

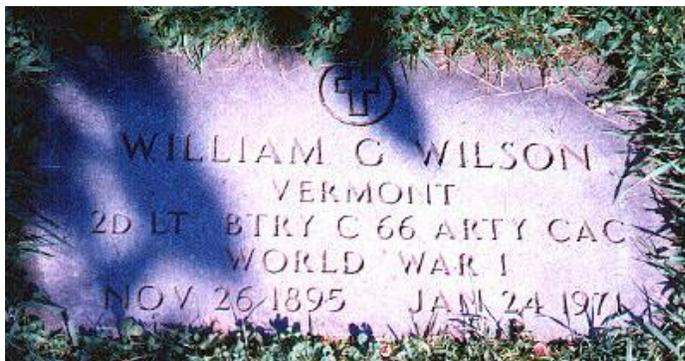


To be sober longer than God

At a time of Thanksgiving, author Joe C reflects over the years of recovery

I am not a journalist but I play in Rebellion Dogs blogs. I like to assume the role of truth-seeking, bias-avoiding, objective fact finder. Alternatively, I will channel my songwriting, storytelling self. I will dust off a tired old truth of the ages and present it in a way that makes others say, “I never thought about that, but yeah—I wish I’d said that.” This week, I come out from hiding—no quotes, no authorities, just the language of my heart. Today, I get personal.

As of November 27th, 2013 I am 37 years sober. I had to calculate it; 2013 minus 1976 isn’t off-the-cuff math for me. After a few decades there will be those who say facetiously, “Joe’s been sober longer than God.” If you know I am an atheist you can really enjoy the irony of that statement. But, compared to AA’s own canonized heroes, maybe I am. Bill Wilson died with 36 years and about 45 days of sobriety. So I am sober longer than that guy. Imagine; January 24th, 1971—no one was sober (in AA) for 37 years.



Thinking about that for a while, it didn’t make me feel special. It made me feel alone. I entertained the idea that my group of peers is shrinking. But that’s a fallacy. These days, 37 years is ordinary. It won’t get you a seat at the front of the stage at the quinquennial AA world convention’s Saturday night open meeting. That spot is reserved for the 40+ club and there are always dozens in

attendance. Some of them share some words of wisdom. They draw names from a hat bring a few up on stage. Some of them speak a few words of wisdom. They draw names from a hat and bring a few up on stage. Some of them are not “all there” but they are all sober for four decades or more. Celebrations of 50 years and more are not unheard of in Toronto, where I live. AA has been here for 65 years and some of the early members helped sober up young punks who are still alive today.

If you are still reading, maybe you want to know what it’s like to be sober *longer than God*. It is as surreal as you might expect. The day before my anniversary, I felt anxious—not grateful or all power-of-example-ish. So, I went to the *A.A. Grapevine* website and I listened to a sneak-preview audio recording of the December issue about Oldtimers. I found what I needed to hear in a story called, “You Won’t Find Rainbows at the Bottom of a Glass.” It was the story of a man 39 years sober who drank again. Ahhh, that hit the spot. As you would suspect from a *Grapevine*

article, he went to treatment and he's sober again, sharing his own unique experience, strength and hope like the rest of us.

I am not one of these members who starts everything I say with "My name is so-and-so and thanks to the program of AA and you fine people, I haven't found it necessary to pick up a drink since _____.(cue the awe and wonderment)." I think there is something very un-AA about that. We are all equal and if you think that I am sporting false humility, count how many votes everyone gets at your next business meeting. Everyone has a say. Everyone has an equal vote because the objectivity of the newcomer is as vital to the group as the experience of the old-timer. Our survival depends on adaptation and where will our innovative ideas come from; from the way we have always done things or from a fresh way of looking at things?



November 1976.

***One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* won best picture and *Still Crazy After All These Years* was the best album of the year. Montreal was the best at hockey, Cincinnati swept the Yankees and The Pittsburgh Steelers were defending Super Bowl champs. I listened to Led Zeppelin's Presence on the headphones during my last acid trip. A.A. released the third edition of the Big Book and Barry L's "Do You Think You're Different" was introduced to AA rooms. A stamp cost 13 cents and the average household income was \$12,660 per year.**

A language new to the AA service work lexicon is, "My service sponsor said that his service sponsor told him...blah, blah, blah." Does anyone see a problem with this?

While it is worthwhile to draw from the wisdom of our elders, if we have a problem, these oldtimers are the ones that got us into this mess in the first place. I wasn't going to lean on any third-party authorities today, but didn't Albert Einstein define Insanity as "Doing the same thing and expecting different results"?

In our Public Information efforts, we spend too much time *talking* and not enough time *listening*.

Instead of going into a community that is unfamiliar to us, and launching right into "When Bill W. met Dr. Bob in 1935..." why not ask a few questions? What are they doing now about members of their community who suffer from alcoholism? What might AA be able to do to help? Maybe if we see our role as out-reach instead of custodians of the Holy Grail, we will be more effective at *carrying the message*.

Some group or district inventories are little more than self-congratulatory pats on the back. Or, there is a tendency to get *back to basics*. We look to the old farts to tell us about the good ol' days. The newcomer (remember the newcomer—the most important person in the meeting?) is best understood by the newest member of our meeting. Why not ask the members with less than six months sobriety about their first impressions of our meeting. If we ask them to tell us candidly what compelled them and what concerned them, we can learn a lot. Is the purpose of the inventory to widen our gateway? Then we need to better understand where we are

marginalizing others. It may be an innocent mistake in the way we talk in clichés or acronyms or how, as the meeting breaks up, we talk to our friends who we haven't seen all week, while the newcomers head for the door. It could be that meeting rituals, that fit us like old slippers, are repellent to new people.

The point I often make is that the newest members of our group, more than anyone, can give us clues as to how we can improve. This isn't to discount tried and true experience but let's keep things in perspective instead of skewing experience. When we label long-timers as experts and discount the newcomer, we are missing more than an opportunity, we are missing the boat. It doesn't matter how confident we are when we're driving in the wrong direction, we're still not going to get the results we hoped for. And if AA isn't growing and members don't feel compelled to get engaged, doing more of "what's worked in the past" won't suddenly change this momentum.

So that's my rant against treating our sobriety date like a currency. I think it makes us more arrogant and less approachable.

But today, it isn't the future of AA that makes me care so much about treating everyone in our meetings as equals. Today it is way more personal. I listened to the story of a member who lived with indifference to the allure of alcohol for decades and suddenly got blindsided. His fall from grace could happen to me—just like it could happen to anybody. Sure, anyone who comes back after a slip has a Monday-morning quarterback's narrative about the cause and effect of what went wrong. The truth is that we wake up one morning, not knowing that today we will relapse, and when we slip it could be one drink, one decade or "till death do we part."

We are all equal in a meeting because it's not the distance between us and the last drink that matters. We are all just one drink away, one moment of weakness away, from alcohol's victory lap in the saga of our life. We are all a tragic Achilles-like tale waiting to be told. That distance, the unknowable space between me and my next drink, is what makes me feel very equal to everyone today. What is there to be lonely about? I am in grand company. It is nice to know that we are all in this together.

"You Won't Find Rainbows at the Bottom of a Glass"

http://www.aagrapevine.org/sites/fileuploads/isovera/drupal6core/AAGV_Dec13_Rainbows.mp3