

The Window of Opportunity

By Wally P.

On pages 13-14 of the "Big Book" of Alcoholics Anonymous, we read that Bill W., while in detox at Towns Hospital in New York City, took the Steps in one day, recovered, and never drank again. In the chapter titled, "A Vision for You," we learn that Dr. Bob relapsed after a couple of weeks on the program because he had not made his amends. He made them in one day and never drank again. Later in this chapter, we find that Bill D. is taken through the steps in a couple of days while in detox at Akron City Hospital. He too never drank again. In the story, "He Sold Himself Short," Dr. Bob took Earl T. through the Steps in "three or four hours." The pioneers repeated this simple and straightforward process hundreds of thousands of times during the "early days" with remarkable success.

In a talk Bill W. gave in Hollywood, CA in 1951, he said, "Don't make a project out of working your steps. Go through your day being the sort of person you would like to be, trying to help someone else, and making sure you don't hurt anyone. And when you get to the end of your day, review the Twelve Steps and you'll find that you've worked them all."

I know there are those who are skeptical that the Steps are simple and meant to be taken quickly and often. At one time, so was I. Then someone pointed out to me that the words used in the "Big Book" to describe taking Steps One through Nine are "next," "at once," "immediately," and "we waste no time."

Recently, a friend told me the reason he takes newcomers through the Steps quickly. He described it in terms of "the window of opportunity." He explained this "window" something like this:

When a newcomer enters the Twelve-step community, whether from a treatment center, detox, or the street, he or she passes through a "window of opportunity"—a time when he or she is most "teachable." How long does a person remain in this state? In other words, how much time does it take a newcomer to realize the pain he or she is experiencing in recovery is greater than the pain he or she remembers when using? How much time do we have to alleviate this pain?

Do we have a year? Absolutely not! Do we have a month? Sometimes we do, sometimes we don't. Do we have a week? For many, that may be pushing it. What if we only have today? What if we assume the newcomer is going to relapse tomorrow (and in many cases this is true). Why not take him or her through the Steps today in order to prevent that relapse tomorrow?

I personally experienced this "window of opportunity" on September 11, 2001. I had conducted a seminar in Austin, TX the previous weekend and was to speak at two treatment centers in the Texas foothills that day. I had not seen any

television, but over the radio I did hear about the Twin Towers coming down and the Pentagon being attacked.

At the second facility, as I started into my scheduled history presentation, a young man in the back of the room raised his hand. I asked if I could help him and he said, "Wally, we are in a lot of pain here today. We don't know what's going on, but we do know it is bad. We need some relief. We know you take people through the Steps. Can you take us through the Steps right now?"

I could have said, "Wait until you get out of treatment. There are Beginner's Meetings in Kerrville. There you can take the Steps in a month or so."

Instead, I turned to one of the counselors and asked, "What do you think? He answered my question with one of his own. "How many times have you done this? To which I replied, "This would be the first." "Then go for it," he said.

I matched everyone up as sharing partners and took them through the first three steps in about 10 minutes. Then I explained the Fourth Step inventory and asked each of them to share with their partners, for the next 10 minutes, what was bothering them. They spread out to do their one-on-one, mini Fifth Steps.

I reconvened the group and took them through the next four steps. I then explained the Eleventh Step, had them get quiet for five minutes, and asked them to share what had come to them during their "quiet time."

I finished up with the Twelfth Step question. After the residents acknowledged they would carry this simple message to others, I looked at my watch. I had taken everyone in the room through all Twelve Steps in 52 minutes.

How thorough was this "Introduction to the Twelve Steps?" It was thorough enough to demonstrate the simplicity of the process. It was thorough enough to move people out of the problem and into the solution. It was thorough enough to give them the confidence to go through the Steps again and again.

Since that monumental day, I have made this "Introduction to the Twelve Steps" hundreds of times at treatment centers, correctional facilities, and recovery workshops and conferences around the world. Many thousands have had their lives changed as the direct result of this "keep it simple" approach to recovery.

About the Author

Wally P. is an archivist, historian and author who, for more than twenty-three years, has been studying the origins and growth of the Twelve-step movement. He is the caretaker for the personal archives of Dr. Bob and Anne Smith.

Wally conducts history presentations and recovery workshops, including "Back to the Basics of Recovery" in which he takes attendees through all Twelve Steps in four, one-hour sessions. More than 500,000 have taken the Steps using this powerful, time-tested, and highly successful "original" program of action.