



...Bringing History To Life

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## **Alcoholics Anonymous – I**

**Lead: Born of despair and yet giving hope to millions, Alcoholics Anonymous, through its principles and methods maps a pathway out of addiction into sobriety.**

**Intro: *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts**

**Content: By December 1934, William Griffiths Wilson, a theretofore-successful stock broker had just about reached the end of his resources. He was an alcoholic, hopelessly addicted to liquor and in deep**

peril professionally and personally. Three times before he had taken the detox treatment at Charles Town's posh Manhattan retreat for well-to-do devotees of alcohol. Each time he went back to the bottle. This was his fourth attempt at getting sober. Wilson was deeply in debt. His career was ruined. To his care givers, the only possibility seemed long-term institutionalization. The attending physician had prescribed the Belladonna Cure, hourly injections of a hallucinogenic made from a poisonous nightshade, a plant designed to invoke relaxation and sobriety out of the discomfort of the treatment.

While in his physical misery and near delirium he was visited by an old imbibing buddy, Ebby Thatcher. Thatcher, also an alcoholic, had become involved in the Oxford Group, a religious association founded in the early twentieth century by ex-YMCA

**missionary, Frank Buchman. This group sought through a process of confession and conversion to bring its adherents into relationship with God and from that into moral rectitude. It was popular among wealthy mainstream Protestants in the 1920s and 1930s and combined religion with popular psychology, home meetings, study of devotional literature and self-revelatory conversation. Among the Oxford Group, Thatcher had found God, dried out, and in that hospital room urged Wilson to do the same. A confirmed agnostic, the patient was disgusted at the prospect of religious conversion and dismissed Thatcher's entreaties. Later, alone, however, with the Belladonna coursing its vicious way through his veins, Wilson gave it a try. "If there is a God, let Him show Himself!" He said, "I am ready to do anything. Anything!" He later described seeing a white light filling his room and had what he termed, "a spiritual**

**awakening.” He saw himself as a free man and he never drank again.**

**Wilson and his wife joined Thatcher in the Oxford Group, absorbing its moral imperatives and its methodology of proselytization. Now an enthusiastic convert, Wilson attempted to change other alcoholics, but ran into resistance due to what his physician called “too much preaching,” but a chance encounter in May 1935 changed his approach. Wilson was on an extended business trip to Akron, Ohio and at an Oxford meeting at the home of a local industrialist he met a closeted alcoholic surgeon named Robert Smith. In extended weeks-long conversation Wilson shared with Smith his own struggle with alcohol which he described as an illness, a “physical allergy” and “mental obsession.” Only later did Wilson describe the spiritual roots of his personal transformation. After a brief lapse**

**into drinking, finally on June 10<sup>th</sup> Smith experienced his own personal conversion and bid good-bye to liquor. The date of his last drink is marked as the founding date of AA. Soon the two former drunks were finding success with other alcoholics in the Akron area through what would become the soon-to-be established organization's strategy of treatment: meeting in small groups for intimate, anonymous sharing, admission of addiction to alcohol and personal inability to free themselves of its grip, conversion to some concept of the divine, and willingness to share their struggle and success with others so afflicted. Next time: Alcoholics Anonymous.**

**Research assistance by Kathryn Garvey, at the University of Richmond's School of Professional and Continuing Studies, I'm Dan Roberts.**

## Resources

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