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A Twentieth Century Miracle

DURING my many years in prison work I have spoken for conventions, service clubs and many other organizations, but to be invited to address the Fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous on the occasion of its twenty-fifth anniversary at this international convention is--to me--my finest hour. I have been asked to address you on the subject of AA and prisons. It was with humility that I accepted this invitation, and yet, as I look back over the sixteen years during which we have had an AA program in the Indiana State Prison, I feel that I could come before you with something of interest, as a representative not only of the members of our AA fellowship in our institution, but as a representative of all the prison administrators who have seen the wisdom of the AA program. . . .

Today, I bring you greetings from thousands of men in the Indiana State Prison and other correctional institutions over the nation who take part in your program from behind the walls. Like alcoholics everywhere, they are working in AA with the genuine desire for finding new hope and guidance for the todays and for the tomorrows that await them beyond prison bars. I speak to you not as an authority on alcoholism or AA, but as a prison warden and sponsor of an AA group of alcoholic prisoners. I might say that I have had a most interesting, encouraging and inspiring experience in the many years that I have worked closely with our group at the Indiana State Prison, and it is the knowledge that I have gained in these years that I wish briefly to relate to you.

Only a short time ago we laid the cornerstone for the new administration building at the prison. As the ceremonies were being held, one thought predominated, of the many that throbbed through my head: to what should we dedicate this beautiful and magnificent building? To the broken hearts. . .the broken dreams. . .the broken and wrecked lives of the men who would, in the years to come, pass through its shining steel doors to the world behind the walls?

Then, too, in my mind and heart I kept asking myself: "Why is it necessary to keep building our prisons larger? And more of them? Why do men continue to need being locked up?" Years in penal work, watching the never-ending stream of men pass in and out of prisons, should be cause enough for asking this question--for it was more than forty years ago that I began my penal career as guard at the old Jeffersonville Reformatory; and my service in the various penal institutions in Indiana has been practically continuous since that time, with the exception of two years I served as Prison Administrator in Japan during the occupation and the more than three years that I served in the Maryland Correctional system.

Through the years I have seen thousands of these men enter the front gate as the direct and indirect victims of alcohol. I have sat in on hundreds of parole board hearings and heard a large portion of these men admit that alcohol was their downfall. I have watched these same men go out on parole and return again as the result of the same basic cause. Yet there seemed nothing that could be done for them. No one seemed to know definitely what caused men to drink. No one knew definitely how to cure them.

Of the more than 2400 men now committed to our care. . .let us look at the record. Alcoholism contributes the major portion of the population load carried by prisons today, and is--more than any other one factor--directly and indirectly responsible for crimes resulting in prison sentences of all types. It is factual that more than sixty per cent of all men entering prison admit to an excessive use of alcohol. A judge of the Criminal Court of Marion County once stated that at least seventy per cent of the crimes committed in his county (and this includes Indianapolis) stemmed from alcohol and saloon contacts.

. . . Small wonder that at times a prison warden has a heartbreaking job. Society charges him to rehabilitate and punish at the same time--a rather paradoxical situation. But we tried in years past to help the drunk, as we knew him then, and in our efforts to study him we called upon all the available sciences and arts. Our institutional files were virtual gold-mines of valuable information on how *not* to help the alcoholic to recovery. We learned from looking over these records of trial and error that there was at least one truth: that punishment alone certainly was not the answer. Something infinitely more powerful was needed.

It was in 1944 that a twentieth century miracle came to the Indiana State Prison--Alcoholics Anonymous. Our group, one of the three oldest prison groups, was inaugurated sixteen years ago, about the time that Warden Clinton Duffy of San Quentin, California, and Warden Joe E. Ragen, of Illinois State Prison, offered AA to the inmates of their respective institutions. The story of our group is filled with tears and laughter, heartbreaks and happiness. . . . If you will double and triple the obstacles faced under free world conditions, you will realize what we were up against. Prison environments, as well as some prison officials, do not readily accept the development of new reforms or ideas. When I first talked of introducing AA inside the prison many skeptics argued that it was a useless fad. But today my original conviction of the value of AA in prisons is revealed as correct. For we find that the man who takes a sincere part in our Bar-Less Fellowship Group is more than two times as likely to make a successful parole as the man who has disregarded the program.

. . . There is no question but what the AA program is a source of strength and courage to the prisoner having a drinking problem and wanting to do something about it.

He finds that the program emphasizes today as the only day that matters. . . . that any man can live decently and honestly, in prison or palace, in Christian charity, and do the things for one day that would appall him if he thought he had to keep them up for the rest of his life. This makes sense to the inmate and this he can understand, this "one day business." Too often he reckons his penal servitude in terms of the days of dogged, daily prison routine ahead, instead of projecting his thoughts and plans to the years involved in his prison sentence. He lives these days, one at a time, in somewhat of a mental blackout, not wanting to think of his tomorrows; because of this feeling some prisoners tend to feel that they are without hope or promise for the future. The AA principle of members helping each other tends to dispel this dread, for the outside AAs in their attendance at our meetings offer the inmate member a human understanding, a companionship and acceptance by free society that he had long forgotten.

These visits instill hope, faith, confidence, and a definite promise in the inmate for his future well-being and happiness upon release. It is then that we see the inmate AA doing for himself what we have not been able to do for him: we see him learning of guilts the law never knows of, for deeds he has never done; and so we understand why he has been unable to fit into the community life. We see inmate AAs--by their very examples of living the AA way of life--contributing much to the general welfare and morale of the entire inmate body. We see the actual proof in the inmate himself as he goes about his daily life and work in the shop and assignment. Rarely does an inmate AA appear before the prison disciplinary board, and then it is generally of small consequence and he is dismissed with a mild reprimand.

Yes, we have learned much from the inmate AA. If you could see the effort it is for these men to bring into the open those things necessary to taking inventory, you would also realize that they are beginning to understand themselves. And by understanding themselves they gain insight, and insight flowers into judgment. It is at this point that their attitude and outlook gradually begins to change. To behold the birth of understanding in a man's mind is to witness a hallowed, spiritual experience. . . . you watch it as it unfolds in the daily lives of these men and you feel the nearness of a Divine Presence.

A question frequently asked of me is, "Does the individual improvement made by the inmate while he is behind the walls stick when he returns to free world society?" I can best answer by letting you be the judge as I read a letter selected from a personal file, written by a former inmate AA now living in the free world.

Meet Fred. He had an imposing record in the F.B.I. files covering many pages when he came to the Indiana State Prison. In a single year he had served five sentences in a Detroit Workhouse, three nine-day sentences and two sixty-day sentences, and his record also listed for the same year several suspended sentences, one probation, and numerous "Golden Rule" releases. His arrest record looked like a railroad timetable. However, he was released on parole, only to be returned in a short time for parole violation because of alcohol. The second time he came back he arrived about the time AA did. He was paroled again, and here are a few excerpts from a letter that we received from him:

"When you stop to think about it, Warden, the fact that I am still out and on the bricks today, no matter by what means, is a miracle. I'm not a garden variety of drunk--nowhere in the prison record was there one for sheer drunkenness to compare to mine. The record was so bad that the Deputy Warden called me in his office on the way out to tell me I wouldn't make it. He was right--I couldn't have made it alone. So I guess when all is said and done I don't need to be a golden-voiced orator, for with a past like mine, my walking around free and sober should be proof enough that AA does work in hopeless cases.

"It is a good feeling for me to go home now and know that the police are not going to lean on the place at any moment. I know what I did last night because I was sober. Seven and a half years ago, before finding AA, I couldn't have been so sure."

. . . Fred now has a lovely wife and two wonderful children and a fine job. He writes frequently of the great happiness in living which he found through AA, and, what is more important, he has not been arrested once since his release in 1950. Does it stick?

. . . Yes, the alumni of Indiana State Prison Bar-Less AA Fellowship are becoming an illustrious and imposing group, with a wonderful record of individual accomplishment and achievement and an enviable record of reclamation of wrecked human life. . . .

I would like to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to you, and to all the AAs in the free world who have helped in our work with the AA prison groups. I am sure I express the appreciation and the thanks of many prison administrators throughout the country for the fine services which you have so unselfishly rendered so that inmates in AA and through AA may see a new day.

You men know all the pitfalls of alcoholism and all the answers; you make our prison groups savor of authenticity. And I can truthfully tell you now that had it not been for the regular help and understanding given by our AA friends outside, the Indiana State Prison AA groups would most assuredly have failed; and by the same token, if it had not been for the persistence of our group of alcoholic inmates, who realized their serious problem and their need for help, we could never have continued. But these men knew they had reached the end of the road. . . they knew they could not help themselves and that they needed the help of others and a Power greater than themselves. They grasped AA as a drowning man would clutch a straw, and they hung on tight. Many of you AAs say solemnly that the program of carrying hope and help through barred windows comes of an old AA recipe for successful accomplishment: man hours of persistence. And they say that each meeting with our inmate AA reminds them of an old familiar motto. You can see it around any AA meeting room--it reads: ". . . But for the grace of God."

You men who come from the outside provide another service that is again part of the AA program and important to the inmate. It is heart-warming indeed--for those of us who have

watched the prison AA program unfold--to see men leave the prison to face the world alone and find unexpected friendship and understanding waiting for them almost at the very prison gate.

The book of life crowds many events into the pages between life and death. Among these, we who are connected with penology believe that for sheer emotional drama the story of a man leaving prison ranks high. To the prisoner walking out of the gate into the free world, happiness stems not only from the exhilarating sense of freedom, but also from the opportunity to share that freedom with his loved ones, those from whom he has been separated for so long. When the gates shut behind him and he can again take those loved ones into his arms, freedom becomes a tangible reality. But the man who walks out into the world again, without the welcome of family or friends or loved ones, has no one thing to prove his liberty to him. There is nothing to which he can hold and say, "This is freedom." And perhaps in the bewildered, lost hours that follow, while he searches for the tangibility, he may again wander off on the wrong road.

It is true that most men who fail on parole do so within the first few months, an indication that here is a link which must be strengthened. The ties with the outside AAs are constructive and can do much to strengthen this link and that is the one reason why I look upon AA as a valuable ally. To that end we are now doing our utmost to create a fellowship of understanding on the part of all outside AA groups.

In closing, I would like to comment on the fact that not so long ago a prison was known as a rough, tough hell-hole and many inmates did their time the hard way. When the prison gates shut behind them as they entered, the world stopped and stood still while they lived in a past of bitter yesterdays.

I have seen them congregate in the yard and argue their cases, complaining of the bad breaks and misfortunes which befell them. They blamed everybody but themselves for the fact that they were in prison. They dreamed of the day when the gates would open and they could get even or catch up. A fair description of those days written by an inmate philosopher went something like this: "Within these walls the days unwind and roll one into another, like drab ribbon. . .each one as colorless as the day before and the day to come. There are no yesterdays worth remembering, no todays worth living, no tomorrows worth anticipating."

I wish the man who wrote those lines could visit--not only the Indiana State Prison--but all prisons today. Among the many thousands of inmates he would see hundreds of faces of inmate members of AA which mirror hope and confidence for the future.

For myself, I too have benefited from the Alcoholics Anonymous program and I am grateful for the opportunity to have contributed a very small portion to its wonderful and inspiring work in helping alcoholic prisoners to recovery. As long as I am warden, and just so long as one alcoholic prisoner is benefiting through the program, we will have an Alcoholics Anonymous group in the Indiana State Prison.

Alfred E. Dowd, Warden
Michigan City, Indiana