

# Harry Tiebout

## Anonymity: The Ego Reducer

Talk before the AA International Convention in St. Louis, 1955

Under ordinary circumstances I should thank the man who introduced me for his very nice remarks, but also for years I have been making a name for ego reduction. I'm not sure my ego got sufficiently reduced by the introduction.

When the invitation came to speak before this group, I immediately said yes, I want to go. For many years, as you all know, I have been associated with AA. All the experiences that I had had came flashing through my mind, and I had so much to say that I didn't quite know where to begin. And with your permission I am going to use a manuscript so that the points that I want to make will not be forgotten.

At an AA meeting, the speaker, as a rule, identifies himself as an alcoholic and then proceeds to tell his story, sprinkling garlands of wisdom, humor, or both as he goes along. I shall also tell my story, although I am much less sure about my matching either the wit or the wisdom of the AA speakers.

I joined AA by proxy in 1939, when a patient of mine became a member of the New York group. Well do I remember my first AA meeting. It was tinged with excitement. AA was going on the air for the first time. One of the members, trying to rehabilitate himself, had talked with Gabriel Heater, who, on hearing his story, suggested that he, the AA man, appear on the program *We the People*. This was a night far too thrilling and special for settling down to a regular meeting.

The actual event was a bit of a letdown. The man from AA spoke briefly of

his experiences. Gabriel Heater, plainly puzzled, had a couple of pointless questions, and it was over. AA, however, had taken a step toward making itself known. Not a very big step to be sure, but one of the many that finally led to its present position on the national and international scene.

Later I attended other meetings more orthodox in character. As I did, I developed a conviction that the group had hit upon a method that solved the problem of excessive drinking. In a sense it was an answer to my prayers. After years of butting my head against the problem of treating the alcoholic, one could begin to hope.

In retrospect my first two or three years of contact with AA were the most exciting in my whole professional life. AA was then in its "miracle phase." Everything that happened seemed strange, wonderful. Hopeless drunks were being lifted out of the gutter. Individuals who had sought every known means of help without success were responding to this new approach. To be close to any such group, even by proxy, was electrifying. In addition, professionally, a whole new avenue of problems of alcohol had opened up. Somewhere in the AA experience was the key to sobriety. There was the first authentic clue after many years of fruitless efforts. Needless to say, the possibilities ahead were most intriguing. Perhaps I could learn how AA worked and thus could learn something about how people stop drinking. All of which meant that I shared in the general excitement of those days. I could see some daylight ahead. My future in this regard was now clear: I would try to discover what made AA tick.

In this quest for understanding, I would have never gotten beyond first base, if it had not been for Bill and many of the early members. The study of the Twelve Steps helped a little. But of far greater importance were the many insights already possessed by Bill and the others into the process through which AA brought about its results. I

heard of the need to hit bottom, of the necessity for accepting a Higher Power, of the indispensability of humility—ideas that had never crossed my professional horizon and certainly had never influenced my nonprofessional thinking or attitudes. Revolutionary as they were, these ideas, nevertheless, made sense, and I found myself embarked on a tour of discovery. I began to recognize more clearly what hitting bottom really implied. I began to do what I could to induce the experience in others, always wondering what was happening inside the individual as he went through the crisis of hitting bottom.

Finally fortune smiled upon me again, this time in the form of another patient. For some period she had been under my new brand of psychotherapy, designed to promote hitting bottom. For reasons completely unknown, she experienced a mild but typical conversion, which brought her into a positive state of mind. Led by her newly found spiritual elements, weak though they were, she started attending various churches in town. One Monday morning she entered my office, her eyes ablaze, and at once commenced talking. “I know what happened to me. I heard it in church yesterday. I surrendered.”

With that word *surrender* she handed me my first real awareness of what happens during the period of hitting bottom. The individual is fighting the admission of being licked, of admitting that he is powerless. If and when he surrendered, he quit fighting, could admit he was licked, and could accept that he was powerless and needed help. If he did not surrender, a thousand crises could hit him, and nothing would happen. The need to induce surrender became the new therapeutic goal.

The miracle of AA was now a little clearer. For reasons still obscure, the program and the fellowship of AA could induce a surrender, which could in turn lead to a period of no drinking.

As might be expected, I too had a thrill of my own. I was getting in on what was happening, always an enjoyable experience. Still questing eagerly I shifted my therapeutic attack. The job now was to induce surrender. When

I tried to cause that, I ran into a whole nest of resistances to that idea, totally new territory to be explored. As I continued my tour, it became ever more apparent that in everyone's psyche there existed an unconquerable ego that bitterly opposed any thought of defeat. Until that ego was somehow reduced or rendered ineffective, no likelihood of surrender could be anticipated.

The shift in emphasis from hitting bottom, to surrender, to ego reduction all occurred during the first five or six years after my initial contact with AA. I well remember the first AA meeting to which I spoke on the subject of ego reduction.

AA, still very much in its infancy, was celebrating the third or fourth anniversary of one of the groups. The speaker immediately preceding me told in detail of the efforts of his local group—which consisted of two men—to get him to dry up and become its third member. After several months of vain effort on their part and repeated nosedives on his, the speaker went on to say, “Finally I got cut down to size and have been sober ever since.” His sobriety was a matter of some two or three years then.

When my turn came to speak, I used his phrase cut down to size as a text around which to weave my remarks. Before long, out of the corner of my eye, I was conscious of a disconcerting stare. It was coming from the previous speaker. Looking a little more directly, I could see his eyes fixed on me in open-eyed wonder. It was perfectly clear that he was utterly amazed that he had said anything that made sense to a psychiatrist. The look of incredulity never left his face for my entire talk.

The incident had one value in my eyes. It showed that two people, one approaching the matter clinically, and the other relying on his own intuitive report of what had happened to him, both came up with exactly the same observation: the need for ego reduction.

During the past decade, my own endeavors have centered primarily upon this problem of ego reduction. How far I have been able

to explore that territory is not at all certain. I have, however, made a little progress. I shall try first to acquaint you with some of my findings, and second to relate them to the AA scene as I see it.

As I have already stated, the fact that hitting bottom could produce a surrender that cut the ego to size was evident fairly soon. In time, two additional facts manifested themselves. The first was that a reduced ego has marvelous recuperative powers. The second was that surrender is an essentially disciplinary function and experience. The first is merely repeating a fact known to you all. It is common knowledge that a return of the full-fledged ego can happen at any time. Years of sobriety are no insurance against its resurgence. No AA, regardless of his veteran status, can ever relax his guard against the encroachment of a reviving ego.

Recently one AA, writing to another, reported he was suffering, he feared from “halo-tosis,” an obvious reference to the smugness and self-complacency that so easily can creep into the individual with years of sobriety behind him. The assumption that one has all the answers—or the contrary, that one needs to know no answers and just follow AA—are two indicators of trouble. In both, open-mindedness is notably absent.

Perhaps as the commonest manifestation of the return of ego is witnessed in the individual who falls from his pink cloud, a state of mind familiar to you all. This blissful pink-cloud state is a logical aftermath of surrender. The ego, which is full of striving, just quits, and the individual senses peace and quiet within. The result is an enormous feeling of release, and the person flies right up to his pink cloud and thinks he has found heaven on earth. Everyone knows he is doomed to fall. But it is perhaps not equally clear that it is the ego, slowly making its comeback, that forces the descent from the pink cloud into the arena of life, where with the help of AA, he can learn how to become a sober person and not an angel.

I could go on with many more examples familiar to you all of the danger

of ever assuming that the ego is dead and buried. Its capacity for rebirth is utterly astounding and must never be forgotten.

My second finding that surrender is a disciplinary experience requires explanation. In recent articles I have shown that the ego basically must be forging continuously ahead. It operates on the unconscious assumption that it, the ego, can never be stopped. It takes for granted its right to go ahead, and in this respect has no expectation of being stopped and no capacity to adjust to that eventuality. Stopping says, in effect, “No, you cannot continue,” which is the essence of disciplinary control. The individual who cannot take a stopping is fundamentally an undisciplined person.

The function of surrender in AA is now clear. It produces that stopping by causing individuals to say, “I quit. I give up my headstrong ways. I’ve learned my lesson.” Very often for the first time in that individual’s adult life he has surrendered and truly feels, “Thy will, not mine, be done.” When that is true we have become, in fact, obedient servants of God. The spiritual life, at that point, is a reality. We have become members of the human race.

I have now presented the two points I wish to make, namely, first, the ego is revivable, and second, surrender is a disciplinary experience.

I next wish to assess their significance for AA as I see it. Primarily the two points say quite simply, “AA can never just be a miracle.” The simple act of surrender can produce sobriety by its stopping effect upon the ego. Unfortunately, that ego will return unless the individual learns to accept a disciplined way of life, which means the tendency for ego comeback is permanently checked.

This is not new to AA members. They have learned that a single surrender is not enough. Under the wise leadership of the founding fathers, the need for continued endeavor to maintain that miracle has been steadily stressed. The Twelve Steps urge repeated inventory, not just one. And

the Twelfth Step itself is a routine reminder that one must work at preserving sobriety. Moreover, it is referred to as Twelfth Step work, which is exactly what it is. By that time, the miracle is for the other fellow.

The Twelve Traditions are also part of the non-miracle aspect of AA. They represent, as Bill has said, the meanings of the lessons of experience. They serve as guides for the inexperienced; in reality they check the ways of the innocent and unwary. They bring the individual down to earth and present him with the facts of reality. In their own fashion the Traditions say, "Pay heed to the teachings of experience, or you will court disaster." It is with reason that we talk of the sober voice of experience.

My stress on the non-miracle elements of AA has a purpose. When I first made my acquaintance with AA, I rode the pink cloud with most of its members. I too went through a period of disillusionment and, fortunately for me, I came out with a faith far stronger than anything a pink cloud can supply. Mind you, I am not selling miracles short, they do loosen the individual up. I now know, however, the truth of the biblical saying, "By their works you shall know them." Only through hard toil and labor can lasting results be obtained.

As a consequence of the need for work to supplement any miracle, my interest in the non-miracle features has grown. I can accept more truly the necessity of organization, of structure, which curb as well as guide. I believe there must be meetings like this one to provide a sense of belonging to a big working organization, of which each individual is but a part. And I believe that any group or individual who fails to participate in the enterprises of the organization is rendering himself and his group a disservice by not submitting to the disciplinary values inherent in those activities. He may be keeping the ego free of entanglements, but he is also keeping

himself unstopped. His chances of remaining sober are not of a high order. He is really going it alone and is headed for another miracle—that may not come off the next time.

In closing let me reaffirm my proxy membership in AA. I have been in on its glowing start, and I've shared in its growing pains. And now I have reached the state of deep conviction in the soundness of the AA process, including its miracle aspect. I have tried to convey to you some of my observations on the nature of that process. I hope they will help in making the AA experience not just a miracle, but a way of life that is filled with eternal values. AA has, I can assure you, done just that for me.