
BILL AND THE NIGHT VISITORS

This is a story told out of turn, of a meeting that was never considered for the agenda of the Fifth General Service Conference. If it deserves a place in the record, that is because it suggests, more eloquently than any formal vote or advisory action, the responsibilities inherent in the third legacy of service which now is passed into the hands of the Conference and, through it, into the hands of all who comprise our fellowship.

(It is a story retailed by a narrator who was only accidentally a witness to a fragment of the scene.)

The time was the evening of the first day of the Conference, that period when the agenda was reserved to area Delegates exclusively. It was an evening of open time for Bill, for members of the Headquarters staff, for those Trustees who had already joined the burgeoning throng in St. Louis. It was an evening when Bill, facing a week that was sure to drain emotional and physical resources, might have been forgiven for seeking the companionship of a small gathering, or the deeper comfort of solitude itself.

Those intimate privileges were not to be his that evening. Instead, unknown to most, Bill was a participant in a meeting at which no notes were taken, no rules of order invoked, no decisions solemnly recorded.

In a little-used room off the beaten path of the Jefferson Hotel's main traffic, Bill sat on one side of a long, green-covered table. Encircling him were perhaps ten or a dozen men who cannot be identified except to indicate that they were men of disciplined minds, questing and compassionate hearts and high status in their community.

Through one of their number who knew and applauded A.A., they had sought the privilege of meeting Bill, of talking with him of this recovery program whose earliest courier he had been. They sought, also, (it may be assumed) the right to ask all manner of questions.

They did not all arrive in one group---but singly and by twos and threes. They approached quietly by way of an outer room, quickly concluded the amenities of recognition or introduction and joined those who had preceded them at the green table.

The first night visitors arrived at nine o'clock. Occasionally a visitor would leave, only to be succeeded minutes later by another arrival. Ten o'clock passed. There was a brief break in the meeting and then, through the closed door, once more was heard the faint rhythm of questions asked and answered, the blurred roar of hearty laughter and the occasional clinking of an ash tray.

BILL AND THE NIGHT VISITORS
(Continued)

Eleven o'clock passed. The indistinct hum of voices continued. By now the one scheduled meeting of the Conference had dissolved. By now most of the Headquarters people had put down their last coffee cups of the day and were groping for the awkward bulk of their room keys. By now, more sophisticated members might have reasoned, Bill had given amply of his time and had earned the right to escape to personal privacy. But the meeting continued.

Midnight came and passed. Moving down the deserted corridor, a watchman tested the door gently and then withdrew, perhaps perplexed by the strange scene. For this must have seemed an odd meeting. The trappings of men seeking simple answers from one of their number are simple indeed and almost forgotten these days.

For these are times when the overstuffed briefcase, the sharpened pencils and pristine pads, are too often the conventional symbols of meetings.

There were none of these in the room with the green table. This was a meeting of minds and hearts, a giving and taking of experience, a tentative search for deep truths that may one day be shared without reserve by all who would heal themselves and others, so that the greatest purposes of life may be realized.

Well past the hour, the meeting came to an end. The tall, lanky man called Bill moved slowly to the door with his new friends---these people who had come in all humility to ask questions about this thing called Alcoholics Anonymous and to try to relate it to their own experience and knowledge and insights.

Bill moved through the door and the night visitors with him, chatting the small talk with which those who meet for the first time work toward common roots of experience and thinking.

And the thought occurred to one who witnessed what might be deemed an isolated, minor incident---the thought occurred that perhaps this meeting testified to the need for the General Service Conference which had brought so many A.A. members to St. Louis in this momentous week.

For A.A., as a promise and demonstration of the possibility of man's redemption from depths of his own making, will probably always have night visitors who would ask privately about that which we offer freely. And we do not have the right to ask why such visitors do not gather with us by day in public places. We have only the responsibility to be sure that, when Bill is no longer among us, we shall have a structure to which all visitors can turn and find inscribed those few and simple truths to which we owe so much.

The burden of building this structure and of inscribing what we have learned, and what we may learn tomorrow, may well divert us from more attractive pursuits.

BILL AND THE NIGHT VISITORS
(Continued)

Some visitors may be those who would come to scoff or to mutilate the principles of experience we have inscribed. Some may seek to destroy the structure itself, which must be built to withstand the malicious as well as the uninformed, those who would permit decay from within as well as those who approach from beyond the walls.

In our own past, searching for sobriety, seeking to maintain it, we too have known what it meant to be a visitor in the night. We have gone forth seeking help. And we have gone forth to pass that help along.

Looking outward, conscious of our need to reach out to those who have understanding or need it, we may perhaps have limited our conception of the Twelfth Step. Unlike Bill, we may unconsciously believe that the Twelfth Step points only in one direction---away from us and out to our brother.

But the steps of the night visitors come toward us and we must have a haven where these people can always find answers they seek, always find private refuge, if they require it, always find the gift of our time, our interest and our willingness to share.

Thus we build this structure of the General Service Conference not for ourselves, although the house is ours in name, but for those unknown travelers who knock upon our door, by day or by night, for all time to come. We build it not to adorn mere men or women but to house simple learnings and to illuminate them.

Less than a generation ago, there were few doors toward which the alcoholic or his family or his friends could turn their steps. A generation hence Bill may not be with us to stand at the door of the house we are building this week. But the house must be there and it must stand strong. And the door of the house must always be open.

For the steps of him who seeks our shelter, to us shall always be those of our brother.