

A Higher Power: The Spiritual Awakening of a World-Class Drunk by

In 1940, Bill Wilson, co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous, a man who knew sin and failure like he knew the back of his hand, was living with his wife, Lois, in a tiny room at the Alcoholics Anonymous “clubhouse” in downtown Manhattan. Wilson was in despair, unsure of the state of his soul, of his role in life, and of the future of A.A. Just then, at his nadir, a Jesuit priest from S. Louis, Father Edward Dowling, who knew of Bill’s work, came calling....

—The Editors

In chapter 4 of *Not-God*, Ernest Kurtz’s magisterial history of Alcoholics Anonymous, the author relates “how Bill Wilson habitually recalled that moment” when he met Father Ed. Kurtz begins:

It would seem that, on a chilly, rain-pelting early winter evening in late 1940, as Wilson almost tangibly felt himself being wrapped ever more tightly in a gloomy pall of spiritual darkness, he sat forlorn in the sparsely furnished clubhouse rooms in which he and Lois were then living.

The tentative words “it would seem” reflect Kurtz’s awareness that Bill, a master raconteur, was known for altering details of stories to make his desired impression upon listeners. When describing events of his life that had significance for Alcoholics Anonymous, he typically was not as concerned with maintaining historical accuracy as he was with conveying the spiritual truths that the events taught him.

In this case, when Bill remembered that “it was a sleety, bitter night” when Father Ed came to meet him, his memory altered the weather to fit his mood. For, according to Dowling’s desk calendar and his speaking schedule, Father Ed visited him late in the evening on Saturday, November 16, 1940. And, on that night, according to contemporary newspaper reports, Manhattan’s temperature was indeed chilly—just above freezing—with some wind gusts, but there was no precipitation.

What Bill sought to convey with his images of Father Ed’s “coat...covered with sleet” and his “hat...covered with snow” was the courage with which Dowling selflessly sailed straight into the storm of the A.A. cofounder’s embittered mind. The meaning of the story was that it took a weak, “crippled” priest to enter into his interior turbulence and carry him back into the warm light of regeneration that he had received at Towns Hospital. As in the Book of Acts, when the gentle touch of the meek Ananias of Damascus caused the scales to fall from Saul’s eyes, God used a humble instrument to restore the deflated and depressed Bill to a state of grace. At least, that is how Bill saw it; he referred to his first meeting with Father Ed as his “second conversion experience.”

Father Ed planned his trip to New York City as a one-night stopover on his rail journey to Springfield, Massachusetts, where he was to address a meeting of the Proportional Representation League on November 18. His calendar does not indicate that he had any business in New York; it seems his only reason for spending the night there was so he could visit the Alcoholics Anonymous clubhouse and, he hoped, meet Bill Wilson.

It was eight p.m. on November 16 when Father Ed's train pulled into Pennsylvania Station. From there, he went to a taxi stand and caught a cab for the five-minute ride to the place where he was staying—most likely the Jesuit community house at St. Francis Xavier High School on West Sixteenth Street between Fifth and Sixth Avenues. There, he dropped off his bag and perhaps had a late dinner.

Finally, as the ten o'clock hour approached, Father Ed put his coat and hat back on and stepped outside to take another five-minute taxi ride—this one to the Alcoholics Anonymous clubhouse on West Twenty-Fourth Street between Eighth and Ninth Avenues. He would have learned the clubhouse's address from Earl T. or another A.A. leader in Chicago, or possibly from having made a telephone call to Ruth Hock at the Alcoholic Foundation.

Just twelve days prior to Dowling's visit, Bill and Lois Wilson had moved into one of the two tiny upstairs bedrooms at the clubhouse. The room was only ten feet square; Lois tried to make it look larger and brighter by painting the walls white with red trim. It was dominated by a bed that had no footboard so that Bill, who was six-foot-three, could stretch out comfortably.

As a Checker Cab carried Father Ed to the clubhouse, Bill was lying in bed with his feet hanging off the end, listening to the wind blow on the room above his head. He was exhausted not just physically but emotionally as well. In his words, "It had been a hectic day, full of disappointments."

For the past few days, he had been shepherding Saturday Evening Post writer Jack Alexander to meetings. Alexander's editor had asked him to investigate Alcoholics Anonymous for a story that, if it came to pass, could bring the fellowship the large-scale national publicity that Bill had been dreaming of. But although Bill had tried to put on a cheerful face for Alexander, inside he feared that the Saturday Evening Post story, as with the hoped-for Reader's Digest publicity, might come to naught—for it was clear that the seasoned reporter was skeptical of what he saw. To Alexander, the alcoholics' tales of recovery seemed too perfect; he expected he was being conned.

After Alexander left the clubhouse that day, a number of alcoholic visitors had kept Bill busy until well after dark. When they left, only Bill and the live-in-caretaker Tom M., a crusty retired fireman, remained; Lois was out somewhere.

Nearly twenty years later, when Bill gave a talk to Catholic clergy days after attending Father Ed's funeral, he offered a vividly detailed account of what happened next.

I lay upstairs in our room, consumed with self-pity. This had brought on one of my characteristic imaginary ulcer attacks....

Then the front doorbell rang, and I heard old Tom toddle to answer it. A minute later, he looked into the doorway of my room, obviously much annoyed.

Then he said, "Bill, there is some damn bum down there from St. Louis, and he wants to

see you.”

Despite Bill’s mistaken recollection that it was snowing, there are two solid reasons to accept the rest of his account of that evening. The first is that he told the story of it at least once in Father Ed’s presence, at A.A.’s 1955 International Convention in St. Louis. The second is his recollection that Tom M. mistook Dowling for a “bum.” He was not the first to do so, and he would not be the last.

Even in his youth, Father Ed had been somewhat careless about his personal appearance, as the admonitions he received in the novitiate attest. He took his vow of poverty seriously and paid no mind to the age of his clothes. There are stories of people buying him a new hat or a new pair of shoes in the (often vain) hope of convincing him to replace his old one.

Once his arthritis set in, Father Ed’s grooming habit worsened as it became more difficult for him to neaten himself up during the course of his workday. He also had to adapt his clothes to his disability; he would split his socks at the top so he could put them on more easily and they would not hamper his circulation. And, like many sufferers of ankylosing spondylitis, he also suffered from psoriasis, to the point that flakes of dry skin would be evident on his black clerics.

So, when Father Ed spoke about humility arising from humiliations, he was not speaking theoretically. The humiliation of being taken for a street person was part of his daily life. Particularly at the end of a long travel day, it is completely plausible that Tom M. would have thought he was just “some damn bum.”

Bill, in his weariness, resented having yet another drunk show up expecting to see him—and at such a late hour. With a sigh, he said to Tom, “Oh well, bring him up, bring him up.”

After Tom headed back downstairs, the next sound Bill heard was that of the wooden stairs creaking as his visitor plodded painfully and haltingly upward. Bill, reluctant to arise, remained stretched out on his bed as he mused to himself about the stranger, “This one is in really bad shape.”

With Bill lying down, the first things Father Ed saw as he approached the top of the stairs were the white walls and red trim of the cramped bedroom. The color combination would have been familiar to Father Ed; it was like that of the candy-striped silk shirt he wore when he entered the Jesuit novitiate at Florissant—which he last saw being used by a Jesuit brother to wipe the floors. Ever since, this shirt had symbolized for him everything he gave up in order to share in the poverty of Christ. Now, twenty-one years later, God was giving him back the colors that had been missing from his life, in a way that would bring him more joy than he could have ever imagined.

“Then,” Bill said as he recalled that moment,

balanced precariously upon his cane, [Father Ed] came into the room, carrying a battered black hat that was shapeless as a cabbage leaf....He lowered himself into my solitary chair, and when he opened his overcoat, I saw his clerical collar. He brushed back a shock of white hair and looked at me through the most remarkable pair of eyes I have ever seen.”

Somehow Bill, without realizing it, had finally sat up on the edge of his bed to face his

guest. Father Ed leaned forward in his chair; he stood his cane up in front of him so he could rest his hands upon its grip. It was in fact an old-fashioned shillelagh. Dowling's left leg remained extended; Bill could tell there was something wrong with it, some kind of stiffness.

Once the two men were finally face to face, what did they discuss? Bill, in telling the story publicly, shared how Father Ed made him feel, but gave few specifics of their conversation. Robert Thomsen was able to learn a bit more about it from a tape recording that Bill made of his recollections. But the best account comes to us from Ernest Kurtz, for he, in addition to consulting Bill's writing, interviews, and speeches, also interviewed Lois Wilson and Nell Wing, both of whom recalled to him how Bill would tell the story of the meeting. What is more, Kurtz learned details of the meeting from John C. Ford, SJ, who recalled how Father Ed would tell the story.

"Father Dowling," Kurtz wrote,

introduced himself as a Jesuit priest from St. Louis who, as editor of a Catholic publication, was interested in the parallels he had intuited between the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous and the [Spiritual] Exercises of St. Ignatius....That he showed delight rather than disappointment when Wilson wearily confessed ignorance of the Exercises at once endeared the diminutive cleric to Bill.

Then something extraordinary happened. Bill described it as a kind of divine inbreaking:

We talked about a lot of things, and my spirits kept rising, and presently I began to realize that this man radiated a grace that filled the room with a sense of presence. I felt this with great intensity; it was a moving and mysterious experience. In years since, I have seen much of this great friend, and whether I was in joy or in pain, he always brought to me the same sense of grace and the presence of God. My case is no exception. Many who meet Father Ed experience this touch of the eternal.

When Bill described the evening in the recording he made for Thomsen, he said that at the end of his and Dowling's conversation, which went on long into the night, he "felt for the first time completely cleansed and freed." As the author of the Fifth Step—"Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs"—Bill recognized this as a Fifth Step experience. Although Bill had composed the Twelve Steps, he himself had not made all of them; they were an adaptation and expansion of the approach that had brought him healing when he was in the Oxford Group.

As so, Kurtz writes,

[Bill] told Dowling not only what he had done and had left undone—he went on to share with his new sponsor the thoughts and feelings behind those actions and omissions. He told about his high hopes and plans, and spoke about his anger, despair, and mounting frustrations. The Jesuit listened and quoted Matthew [5:6]: "Blessed are they who do hunger and thirst." God's chosen, he pointed out, were always distinguished by their yearnings, their restlessness, their thirst.

Father Ed could say that to Bill because he had lived it. Years later, looking back on that evening in a letter to an A.A. member, he wrote that he and Bill bonded over his respect for Bill's religious experience; this respect, he said, came through a sense of sympathy: "I had had some opportunity to observe religious experience such as Bill had."

But in fact, Father Ed had more than sympathy. He could directly empathize with Bill, for he too had experienced the peaks and valleys of the spiritual life. He too had experienced the dark night of doubt that descended into despair, when he went through his great time of purgation in the novitiate. He too had experienced the joy of the certainty of God's presence, when, upon making his initial vows, he was flooded with divine consolation. He too had experience—and continued to experience—the hunger and thirst for a renewal of the sense of the nearness of God. And, like Bill with his Twelfth Step, Father Ed had discovered that the hidden God awaited him in the form of each person who approached him with a problem.

Bill, recognizing in the priest a kindred spirit, asked him from the depths of his pain, "Won't there ever be any satisfaction?" Dowling, Kurtz writes,

almost snapped back: "Never. Never any." He continued in a gentler tone, describing as "divine dissatisfaction" that which would keep Wilson always reaching out for unattainable goals, for only by so reaching could he attain what—hidden from him—were God's goals.

Father Ed's many hours reading the Imitation of Christ had prepared him well for this moment. At one point in that spiritual classic, the storm-tossed disciple prays for light: "O Christ, ruler of the power of the sea and calmer of its raging waves, come near and help me." Christ responds with words very much like those that Dowling used to teach and comfort Bill: "How will you gain eternal rest if you look for leisure in this life? Do not choose to have rest, but patient endurance...I will give an eternal reward for your brief toil and endless glory for your transitory trouble."

But Father Ed did more than remind Bill of God's promises. He gave him, in Kurtz's words, "this acceptance that his dissatisfaction, that his very 'thirst,' could be divine." Such acceptance, Kurtz wrote, "was one of Dowling's great gifts to Bill Wilson and through him to Alcoholics Anonymous." The divinization of thirst is a classic Christian message. Father Ed would have known it from Augustine's words to God at the start of his Confessions: You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you."

When Bill asked Father Ed's opinion on another issue, the priest again drew upon ancient wisdom:

Bill spoke of his own difficulties in prayer and his continuing problem in conveying the meaning of his "spiritual experience" to alcoholics. There was a move afoot within the fellowship just then, he told Dowling, to change the phrase in the Twelfth Step to "spiritual awakening"—it seemed to Bill an attempt to mask rather than to clarify the role of the divine in the alcoholic's salvation. Tactfully, Father Ed offered a succinct response: "If you can name it, it's not God."

Kurtz, who titled his study of A.A. Not-God, seems to have been unaware that Dowling's words in this instance were a near-direct quote from Augustine. Father Ed—who, as we have seen, in his personal spirituality often followed the via negativa, the negative path to God—drew the saying from Augustine's Sermon 117, in which the saint says, "Si comprehendis, non est Deus"—if you comprehend it, it is not God.

Finally, after hours of conversation, Father Ed raised himself up to leave, using his cane to steady himself. Then he leaned down to meet Bill's gaze, looking intently at him. Thomsen, drawing from Bill's recorded recollections, says,

he told [Bill] that the two of them in that little room were among the blessed of all time, for they were here, living now. Out of those who had gone before, and all those not yet born, they had been elected to stand up now and speak their piece. There was a force in Bill that was all his own, that had never been on this earth before, and if he did anything to mar it, or block it, it would never exist anywhere again.

It was Father Ed's way of impressing upon Bill the message of Cardinal Newman's reflection: "God has created me to do Him some definite service; He has committed some work to me which He has not committed to another...."

Then, Thomsen writes,

[Dowling] hobbled over to the door, looked back, and as a parting shot said that if ever Bill grew impatient, or angry at God's way of doing things, if ever he forgot to be grateful for being alive here and now, he, Father Ed Dowling, would make a trip all the way from St. Louis to wallop him over the head with his good Irish stick.

Bill was left feeling a great calm—and great hope. He would tell Thomsen there was no way of describing what Father Ed did for him, the doors he flung open before him; after absorbing the impact of their first encounter, he awakened to a new reality, a totally altered view of himself and his place in the world.

This meeting, Bill said in his talk to Catholic priests after Dowling's death, "was the beginning of one of the deepest and most inspiring friendships that I shall ever know. This was the first meaningful contact that I had ever had with the clergymen of your faith."

As for Father Ed, perhaps the best indication of how he felt after meeting Bill was in a letter where he wrote that the inspiration he received in his work with alcoholics in A.A. was comparable to that which he received when he was ordained. When he published a pamphlet on the fellowship, he dedicated it "in gratitude to the women and men of A.A."



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