked away.

The seminary professor and his wife were stunned. He called the waitress over & asked her, 'Do you know who that man was -- the one who just left that was sitting at our table?'

The waitress grinned and said, 'Of course. Everybody here knows him. That's Ben Hooper. He's governor of Tennessee!'

Do you realize that you are a child of God?

II Bondage to Self

Most people today do not recognize that they are a child of God.

Many have very little consciousness of God in their lives.

Their lives are run by their "imperial ego."

So many suffer from the "cult of the imperial ego."

Our culture feeds our imperial ego daily with a diet of empty celebrity and superficiality, with success related to looks and not achievement, the need to package oneself and look perfect to be appreciated... with the tyranny of clothing and fashion industry.

Words from a poem by Carmelite poet Sr. Jessica Powers say it all...

*I rose up from acres of self
that I tended with passion
and defended with flurries of pride
I walked out of myself and went
into the woods of God's mercy,
and here I abide.*

- *acres of self*

This is certainly true of alcoholics. The Big Book calls it "Bondage to Self." Here's a description:

From the Desk of Donald Ware, C.P.

Selfishness – self-centeredness! That, we think, is the root of our troubles. Driven by a hundred forms of fear, self-delusion, self-seeking, and self-pity, we step on the toes of our fellows and they retaliate... so our troubles, we think, are basically of our own making. They arise out of ourselves, and the alcoholic is an extreme example of self-will run riot, though we usually don't think so. Above everything, we alcoholics must be rid of selfishness. We must, or it will kill us! God makes that possible... We had to quit playing God. It didn't work. (BB, p.62)

acres of self

Soon after this the Big Book gives us the beautiful Third Step Prayer...

Say it with me now...

God, I offer myself to Thee – to build with me and do with me as Thou wilt. Relieve me of the bondage of self, that I may better do Thy will. Take away my difficulties, that victory over them may bear witness to those I would help of Thy Power, Thy Love, and Thy Way of life. May I do Thy will always. (BB, p.63)

acres of self

"Bondage to Self" – we live in a culture that considers this a virtue. "Have it your way... and supersize it!"

A consumer culture places you at the center of life and promises you happiness and fulfillment of your every desire – for a price, of course. But you deserve it – after all, life is about you and your fulfillment.

Bill W refers to the dangers of "big-shot-ism." (*Twelve and Twelve*, p. 92)

Another writer calls it the "Cult of the Imperial Ego," or the "Coronation of Self."

What happens?

I want it my way

Do it my way

No matter what you say

I want it my way

In bondage to self

So often angered

Frustrated

Fearful

So often others don't bend

To my way

I know the best way...

Can't you see?

Don't you agree?
Don't you understand?

I want it my way
Do it my way
No matter what you say
I want it my way.

How do we ever get out of this stifling, resentment contagious "bondage to self?"

acres of self

III Steps One, Two and Three

What does the Big Book say?

Step One... We have to recognize that our lives are unmanageable. We have to realize that wanting it my way all of the time doesn't work...

We are powerless to get our lives together. We have to surrender. We have to dethrone our imperial ego.

How do we arrive at this point?

Thru suffering.

We get "sick and tired of being sick and tired."

We get miserable.

We ain't getting it our way.

Something is wrong and we don't know how to fix it.

Richard Rohr has written an interesting and insightful book on the spirituality of the Twelve Steps called *Breathing Underwater*. In the *Introduction* he gives four spiritual principles for spiritual growth... (p.xxii)

We suffer to get well.

We surrender to win.

We die to live.

We give it away to keep it.

In Step One we surrender and realize that we can't do it – we have to get out of the driver's seat... it can't be our way.

Step Two we come to believe that only a power greater than ourselves can help us.

Step Three... we surrender to win, we die to live. We realize that only with the help of a Higher Power can we survive.

The **Big Book** says:

Our description of the alcoholic... and our personal adventures before and after make clear three pertinent ideas:

- a. *That we were alcoholic and could not manage our own lives.*
- b. *That probably no human power could have relieved our alcoholism.*
- c. *That God could and would if He were sought.*

Being convinced, we were at Step Three, which is that we decided to turn our will and our life over to God as we understood Him. (BB, p.60)

We get down on our knees and pray with all of the earnestness and humility we are capable of...

Please say the Third Step Prayer with me again...

God, I offer myself to Thee – to build with me and do with me as Thou wilt. Relieve me of the bondage of self, that I may better do Thy will. Take away my difficulties, that victory over them may bear witness to those I would help of Thy Power, Thy Love, and Thy Way of life. May I do Thy will always. (BB, p.63)

This, in my opinion, is the first step of a "spiritual awakening..." beginning to recognize our "bondage to self" – no more denying it, we have a problem – and it ain't just with alcohol... We need help... we can't fix it. We surrender. We ask our Higher Power for help.

Steps Four, Five, Six and Seven... Spiritual Awakening Continues

Many, if not most people, seldom examine their lives.

They identify with their thoughts, emotions, perceptions and compulsive behavior patterns.

We might put it this way...

I am what I feel,

I am what I think,

I am what I perceive

and I am the way I act – that's just me.

If you've ever examined Facebook pages, many times you will notice how superficial they can be – an almost endless stream of me, me and me – but seldom that part of "me" that I don't like... seldom the sufferings, pain, fears or regrets of my life.

acres of self... unexamined !

What are my compulsive behaviors? Do I even recognize them?

Is there anything about myself I would like to change? Have I even tried?

If I asked my best friend or my spouse what about me needs changed could they even dare to be honest?

From the Desk of Donald Ware, C.P.

Carl Jung talked about our "shadow" – negative aspects about ourselves about which sometimes, most times, we are not even aware. In Steps Four, Five, Six and Seven we get into shadow-boxing (to use Rohr's descriptive term). The Big Book calls this housecleaning.

Step Four... make a searching and fearless moral inventory to the best of my ability...

What are my grudges or resentments, how do they affect me and what is *my* part in them? (BB, p.65)

What is my garbage? What are my secrets?

Step Five... admit to ourselves, God and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs...

Be as honest as we can be.

How many people outside the Program do this in their lives even once?

How many people lead "unexamined" lives, unable or refusing to look at themselves honestly... sometimes not even aware that their thoughts, emotions or behaviors are unhealthy?

There are a couple of insightful reflections I picked up a while ago...

Destiny... Sow a Thought

Sow a thought, reap an act.

Sow an act, reap a habit.

Sow a habit, reap a character.

Sow a character, reap a destiny. (Poet Samuel Smiles)

OR

Be careful what you want,
it becomes what you think;

be careful what you think,
it becomes what you do.

Be careful what you do,
it becomes a habit.

Be careful of your habits,
they become your character.

Be careful of your character,
it becomes your destiny.

~From A Sermon by Dr. John Frederick Fiedler

First United Methodist Church, Dallas, Texas (2-11-2001)

Some folks hardly ever reflect on what they think or how they act, or how they look at reality.

They accept what they think as automatically true.

They seldom question their judgments.

From the Desk of Donald Ware, C.P.

How many people have a problem dealing with the complexity of life or the paradoxes of life?

Of course, it can be scary recognizing life's complexities and paradoxes, let alone our own personal foibles and personality defects and flaws.

How many alcoholics were like that with regard to their drinking habits?

How many never tied up their problems or their risky or destructive behaviors with their drinking?

Steps Four and Five begin a housecleaning.

We need to surrender to win.

We need to die to live.

We need to suffer to get well.

Steps Six and Seven turn our character defects and shortcomings over to our Higher Power to deal with and heal, sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly. We have to surrender to win, we have to die to live.

Notice again... we don't do this all by ourselves.

Our Higher Power gives us the help we need,

the insight we need,

the encouragement we need

and the challenges we need

especially thru other folks in the AA Program and thru our sponsor.

We can't do this alone.

We are getting a heart transplant!

AA is a "we" program.

In my opinion our 'spiritual awakening is now deepening and developing, even if we're not aware of it... We're being as honest as we can be, with the help of our Higher Power and our sponsor! We're continuing to invite our Higher Power into our lives – to change us. (In the traditional language of Christian spirituality this was called "conversion.") It was a change of life from vice to virtue, from self-centeredness to God-centeredness and other-centeredness.

*(See Bill W's reflection on Steps Six and Seven in **Twelve and Twelve.**)*

Steps Eight and Nine... we make amends. Our sponsor helps us with this. The Big Book helps us. Others help us. If we want to get better we can't shortcut these steps – or any steps. There is no softer way. It's the Program's way or our way.

We have to surrender to win,

we have to die to live...

and we have to suffer to get well.

From the Desk of Donald Ware, C.P.

That's how it works.

Steps Ten, Eleven and Twelve...

It's about continued change and continued growth.

It's about taking our inventory daily.

Read Step 10 in the **Big Book**.

It's about getting to know our God thru prayer and meditation each day... being sure to spend time in prayer, getting to know God and God's will for us, each day.

It's about good reading and needed continued study.

It's about carrying this message to other alcoholics and practicing these principles in all of our affairs.

"Spiritual Awakening" or "Spiritual Experience" is about continued growth.

Read the stories in the Big Book.

These people have changed and they tell their stories.

Do you have a favorite story?

Remember the Promises in the Big Book:

If we are painstaking about this phase of our development, we will be amazed before we are half way through.

We are going to know a new freedom and a new happiness.

We will not regret the past nor wish to shut the door on it.

We will comprehend the word serenity and we will know peace.

No matter how far down the scale we have gone, we will see how our experience can benefit others.

That feeling of uselessness and self-pity will disappear.

We will lose interest in selfish things and gain interest in our fellows.

Self-seeking will slip away.

Our whole attitude and outlook upon life will change.

Fear of people and economic insecurity will leave us.

We will intuitively know how to handle situations which used to baffle us.

We will suddenly realize that God is doing for us what we could not do for ourselves.

Are these extravagant promises? We think not. They are being fulfilled among us – sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly. They will always materialize if we work for them. (BB, pp. 84-85)

Welcome to the world of "Spiritual Experience" or "Spiritual Awakening."

The promises flow from this 'spiritual awakening.'

Conclusion