

Bill Wilson's Sudden Experience in the AA Story

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PostPrint Version of Appendix Chart III in idem.

Revelatory Events: Three Case Studies of the Emergence of New Spiritual Paths

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- 1939—Bill's Story in *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 1st edition [the Big Book]
 1941 (March)—Jack Alexander, "Alcoholics Anonymous," Saturday Evening Post
 [second hand, based on interviews]
 1944 (June)—W.W., "The Fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous," talk given at Yale
 School of Alcoholic Studies, reprinted in *Alcohol, Science, and Society* (1945).
 1955—Forward, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 2nd edition

Unintended experience event [what happened]	
1939	He had a "sudden and profound" experience
1941	"Five months before coming to Akron, he had gone on the water wagon."
1944	He experienced a "sudden illumination," a "hot flash," a "sudden flash of Presence"— "the central experience of his life"
1955	"The broker had been relieved of his drink obsession by a sudden spiritual experience."
Cause explanation [why it happened]	
1939	He had "turn[ed] in all things to the Father of Light who presides over us all" and "God" had come to him following Ebby's intervention
1941	"... the ministration of the Oxford Group in New York."
1944	He called upon God, "if there is a God, ... [to] show Himself" following Ebby's intervention
1955	"...following a meeting with an alcoholic friend ... in contact with the Oxford Groups."
Unintended experience event [what happened]	
1939	"While I lay in the hospital the thought came that there were thousands of hopeless alcoholics who might be glad to have what had been so freely given me. Perhaps I could help some of them. They in turn might work with others."
1941	Absent
1944	"I actually thought ... that God had selected me, by this sudden flash of Presence, to dry up all the drunks in the world."
Cause explanation	
1939	No cause given
1941	None
1944	"I had the conceit ... to believe...that God has selected me to dry up all the drunks."
Intended behavior event [what he did]	
1939	"My wife and I abandoned ourselves with enthusiasm to the idea of helping other alcoholics to a solution of their problems" (AA, 15).

1941	“Fascinated by the problem of alcoholism, he had many times gone back as a visitor to a Central Park West detoxicating hospital, where he had been a patient, and talked to the inmates.”
1944	“I worked like thunder for 6 months.”
1955	“Prior to his journey to Akron, the broker had worked hard with many alcoholics”
Reason explanation [why he did it]	
1939	“My friend has emphasized the absolute necessity of demonstrating these principles in all my affairs. Particularly it was imperative to work with others as he had worked with me. Faith without works was dead” (AA, 14).
1941	No reason given.
1944	“God had selected me ... to dry up all the drunks in the world...Divine Appointment”
1955	“on the theory that only an alcoholic could help an alcoholic”
Unintended experience event [what happened]	
1939	“I would be amazingly lifted up and set on my feet” [when he went “to [his] old hospital in despair” and talked to a man there] (AA, 15).
1941	He found ... he could stave off his own craving....by working on other alcoholics [but] he effected no recoveries.”
1944	“...not one alcoholic got dried up.”
1955	“but he had succeeded only in keeping sober himself.”
Cause explanation	
1939	No reason given
1941	No reason given
1944	He believed “it had to happen in some particular way just like [his] or else it would be of no use.”
1955	No reason given.
Unintended experience event [what happened]	
1939	“Led ... [to Dr. Bob] ... who ... was nearing the nadir of alcoholic despair ... he has not had a drink since” (AA, 155–156)
1941	“Dr. Armstrong became Griffith’s first real disciple.”
1944	“...came across Dr. ‘Bob’ S. out in Akron ... and Bob S. recovered.”
1955	“the Akron physician ... sobered, never to drink again”
Cause explanation [why it happened]	
1939	He remembered “his responsibilities ... [to] other alcoholics,” phoned a random church in the directory, and “related his experience” to the other alcoholic.
1941	He knew that working on other alcoholics could stave off his own craving, but no particular reason is given for success in this case as compared to others.
1944	He realized that “talk[ing] with another alcoholic even though I failed with him, was better than to do nothing.” His motivation [he said] had shifted. “No longer was I preaching from any moral hilltop or from the vantage point of a wonderful spiritual experience. No, this time I was looking for another alcoholic, because I felt that I needed him twice as much as he needed me.

1955	“He [Bill] suddenly realized that in order to save himself he must carry his message to another alcoholic.”
Unintended experience event [what happened]	
1939	“Thus we grow” (AA, 162)
1941	“Progress was slow.”
1944	“[P]rogress was very slow”
Cause explanation [why it happened]	
1939	Message [as laid out in Big Book] was passed on from one alcoholic to another.
1941	No reason given.
1944	They started “preaching” again, assuming things had to happen “in some particular way,” instead of looking at things from the other’s point of view.
Unintended experience event [what happened]	
1944	They realized that AA was not a “set of fixed ideas, but ... a growing thing, growing out of experience” and that recovery originated in “a spiritual awakening growing out of painful adversity” [and not a particular “spiritual experience”].

Later Accounts

- 1945—John J., “Man’s Triumvirate” [second hand account of talks given by Bill W. and Dr. Bob at the Tenth Anniversary commemoration in Cleveland], *AA Grapevine* 2/2, July.
- 1951—Bill W., Speech in Chicago, February 1951. Fitzpatrick Archives, www.recoveryspeakers.org. In Michael Fitzpatrick, *Dr. Bob and Bill W. Speak* (Hazelden, 2012), pp. 37–39.
- 1954a—Bill W., Talk at LeMoyne College, Syracuse, NY, April 1954. Transcript. AA Archives.
- 1954b—Bill W., dictated autobiography, fall 1954. Published as *Bill W. My First Forty Years: An Autobiography by the Cofounder of Alcoholics Anonymous* (Hazelden, 2000), pp. 144–155.
- 1957—Anon., *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*.
- 1966—Bill W., Speech, AA International Doctors Conference, Indianapolis, 1966. Fitzpatrick Archives, www.recoveryspeakers.org. In Michael Fitzpatrick, *Dr. Bob and Bill W. Speak* (Hazelden, 2012), pp. 37–39.