Chapter 2

THERE IS A SOLUTION

We, of ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS, know thousands of men and women who were once just as hopeless as Bill. Nearly all have recovered. They have solved the drink problem.

We, the members of Alcoholics Anonymous, know thousands of people who have felt just as hopeless as Bill. Nearly all of those people have learned to live in sobriety. Through A.A., they have solved their drinking problem.

We are average Americans. All sections of this country and many of its occupations are represented, as well as many political, economic, social, and religious backgrounds. We are people who normally would not mix. But there exists among us a fellowship, a friendliness, and an understanding which is indescribably wonderful. We are like the passengers of a great liner the moment after rescue from shipwreck when camaraderie, joyousness and democracy pervade the vessel from steerage to Captain's table. Unlike the feelings of the ship's passengers, however, our joy in escape from disaster does not subside as we go our individual ways. The feeling of having shared in a common peril is one element in the powerful cement which binds us. But that in itself would never have held us together as we are now joined.

We are a large and varied group of people who live

all over the world. We come from many countries and work at many different jobs. We come from many political, economic, social, and religious backgrounds. We are people who normally would not spend time together. But through our experiences with A.A., we have found friendship, fellowship, and understanding. We are like passengers on a boat that has been shipwrecked, right after we've been rescued. We feel connected because of what we have all experienced. And we feel joy because we are so relieved that our lives are no longer in danger. We have escaped disaster. We all feel this, no matter what our lives are like outside of A.A. We might be rich or poor, young or old, with our families or totally alone. When we are together, none of that matters to us.

Unlike rescued passengers from a sinking boat, our joy lasts long after we've left behind our drinking days. Knowing that we've all faced the same type of danger ties us all together. So does the fact that we've found a solution to our drinking, and we're experiencing that solution together. These things make us into a Fellowship.

FELLOWSHIP: Members of A.A. sometimes refer to themselves as "the Fellowship," meaning a group of people with shared experiences who care for and support each other.

The tremendous fact for every one of us is that we have discovered a common solution. We have a way out on which we can absolutely agree, and upon which we can join in brotherly and harmonious action. This is the great news this book carries to those who suffer from alcoholism.

The tremendous fact is we have found a way to recover from alcoholism, and we agree on it completely. This book was created so that anyone who suffers from alcoholism can learn about this Fellowship, and decide if they'd like to join us.

An illness of this sort—and we have come to believe it an illness—involves those about us in a way no other human sickness can. If a person has cancer all are sorry for him and no one is angry or hurt. But not so with the alcoholic illness, for with it there goes annihilation of all the things worth while in life. It engulfs all whose lives touch the sufferer's. It brings misunderstanding, fierce resentment, financial insecurity, disgusted friends and employers, warped lives of blameless children, sad wives and parents—anyone can increase the list.

We believe that alcoholism is a sickness, and it affects all of the people in our lives. When someone has cancer, people feel sorry for them, but no one is angry or hurt about the fact that they have cancer. This is not how it is with alcoholism. People do get angry at us. This is because alcoholism causes pain and destruction for everyone who knows and loves us. It causes misunderstandings, bitterness, and money problems. It makes our friends and employers feel frustrated and disappointed in us. It hurts our children, our partners, and our parents. Everyone we know is affected.

We hope this volume will inform and comfort those who are, or who may be affected. There are many.

We hope the information and stories in this book will help and comfort these people, too—people who aren't alcoholics themselves but have been affected by the alcoholics they know need help and support.

Highly competent psychiatrists who have dealt with us have found it sometimes impossible to persuade an alcoholic to discuss his situation without reserve. Strangely enough, wives, parents and intimate friends usually find us even more unapproachable than do the psychiatrist and the doctor.

Alcoholics who help each other feel understood

Many excellent doctors who treat alcoholics have trouble getting us to talk about our experiences. We may share a little, but we don't feel comfortable explaining how we feel. Our partners, parents, and close friends have an even harder time talking to us about alcoholism. Most of us don't want to describe our feelings or struggles, even to people who care about us.

But the ex-problem drinker who has found this solution, who is properly armed with facts about himself, can generally win the entire confidence of another alcoholic in a few hours. Until such an understanding is reached, little or nothing can be accomplished.

But recovering alcoholics who are already in A.A. are completely different. We can usually gain the trust of other alcoholics very quickly. Ex-problem drinkers who have joined A.A. understand how alcoholism works. They are often able to help alcoholics who are still drinking to open up and start talking. Without this connection, very little (or nothing at all) will work.

That the man who is making the approach has had the same difficulty, that he obviously knows what he is

talking about, that his whole deportment shouts at the new prospect that he is a man with a real answer, that he has no attitude of Holier Than Thou, nothing whatever except the sincere desire to be helpful; that there are no fees to pay, no axes to grind, no people to please, no lectures to be endured—these are the condi-

tions we have found most effective. After such an approach many take up their beds and walk again.

This is because recovering alcoholics in the A.A. program have had many of the same problems and struggles as newcomers to A.A. We have experienced the same pains and seen the same situations go wrong. So when a recovering alcoholic talks with a newcomer, the newcomer feels at home. It's clear that the recovering alcoholic has found a way to end a damaging drinking career, and truly wants to help the alcoholic who is still drinking. It's an open and welcoming conversation. The newcomer may worry at first that there's some sort of "catch." Will they have to listen to long lectures? Will they have to pay fees or follow lots of rules? Very quickly they realize that talking with an A.A. member is safe. Their conversations are just honest sharing of stories.

In Alcoholics Anonymous, newcomers don't feel judged or pressured. The only goal of A.A. members is to help. This simple approach to recovery has helped many alcoholics find hope.

None of us makes a sole vocation of this work, nor do we think its effectiveness would be increased if we did. We feel that elimination of our drinking is but a beginning. A much more important demonstration of our principles lies before us in our respective homes, occupations and affairs. All of us spend much of our spare time in the sort of effort which we are going to describe. A few are fortunate enough to be so situated that they can give nearly all their time to the work.

Why was the Big Book created?

A.A. members are not paid to help each other. We don't think that the program would be more effective if we paid members or experts to work for us. We believe that when an alcoholic stops drinking, that is just the beginning of recovery. The rest of the recovery journey is longer and slower. It involves being able to live by A.A.'s principles each day, at home and at work. All of us are on that journey, no matter how long we have been members of A.A. Learning to live by these guiding principles is absolutely essential to our recovery.

If we keep on the way we are going there is little doubt that much good will result, but the surface of the problem would hardly be scratched. Those of us who live in large cities are overcome by the reflection that close by hundreds are dropping into oblivion every day. Many could recover if they had the opportunity we have enjoyed. How then shall we present that which has been so freely given us?

All of us are also dedicated to helping new A.A. members—or anyone who joins the program and is struggling. When A.A. first began, everything was done person to person, which worked very well and helped hundreds of people get sober. But we wanted to find ways to reach and help more alcoholics. The members who lived in large cities saw that people were struggling with alcoholism every day. Those people might be able to recover if they understood how A.A. worked. We knew there must be a way to spread their ideas.

We have concluded to publish an anonymous volume setting forth the problem as we see it. We shall

bring to the task our combined experience and knowledge. This should suggest a useful program for anyone concerned with a drinking problem.

Of necessity there will have to be discussion of matters medical, psychiatric, social, and religious. We are aware that these matters are, from their very nature, controversial. Nothing would please us so much as to write a book which would contain no basis for contention or argument. We shall do our utmost to achieve that ideal. Most of us sense that real tolerance of other people's shortcomings and viewpoints and a respect for their opinions are attitudes which make us

more useful to others. Our very lives, as ex-problem drinkers, depend upon our constant thought of others and how we may help meet their needs.

We wanted this book to feel welcoming to anyone, regardless of their background or views. But we also realized that any book about alcoholism would need to talk about medical, psychiatric, social, and religious issues. So we did not skip over these upsetting and controversial topics. In fact, we pointed out that A.A. members are more helpful to each other when they can disagree respectfully. Learning to see things from multiple angles helps us become more accepting and tolerant. This makes us more useful as A.A. members.

And as you will see, being useful to other alcoholics and helping them is absolutely essential to being in recovery in A.A.

You may already have asked yourself why it is that all of us became so very ill from drinking. Doubtless you are curious to discover how and why, in the face of expert opinion to the contrary, we have recovered from a hopeless condition of mind and body. If you are an alcoholic who wants to get over it, you may already be asking—"What do I have to do?"

It is the purpose of this book to answer such questions specifically. We shall tell you what we have done. Before going into a detailed discussion, it may be well to summarize some points as we see them.

Understanding types of drinkers

You probably have many questions about how A.A. works. You might wonder what you need to do to join the program. This book will answer all of those

questions in the coming chapters. But first, we need to explain a few important ideas about alcoholism itself.

How many times people have said to us: "I can take it or leave it alone. Why can't he?'' "Why don't you drink like a gentleman or quit?'' "That fellow can't handle his liquor.'' "Why don't you try beer and wine?'' "Lay off the hard stuff.'' "His will power must be weak.'' "He could stop if he wanted to.'' "She's such a sweet girl, I should think he'd stop for her sake.'' "The doctor told him that if he ever drank again it would kill him, but there he is all lit up again.'' Now these are commonplace observations on drinkers which we hear all the time. Back of them is a world of ignorance and misunderstanding. We see that these expressions refer to people whose reactions are very different from ours.

Many alcoholics have heard—or been told—many of the following things:

"I can drink when I want, and stop when I want. Why can't she do the same thing?"

"That guy just can't handle his booze."

"She has zero self-control."

"Why don't you stick to beer and wine? Too much hard liquor is your problem."

"I'm sure he could stop if he wanted to."

"He's got a family at home. You'd think he'd get sober for their sake."

"The doctor told her if she ever drank again it would kill her … but she just keeps getting wasted."

These pieces of advice and opinions are all very common. Some alcoholics hear them all the time. But they are all based on misunderstandings about alcoholism. People who say these things aren't aware of how alcoholism actually works. And because they aren't aware, they compare alcoholics to other kinds of

drinkers.

Moderate drinkers have little trouble in giving up liquor entirely if they have good reason for it. They can take it or leave it alone.

If they have a good reason, average drinkers can usually give up liquor. They can take it or leave it. They can “go cold turkey,” as the saying goes.

Then we have a certain type of hard drinker. He may have the habit badly enough to gradually impair

him physically and mentally. It may cause him to die a few years before his time. If a sufficiently strong reason—ill health, falling in love, change of environment, or the warning of a doctor—becomes operative, this man can also stop or moderate, although he may find it difficult and troublesome and may even need medical attention.

Hard drinkers struggle more to break the cycle. There's a certain type of hard drinker whose habits affect both physical and mental health. Drinking may even cause them to die earlier than they would otherwise. But some of these hard drinkers can still reverse their habits. If a strong reason comes up, they can stop drinking. Serious sickness, falling in love, getting a new job, moving to a new place, or getting a warning from a doctor may be enough to make them change. They may stop or slow down their drinking, even if they need medical support to make the changes stick.

But what about the real alcoholic? He may start off as a moderate drinker; he may or may not become a continuous hard drinker; but at some stage of his drinking career he begins to lose all control of his liquor consumption, once he starts to drink.

But what about chronic alcoholics? Lifelong, serious alcoholics? Some of us start off as average drinkers, and over time become hard drinkers. At both of these early stages, we still have some control over our actions. But if we continue to drink frequently, we will form a drinking habit that's almost

impossible to break. When this happens, it can seem like we've crossed an invisible line. Whenever we start to drink, we cannot control how much we drink. And we certainly can't stop drinking altogether.

Here is the fellow who has been puzzling you, especially in his lack of control. He does absurd, incredible, tragic things while drinking. He is a real Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. He is seldom mildly intoxicated. He is always more or less insanely drunk. His disposi-tion while drinking resembles his normal nature but little. He may be one of the finest fellows in the world. Yet let him drink for a day, and he frequently becomes disgustingly, and even dangerously anti-social. He has a positive genius for getting tight at exactly the wrong moment, particularly when some important decision must be made or engagement kept. He is often perfectly sensible and well balanced concerning everything except liquor, but in that respect he is incredibly dishonest and selfish. He often possesses special abilities, skills, and aptitudes, and has a promising career ahead of him. He uses his gifts to build up a bright outlook for his family and himself, and then pulls the structure down on his head by a senseless series of sprees. He is the fellow who goes to bed so intoxicated he ought to sleep the clock around. Yet early next

morning he searches madly for the bottle he misplaced the night before. If he can afford it, he may have liquor concealed all over his house to be certain no one gets his entire supply away from him to throw down the wastepipe. As matters grow worse, he be-gins to use a combination of high-powered sedative and liquor to quiet his nerves so he can go to work. Then comes the day when he simply cannot make it and gets drunk all over again. Perhaps he goes to a doctor who gives him morphine or some sedative with which to taper off. Then he begins to appear at hospitals and sanitariums.

For non-alcoholics, it can be extremely confusing to watch chronic alcoholics live their lives. We often do strange and destructive things while drinking. This includes things we would never do while sober. We may seem like two different people living in one body. Alcoholics can seem like happy, normal people until we spend a day drinking. After that, we often become angry, dangerous, and unreliable. We may be reasonable about everything except liquor. When it comes to drinking and alcohol, we become dishonest and selfish. Some chronic alcoholics are talented people who seem to have promising careers and lives ahead of them … but all that hope is destroyed when we go on drinking sprees.

SPREE: Drinking very large amounts of alcohol in short periods of time. (See also: binge)

Some alcoholic behaviors seem downright strange to non-drinkers. We may go to bed

extremely drunk, wake up very hungover, and still look for more liquor in the morning. We may hide alcohol all over the house so no one can pour our entire supply down the toilet. As our condition gets worse, we might use both drugs and liquor to quiet our nerves so we can keep going to work. Eventually this stops working, and then we stop trying. If things get bad enough, some chronic alcoholics will go to medical doctors for help, but few doctors understand how to help us.

This is by no means a comprehensive picture of the true alcoholic, as our behavior patterns vary. But this description should identify him roughly.

Does this description fit every alcoholic? Of course not. Our behaviors vary, and so do our lives. But if you are struggling with drinking yourself, some of what you've just read will probably sound familiar.

Why does he behave like this? If hundreds of experiences have shown him that one drink means another debacle with all its attendant suffering and humiliation, why is it he takes that one drink? Why can't he stay on the water wagon? What has become of the common sense and will power that he still sometimes displays with respect to other matters?

Perhaps there never will be a full answer to these questions. Opinions vary considerably as to why the alcoholic reacts differently from normal people. We are not sure why, once a certain point is reached, little can be done for him. We cannot answer the riddle.

Why can't alcoholics just stop drinking?

Why do alcoholics behave like this? Especially

when we know from experience that taking one drink will lead to more drinks? And that leads to being drunk and making terrible choices? If alcoholics can use common sense and willpower in other areas of our lives, why can't we use it when it comes to drinking?

There are no easy answers to these questions. Experts have a variety of opinions about why alcoholics react differently to liquor. No one is sure why we have so much trouble controlling our drinking.

We know that while the alcoholic keeps away from drink, as he may do for months or years, he reacts much like other men. We are equally positive that once he takes any alcohol whatever into his system, something happens, both in the bodily and mental sense, which makes it virtually impossible for him to

stop. The experience of any alcoholic will abundantly confirm this.

But we *are* sure that a single drink is enough to affect our behavior in very serious ways. When we stop drinking for months or years at a time, we are able to change ourselves. With no liquor in our systems, we can control our actions and choices. We become more like normal people. But as soon as we drink any amount of alcohol, something happens that makes it impossible for us to stop. It doesn't matter how long we have been sober. One drink can start the terrible cycle of drinking again.

These observations would be academic and pointless if our friend never took the first drink, thereby setting the terrible cycle in motion. Therefore, the main problem of the alcoholic centers in his mind, rather than in his body. If you ask him why he started on that last bender, the chances are he will offer you any one of a hundred alibis. Sometimes these excuses have a certain plausibility, but none of them really makes sense in the light of the havoc an alcoholic's drinking bout creates. They sound like the philosophy of the man who, having a headache, beats himself on the head with a hammer so that he can't feel the ache. If you draw this fallacious reasoning to the attention of an alcoholic, he will laugh it off, or become irritated and refuse to talk.

The alcoholic's main problem lives within the mind. Most alcoholics cannot explain why we decide to drink. When asked for a reason, we may give some

excuse that makes no sense. Our excuses sound ridiculous since drinking causes such chaos and pain in our lives. We may even say something that has no logic at all. We may sound like people who deal with headaches by hitting themselves on the head with a hammer. (They are in more pain than before, but they don't feel the headache anymore.) Our reasons and choices are totally confusing to sober people. But if anyone points this out, we usually laugh it off or get angry.

Once in a while he may tell the truth. And the truth, strange to say, is usually that he has no more idea why he took that first drink than you have. Some drinkers have excuses with which they are satisfied part of the time. But in their hearts they really do not know why they do it. Once this malady has a real hold, they are a baffled lot. There is the obsession that somehow, someday, they will beat the game. But they often suspect they are down for the count.

Once in a while, alcoholics tell the truth. And the truth is usually that we have absolutely no idea why we take that first drink. Some drinkers make up excuses when people ask about their drinking, but in our hearts we just don't know why we do it. As our alcoholism gets worse, we feel confused a lot of the time. Many of us believe that someday, somehow, we will find a way to trick ourselves into getting sober. Many more of us secretly believe we are lost forever.

How true this is, few realize. In a vague way their families and friends sense that these drinkers are abnormal, but everybody hopefully awaits the day when the sufferer will rouse himself from his lethargy and assert his power of will.

The tragic truth is that if the man be a real alcoholic, the happy day may not arrive. He has lost

control. At a certain point in the drinking of every alcoholic, he passes into a state where the most powerful desire to stop drinking is of absolutely no avail. This tragic situation has already arrived in practically every case long before it is suspected.

The sad truth is that alcoholics are often lost. We cannot control our drinking. At a certain point, all alcoholics realize that we have no control. Even though we want to stop drinking more than anything, it doesn't matter. We just cannot stop.

The fact is that most alcoholics, for reasons yet obscure, have lost the power of choice in drink. Our so-called will power becomes practically nonexistent. We are unable, at certain times, to bring into our consciousness with sufficient force the memory of the suffering and humiliation of even a week or a month ago. We are without defense against the first drink.

No one knows exactly why, but alcoholics have lost the power to make our own choices when it comes to drinking. We have no willpower when it comes to drinking. We can't even remember how awful it felt the last time we got drunk. We know that drinking will make a mess of our lives, but knowing that won't keep us from getting drunk. Or we may tell ourselves that this time will be different, and we will handle ourselves better. But we know this is a lie.

The almost certain consequences that follow taking even a glass of beer do not crowd into the mind to deter us. If these thoughts occur, they are hazy and

readily supplanted with the old threadbare idea that this time we shall handle ourselves like other people. There is a complete failure of the kind of defense that keeps one from putting his hand on a hot stove.

To non-alcoholics, we may seem like we don't understand how our actions will affect our lives. We look like we don't understand cause and effect. Or we don't care what happens to us. To non-alcoholics, alcoholics look like we're constantly pressing our bare hands to hot stoves while saying, "It won't burn me this time."

The alcoholic may say to himself in the most casual way, "It won't burn me this time, so here's how!'' Or perhaps he doesn't think at all. How often have some of us begun to drink in this nonchalant way, and after the third or fourth, pounded on the bar and said to ourselves, "For God's sake, how did I ever get started again?'' Only to have that thought supplanted by "Well, I'll stop with the sixth drink.'' Or "What's the use anyhow?''

When alcohol is involved, many alcoholics feel like we aren't able to think at all. Our brains seem to switch off completely. Many of us have started drinking at a bar, thinking a drink or two won't hurt us. As soon as we realize we've had four or five drinks, we pound on the bar in surprise. We say to ourselves, "For God's sake, how did this happen?" As soon as that thought appears in our minds, it's replaced by "Well, I'll stop with the sixth drink." Or "Does it even matter if I stop?"

When this sort of thinking is fully established in an individual with alcoholic tendencies, he has probably

placed himself beyond human aid, and unless locked up, may die or go permanently insane. These stark and ugly facts have been confirmed by legions of alco-

holics throughout history. But for the grace of God, there would have been thousands more convincing demonstrations. So many want to stop but cannot.

This is a dangerous way to think. When alcoholics begin to think like this, we need immediate medical help. Otherwise we may become mentally ill, give ourselves brain damage, or end up dead. This is not an exaggeration. Throughout history, millions of alcoholics have drunk themselves into terrible sickness or early graves. So many want to stop but cannot.

There is a solution. Almost none of us liked the self-searching, the leveling of our pride, the confession of shortcomings which the process requires for its successful consummation. But we saw that it really worked in others, and we had come to believe in the hopelessness and futility of life as we had been living it. When, therefore, we were approached by those in whom the problem had been solved, there was nothing left for us but to pick up the simple kit of spiritual tools laid at our feet. We have found much of heaven and we have been rocketed into a fourth dimension of existence of which we had not even dreamed.

Alcoholism is a life and death situation

But there is a solution. We learned from other people's practices and combined these with our own experiences. We saw that certain actions helped other alcoholics stay sober and adopted them. Things like apologizing to people they had hurt, making lists of their own strengths and weaknesses, and helping

other alcoholics get sober. We have collected a set of ideas and actions that could help any alcoholic get sober. It is a kind of "spiritual toolkit." And when we began to use that toolkit, we found true happiness and a miraculous new way to be in the world.

The great fact is just this, and nothing less: That we have had deep and effective spiritual experiences* which have revolutionized our whole attitude toward life, toward our fellows and toward God's universe. The central fact of our lives today is the absolute certainty that our Creator has entered into our hearts and lives in a way which is indeed miraculous. He has commenced to accomplish those things for us which we could never do by ourselves.

The great fact is this: We have had deeply spiritual experiences. These experiences have changed our attitudes toward life, toward other alcoholics, and toward God as we understand God. All of us feel this way. We believe that God has entered our hearts and lives in the most miraculous way. By helping us become sober, God has done for us things that we could never do alone.

If you are as seriously alcoholic as we were, we believe there is no middle-of-the-road solution. We were in a position where life was becoming impossible, and if we had passed into the region from which there is no return through human aid, we had but two alternatives: One was to go on to the bitter end, blotting out the consciousness of our intolerable situation as best we could; and the other, to accept spiritual help. This

We believe there is no middle-of-the-road solution. There is no "halfway." There is no compromise.

Alcoholics have two options: One is to continue drinking to escape from how awful our lives have become until we eventually die, bitter and alone. The other is to accept spiritual help.

*Fully explained—Appendix II.

we did because we honestly wanted to, and were willing to make the effort.

Why alcoholics must connect with a Higher Power

We'd like to share a story that shows how important it is for recovering alcoholics to believe in a Power greater than themselves. Incorporating a Higher Power into the recovery process is critically important.

A certain American business man had ability, good sense, and high character. For years he had floundered from one sanitarium to another. He had consulted the best known American psychiatrists. Then he had gone to Europe, placing himself in the care of a celebrated physician (the psychiatrist, Dr. Jung) who prescribed for him. Though experience had made him skeptical, he finished his treatment with unusual confidence. His physical and mental condition were unusually good. Above all, he believed he had acquired such a profound knowledge of the inner workings of his mind and its hidden springs that relapse was unthinkable. Nevertheless, he was drunk in a short time. More baffling still, he could give himself no satisfactory explanation for his fall.

Years ago, a Rhode Island businessman found himself unable to control his alcoholism. He spent most of his time in hospitals. Even with medical care, he couldn't stop drinking. He had worked with many American doctors but none of them could help him. So he went to Europe to get help from a famous

psychiatrist practicing in Switzerland. This doctor helped him understand how his mind and emotions worked. The Rhode Island man left Europe feeling confident that this new self-knowledge would prevent him from drinking again.

But once he was home, he started drinking right away. And he had no idea why.

So he returned to this doctor, whom he admired, and asked him point-blank why he could not recover. He wished above all things to regain self-control. He seemed quite rational and well-balanced with respect to other problems. Yet he had no control whatever over alcohol. Why was this?

So he returned to Europe and asked his doctor bluntly why he could not recover. Our alcoholic friend knew he'd lost his self-control, and he desperately wanted to get it back. He felt like he could make wise decisions in other areas of his life, but always made terrible decisions about drinking. He wanted his doctor to explain why this was happening.

He begged the doctor to tell him the whole truth, and he got it. In the doctor's judgment he was utterly hopeless; he could never regain his position in society and he would have to place himself under lock and key or hire a bodyguard if he expected to live long. That was a great physician's opinion.

In fact, he begged the doctor to be completely honest. The doctor gave him the hard truth. In the doctor's opinion, our alcoholic friend was totally hopeless. He would never stop drinking, and never be able to get his life back on track. The only way for him

to stay alive would be to commit himself to a hospital forever or hire a bodyguard to keep him from drinking.

But this man still lives, and is a free man. He does not need a bodyguard nor is he confined. He can go anywhere on this earth where other free men may go

without disaster, provided he remains willing to maintain a certain simple attitude.

The doctor was being truthful, but it turned out that our friend didn't have to lock himself away to stay sober. He was able to go wherever he wanted and to avoid drinking as long as he maintained a certain attitude, which was brought about by a spiritual transformation.

Some of our alcoholic readers may think they can do without spiritual help. Let us tell you the rest of the conversation our friend had with his doctor.

If you are an alcoholic yourself, you may read this story and think you can do the same thing without spiritual help. You may want to get sober without involving God in your journey. Before you make that decision, let us share the rest of the conversation our alcoholic friend had with his European doctor.

The doctor said: "You have the mind of a chronic alcoholic. I have never seen one single case recover, where that state of mind existed to the extent that it does in you.'' Our friend felt as though the gates of hell had closed on him with a clang.

He said to the doctor, "Is there no exception?''

"Yes,'' replied the doctor, "there is. Exceptions to cases such as yours have been occurring since early times. Here and there, once in a while, alcoholics have had what are called vital spiritual experiences. To me these occurrences are phenomena. They appear to be in the nature of huge emotional displacements and

rearrangements. Ideas, emotions, and attitudes which were once the guiding forces of the lives of these men are suddenly cast to one side, and a completely new set of conceptions and motives begin to dominate them. In fact, I have been trying to produce some such emotional rearrangement within you. With many individuals the methods which I employed are successful, but I have never been successful with an alcoholic of your description."*

The doctor said, "You have the mind of a chronic alcoholic. In my whole career, I have never seen anyone in your state of mind get sober."

Hearing this, our friend felt as though the gates of hell had closed on him with a clang.

He said to the doctor, "Are there any exceptions?"

"Yes there are," the doctor said. "Over the years, I have seen some exceptions to cases like yours. They have shown up when an alcoholic has something called a 'vital spiritual experience.' The way I understand them, these experiences are huge emotional events. Events that completely transform the alcoholic's attitudes. They leave behind ideas, feelings, and attitudes that were extremely important to them. A completely new set of ideas, feelings, and attitudes replaces them. It's like they were living in a black-and-white version of the world until the vital spiritual experience, and afterward everything is in bright, vivid color."

The doctor continued, "Actually, I have been trying to trigger this kind of experience in you. I've been able to do it for some of my patients in the past. I have not done it for anyone who is as ill as you are right now." (See page 165 **[Spiritual Experience]** for more on the experience the doctor is talking about.)

VITAL SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE: A powerful emotional event that allows an alcoholic to feel connected to a Higher

Power. It also changes their attitude about drinking. Afterward, the alcoholic may finally feel like they belong in this world. They may have a sense that life is good and right and purposeful.

Upon hearing this, our friend was somewhat relieved, for he reflected that, after all, he was a good church member. This hope, however, was destroyed by the doctor's telling him that while his religious convictions were very good, in his case they did not spell the necessary vital spiritual experience.

*For amplification—see Appendix II.

Here was the terrible dilemma in which our friend found himself when he had the extraordinary experience, which as we have already told you, made him a free man.

Hearing this was a relief to our alcoholic friend. He was a regular churchgoer, so he thought maybe he could create a vital spiritual experience for himself. The doctor pointed out that religious belief was not the same thing. Fortunately, our friend found his way to the profound transformation he needed. And it made him a free man.

We, in our turn, sought the same escape with all the desperation of drowning men. What seemed at first a flimsy reed, has proved to be the loving and powerful hand of God. A new life has been given us or, if you prefer, "a design for living" that really works.

God, as you understand God

At one time or another, all members of the A.A. Fellowship have felt as desperate as our friend in the story above. We have wanted to escape our alcoholism, and not known how. At first it seemed like a weak idea, but when we fully accepted the love and guidance of God, we were finally able to pull ourselves out of our suffering. We were given new lives, and given a new way to live them.

According to A.A. cofounder Bill W., a "vital spiritual experience" is necessary for alcoholics to wake up and begin the process of recovery.

The distinguished American psychologist, William James, in his book "Varieties of Religious Experience,'' indicates a multitude of ways in which men have discovered God. We have no desire to convince anyone that there is only one way by which faith can be acquired. If what we have learned and felt and seen means anything at all, it means that all of us, whatever our race, creed, or color are the children of a living Creator with whom we may form a relationship upon simple and understandable terms as soon as we are willing and honest enough to try. Those having religious affiliations will find here nothing disturbing to their beliefs or ceremonies. There is no friction among us over such matters.

For as long as humans have walked on the earth, we have connected with God in many different ways. We have called God by many names, and practiced our faith in a variety of ways. In Alcoholics Anonymous, we respect all faiths, spiritual practices, and ways of thinking about God. Members of the Fellowship may feel more comfortable saying "a Higher Power" or "a Power greater than ourselves" or "the Creator." They may rely on ideas about God that they have held since childhood. Or they may choose to create their own ideas of who or what God is to them right now.

We think it no concern of ours what religious bodies our members identify themselves with as individuals. This should be an entirely personal affair which each one decides for himself in the light of past associations, or his present choice. Not all of us join religious bodies, but most of us favor such memberships.

We don't believe that there is only one way to create a relationship with God. We don't believe that

there is only one way to find faith. And we are not interested in telling others what or how to believe. But we do believe that all human beings can connect with a Power greater than themselves, if they are willing to try. And we believe that doing so can be simple and rewarding.

Those of us who already practice some form of religion can continue to do that. Nothing in the program will interfere with their religion or beliefs. And those of us who do not practice any specific religion are just as welcome in our Fellowship. We believe that attending religious ceremonies, reading scriptures, or visiting sacred places is a personal choice for each of us to make. We welcome all people, no matter how they connect with their Higher Power. We don't judge anyone, and we practice our own faiths knowing that we won't be judged by other A.A. members. There is no conflict between members about what we believe.

In the following chapter, there appears an explanation of alcoholism, as we understand it, then a chapter addressed to the agnostic. Many who once were in this class are now among our members. Surprisingly

enough, we find such convictions no great obstacle to a spiritual experience.

In the next chapter, we will explain alcoholism as we understand it. After that, you'll find a chapter addressed to agnostics (people who aren't sure if God is real). Many people who once doubted God's existence are now A.A. members. You may be surprised to hear that these kinds of doubts don't prevent people from having vital spiritual experiences. They also don't prevent people from eventually connecting with a Higher Power.

Further on, clear-cut directions are given showing how we recovered. These are followed by forty-two personal experiences.

Each individual, in the personal stories, describes in his own language and from his own point of view the way he established his relationship with God. These give a fair cross section of our membership and a clear-cut idea of what has actually happened in their lives.

We hope no one will consider these self-revealing accounts in bad taste. Our hope is that many alcoholic men and women, desperately in need, will see these pages, and we believe that it is only by fully disclosing ourselves and our problems that they will be persuaded to say, "Yes, I am one of them too; I must have this thing."

In the coming chapters, you will read some stories from alcoholics who learned to embrace the importance of a Higher Power in their recovery journey. Their stories are included here to show how many people across the world

have felt exactly as you do. As you hear from them and learn about their experiences, you may see yourself in their stories. You may find yourself saying, “Yes, I am one of them too; I must be an alcoholic after all.”