

# EMOTIONAL SOBRIETY

I recommended Bill Wilson's writing on "Emotional Sobriety" to someone who I have never met in person, but who sent me inquiries via email. The next paragraph is the particular excerpt from Bill Wilson's writing that he referenced, followed by his question, followed by my response. Following my response is Bill Wilson's complete writing on this subject.

*"Suddenly, I realized what the matter was. My basic flaw had always been dependence, almost absolute dependence, on people or circumstances to supply me with prestige, security, and the like. Failing to get these things according to my perfectionist dreams and specifications, I had fought for them. And when defeat came, so did my depression."*

*Bill Wilson, Emotional Sobriety*

**But if we're correct that the spiritual malady is the real problem, and drinking, drugs, self-pity, self centered fear, demands for security and prestige, depression, etc. are just "solutions" or symptoms: since Bill W. obviously learned God-reliance and service to others through the 12 step-work which kept him sober, why didn't that same God-reliance and service keep him from dependence on people, circumstances, prestige, and security, which led to depression? To ask it another way: since he was still dependent on people or circumstances instead of God, how did he stay sober? Was it a matter of degrees---it was enough God reliance to keep him sober, but not enough to keep him from depression?? (Do matters of the soul lend themselves to this kind of linear analysis??)**

The simple answer is that Bill learning principles or being aware of the principles is not the same as practicing them. We can know that we need to eat food, but if we don't eat food, it doesn't matter what we know. The twelve steps are not a solution for "lack of willingness". In my experience "pain, or the fear of pain" and "joy or the promise of joy" are the only motivators for willingness to do something that doesn't look like it's going to work.

I suspect that often people believe that we can somehow "ride the momentum" of yesterday's activities and get relief today. The timing of Bill Wilson's reliance upon things human that he attributes to his depression was the early 1940's to the mid 1950's. My spiritual condition is contingent upon my current actions, not the actions I took yesterday...not even the actions that I hope to take tomorrow. What I am doing now will directly affect how I perceive the world around me right now. So the question in my mind is "what was Bill Wilson doing from the early 1940's to the mid 1950's?"

- The traditions were being developed out of a sense that AA was falling apart.
- The fellowship of AA was not particularly receptive to these Traditions and Bill Wilson felt that without the adoption of them, there is no reason to believe that AA would meet the same demise as the Washingtonians and the Oxford Groups...Bill had an internal fight on his hands.
- Dr. Bob's health was failing. Not only was Bill losing his best friend, but he also knew that the fellowship of AA usually followed the suggestions that Dr. Bob and Bill agreed upon, but hardly ever followed the suggestions that only one of them believed in. Bill was never more aware of his own mortality and he felt that he had to do something to sustain AA's future before Bob died. In 1950, AA Came of Age, the steering of AA's future was turned over to AA World Services.
- Dr. Bob died in 1950.

Bill seemed to recover from his depression only after the service structure was in place so that him and Bob were no longer the leaders and now he could go back to being nothing more than a “garden variety alcoholic” trying to help one alcoholic at a time, rather than feeling as though he had the weight of the future of AA completely on his shoulders. By this point in time, the Traditions had already been adopted as well. I visualize Bill doing one big gigantic exhale after holding his breath for about fifteen years.

I do NOT believe that matters of the soul lend themselves to linear analysis because matters of the soul are eternal...matters of the mind wear out in a very short amount of time, in comparison to eternity, which I suppose is the lifespan of the soul. Linear analysis lives in the intellect. Even man’s “collective intellect” can never totally grasp the matters of the soul. They can’t even grasp most matters of the physical universe of which they are aware of, let alone things that they’re not aware of. The intellect is always trying to steer the direction of the human condition...the soul is always telling the intellect whether or not the direction it chooses is love driven or fear driven.

It is only when the human being accepts that the matters of the soul, or in other words, spiritual dependence (planting seeds of Love), will always produce the most beneficial result. Then, and only then, can a man truly live in peace under any and all circumstances. This, in my opinion, is the spiritual awakening. Until man accepts this, I believe that he will always live with internal turmoil...a constant struggle between dependence on worldly things vs. dependence upon things spiritual.

I also suspect that way too often, people mistakenly believe the primary purpose of the twelve steps is to attain sustained abstinence from alcoholic beverage. I don’t believe that this is a realistic goal, nor do I believe this is what the literature is truly stating.

In most of AA’s literature, “sobriety” is the stated purpose.

One of the definitions of sobriety is undoubtedly a period of abstinence from alcoholic beverages, it states nothing about sustained abstinence in the definition, however, implying an undetermined period of time or possibly implying merely a moment in time. This feeds into what I believe is a serious misconception that just because you’ve attained a substantial amount of time abstinent from alcoholic beverage that you have somehow achieved seniority or somehow now have valuable experience to share with others. I believe this misconception to be one of AA’s biggest challenges today.

Other definitions of the word sobriety, according to [www.dictionary.com](http://www.dictionary.com) refer to a “state of being” that don’t appear to have anything to do with mind or mood altering substances or beverages.

First Definition Entry...

1. The state or quality of being sober.
2. Temperance or moderation, esp. in the use of alcoholic beverages.
3. Seriousness, gravity or solemnity: *an event marked by sobriety.*

Second Definition Entry...

1. Gravity in bearing, manner or treatment.
2. Moderation in or abstinence from consumption of alcoholic liquor or use of drugs: *“three years of drug-free sobriety” (Ron Rosenbaum).*

Definition of “Soberness” from Dictionary.com:

1. Not intoxicated or drunk.
2. Habitually temperate, esp. in the use of liquor.
3. Quiet or sedate in demeanor, as persons.
4. Marked by seriousness, gravity, solemnity, etc., as of demeanor, speech, etc.: *a sober occasion.*
5. Subdued in tone, as color; not gay or showy, as clothes.

6. Free from excess, extravagance or exaggeration: *sober facts*.
7. Showing self-control: *sober restraint*.
8. Sane or rational: *a sober solution to the problem*.
9. To make or become sober: (often fol. by *up*).

I'm not attempting to debate accurate usage of the English language, nor am I trying to suggest that I have a clue why the authors of AA's literature chose the words they chose. They do seem to have been very selective in their choice of words, however. But the common usage of words changes over time. Only half a century ago, the word "gay" had a completely different meaning. If I use today's definition, then Bill Wilson was being drawn into a bar in the lobby of the Mayflower Hotel which was currently occupied by homosexuals, according to his story...obviously, ridiculous. Not so obvious is the evidence that the word "alcohol" was not used to describe a beverage prior to the early twentieth century. Malts, ales and lagers are examples of the words used to describe alcoholic beverages at that time. However, "alcoholism", being "es spiritus" in Latin, was used as far back as the Bible to describe a spiritual condition.

Those of us who have had the experience of an addictive substance or behavior driving our lives without the full consent of our will, who are desiring and attaining complete abstinence will experience one of the following...

1. If he/she has a spiritual malady, and they live a life based on spiritual principle, they will experience...
  - An unexplainable, but undeniable, removal of a mental obsession and compulsion, of which if yielded to would immediately incite, upon the initial ingestion of the substance, a physical allergy or craving for more, which appears to be a direct result of...
  - A spiritual condition that is filled with hope, purpose and direction due to our spiritual actions.
2. If he/she has a spiritual malady, and they cannot or will not live a life based on spiritual principle, they will experience...
  - A possible unexplainable, but undeniable, removal of a mental obsession and compulsion, of which if yielded to would immediately incite, upon the initial ingestion of the substance, a physical allergy or craving for more, combined with...
  - A miserable perception of the world around them forcing them to find relief in any and many other forms, all of which will produce destruction of the spirit. Some examples of the forms are depression, anger, selfish behavior, ad infinitum.
3. If he/she does not have a spiritual malady he/she can get sober in the 4H club, the church or anywhere else, provided he/she does not forget what will happen if he/she ingests even a little bit of the addictive substance.

I believe that the majority of Alcoholics Anonymous today consists of the third type, a large percentage of the second type and a small percentage of the first type. Not that this assessment means anything, I just felt like taking the opportunity to point it out.

I suspect that during Bill's depression years, he fell into the category of the second type mentioned, although he was originally in the first and then eventually came back to the first.

There are reports that Bill Wilson was supposedly begging for a drink on his death bed. If this is true, then what appears to have been removed first was his spiritual awareness followed by either the

realization that he was dying, so there won't be any negative consequence or the deterioration of the mind as the body was shutting down preparing for the transition from life to death. The physical and mental chaos that might accompany someone during this transition could have allowed for a lack of spiritual awareness...he died from emphysema...apparently a very painful death, gasping for air. He might have simply wanted relief of any kind.

As far as expanding my personal spiritual horizons I definitely do not want to fall into a trap by diving deep in to studies or intellectual exchanges of dialogue as a replacement for giving my brother my time. This would be a guarantee of spiritual detriment, which might be, in some ways, what Bill Wilson was doing. He spent so much time organizing, writing, reading, engaging in intellectual gymnastics that he forgot that what he really needed was "to be his brother's keeper". It would be the equivalent of studying to be a personal trainer but never working out...or studying to be a nutritionist but eating crappy food, and then being perplexed that I'm not getting the results I'm promised in the studies. It appears to me that most of the world finds very creative ways to attempt to grow spiritually, while the common denominator in all of these approaches is they all stop just short of actually laying down their lives for their brother.

## EMOTIONAL SOBRIETY

"I think that many oldsters who have put our AA "booze cure" to severe but successful tests still find they often lack emotional sobriety. Perhaps they will be the spearhead for the next major development in AA, the development of much more real maturity and balance (which is to say, humility) in our relations with ourselves, with our fellows, and with God.

Those adolescent urges that so many of us have for top approval, perfect security, and perfect romance, urges quite appropriate to age seventeen, prove to be an impossible way of life when we are at age forty-seven and fifty-seven.

Since AA began, I've taken immense wallops in all these areas because of my failure to grow up emotionally and spiritually. My God, how painful it is to keep demanding the impossible, and how very painful to discover, finally, that all along we have had the cart before the horse. Then comes the final agony of seeing how awfully wrong we have been, but still finding ourselves unable to get off the emotional merry-go-round.

How to translate a right mental conviction into a right emotional result, and so into easy, happy and good living. Well, that's not only the neurotic's problem, it's the problem of life itself for all of us who have got to the point of real willingness to hew to right principles in all of our affairs.

Even then, as we hew away, peace and joy may still elude us. That's the place so many of us AA oldsters have come to. And it's a hell of a spot, literally. How shall our unconscious, from which so many of our fears, compulsions and phony aspirations still stream, be brought into line with what we actually believe, know and want! How to convince our dumb, raging and hidden 'Mr. Hyde' becomes our main task.

I've recently come to believe that this can be achieved. I believe so because I begin to see many benighted ones, folks like you and me, commencing to get results. Last autumn, depression, having no really rational cause at all, almost took me to the cleaners. I began to be scared that I was in for another long chronic spell. Considering the grief I've had with depressions, it wasn't a bright prospect.

I kept asking myself "Why can't the twelve steps work to release depression?" By the hour, I stared at the St. Francis Prayer ... "it's better to comfort than to be comforted". Here was the formula, all right, but why didn't it work?

Suddenly, I realized what the matter was. My basic flaw had always been dependence, almost absolute dependence, on people or circumstances to supply me with prestige, security, and the like. Failing to get these things

according to my perfectionist dreams and specifications, I had fought for them. And when defeat came, so did my depression.

There wasn't a chance of making the outgoing love of St. Francis a workable and joyous way of life until these fatal and almost absolute dependencies were cut away.

Because I had over the years undergone a little spiritual development, the absolute quality of these frightful dependencies had never before been so starkly revealed. Reinforced by what grace I could secure in prayer, I found I had to exert every ounce of will and action to cut off these faulty emotional dependencies upon people, upon AA, indeed upon any act of circumstance whatsoever.

Then only could I be free to love as Francis did. Emotional and instinctual satisfactions, I saw, were really the extra dividends of having love, offering love, and expressing love appropriate to each relation of life.

Plainly, I could not avail myself to God's love until I was able to offer it back to Him by loving others as He would have me. And I couldn't possibly do that so long as I was victimized by false dependencies.

For my dependence meant demand, a demand for the possession and control of the people and the conditions surrounding me.

While those words "absolute dependence" may look like a gimmick, they were the ones that helped to trigger my release into my present degree of stability and quietness of mind, qualities which I am now trying to consolidate by offering love to others regardless of the return to me.

This seems to be the primary healing circuit: an outgoing love of God's creation and His people, by means of which we avail ourselves of His love for us. It is most clear that the real current can't flow until our paralyzing dependencies are broken, and broken at depth. Only then can we possibly have a glimmer of what adult love really is.

If we examine every disturbance we have, great or small, we will find at the root of it some unhealthy dependence and its consequent demand. Let us, with God's help, continually surrender these hobbling demands. Then we can be set free to live and love: we may then be able to gain emotional sobriety.

Of course, I haven't offered you a really new idea --- only a gimmick that has started to unhook several of my own hexes' at depth. Nowadays, my brain no longer races compulsively in either elation, grandiosity or depression. I have been given a quiet place in bright sunshine"

Bill Wilson