

A. A.'s Pioneer Program & the Practice of Quiet Time. Why early A. A. recovery rates far exceeded those of today *Father Bill W.*



In Step Eleven, we're directed "to improve our conscious contact with God" through the daily practice of prayer and meditation. I'm sad to say that for the first 20 years in my recovery the real meaning of the words "conscious contact" seemed to elude me. Like many recovering addicts, I'd start my day with a brief prayer asking God to keep me clean and sober and reading a short passage from a favorite meditation book; but experiencing a genuine "conscious contact" with God wasn't any known part of my program at all.

But then one day, I hit an emotional wall. I didn't relapse, but deep inside I felt acutely the emptiness I'd been trying my best to cover over and ignore. I knew I needed something more in my relationship with God than I'd experienced up till then. Ninety meetings in 90 days or one more journey through the 12-Steps wasn't likely to bring me what I craved. I needed to experience more intimately the Great Reality that the Big Book promised was alive and living deep within me. Even though I was sober, I wasn't in relationship with God as I might be with a real friend. But, once again, the gift of desperation re-appeared in my life and I was willing to travel still farther down the "Road of Happy Destiny."

It was then that I was guided to the late Earl Husband. Earl was an A. A. archivist in Oklahoma City who opened a spiritual door for me and invited me to come step inside. He introduced me to the beliefs and practices of the Oxford Group. I came away from our first meeting with a glimpse into a program that was similar yet very different from the one I had known in A.A. It was the program worked by the early A.A. Pioneers during the years 1935 to 1939 – the years before the Big Book appeared. During those formative years, there were no 12 steps and there was no Alcoholics Anonymous. But there was something powerful enough to keep alcoholics sober with recovery rates far exceeding those we see today.

A. A.'s Pioneers had all gotten sober in the Oxford Group. The Group called themselves "A First Century Christian Fellowship." They set out to build a fellowship based not on religious doctrine and dogmas that can often divide, but on a felt experience of God's presence that can't help but unite. Oxford Group members referred to themselves as "Soul Surgeons" and "Life Changers." But the change they sought to bring about in the world could only begin by changing one person at a time – and that change had to begin deep within them. In the spiritual laboratory of a person's own life, each new man or woman was challenged to engage in a simple but costly experiment. They said, "Either God is or He isn't. Either God's everything or He's nothing." To begin the experiment, all anyone needed to do was acknowledge even the possibility of God's existence and that, if He existed, God could solve whatever problem the person might have (Step 2). Then they were to invite Him to come into their lives and do for them what they could not do for themselves. (Step 3)

What became our Step Three was originally a one-time commitment inviting God (if He existed) to come into one's life. This was usually performed in the presence of another committed individual and done on one's knees. They then continued in their experiment by attempting to live a life grounded in absolute honesty, purity, unselfishness and love (Steps 6&7). These were the Four Absolutes that lay at the heart of the Oxford Group program and they can still be found today in many of the 12 Steps groups around Akron and Cleveland where A.A. began. Then, with the help of another surrendered member of the Group, they searched their lives (Step 4) and shared all the dark places they found inside (Step 5). Then came amends to the people they had harmed, much as we do today (Steps 8 & 9).

Finally, but perhaps most importantly, they practiced a daily Quiet Time. They believed that anyone sincerely seeking to know and serve God would begin to hear His still, small Voice and would be guided onto the particular life-path that God wanted them to journey (Steps 10-11, 12). Dr. Bob and his little band of drunks in Akron reduced this formula to:

Trust God / (1,2,3), Clean House / (4,5,6,7,8,9), Help Others / (10,11 & 12)

They had no steps in those early years, but they had found a formula that worked miracles!

As I learned more about the origins of A.A., suddenly the years 1935 through 1939 started to come alive for me. I was beginning to experience the Power hidden within the Steps in a wholly new way. Those years were the time when alcoholics were recovering without the benefit of the 12 Steps (because they'd yet to be written) but they were recovering with the benefit of a direct and felt experience of the power and presence of God experienced in their consciousness. That Pioneer Program produced astounding success ratios among alcoholics. (They recorded a 75% recovery rate with half their members finding immediate sobriety and another 25% achieving it after a convincing, but painful, relapse. In Cleveland, the reported recovery rate was higher still.) Interestingly, the recovery rates during this same period for New York City were not nearly so high. (Perhaps it's because the New York group recovery formula wasn't Trust God, Clean House, and Help Others; instead, it was Don't Drink and Go to Meetings!)

As I read more and more about the Oxford Group and about early A. A. Pioneer practices, I was struck by how critical the conscious contact idea was in bringing about the spiritual awakening that every “real alcoholic/addict” so desperately needs to stay clean and sober. Receiving direct guidance from God through the practice of Quiet Time formed the heart of Oxford Group practices and it was at the heart of the Pioneer’s Program as well. As Dr. Bob and the Good Oldtimers points out: “The A.A. members of that time did not consider meetings necessary to maintain sobriety. They were simply desirable. Morning devotion and quiet time, however, were musts.” (Please don’t read this as saying “meetings aren’t important” – it’s saying that meetings are important - but meetings alone won’t bring about the in-depth, psychic change that conscious contact with God both can and will.)

During the second 20 years of my recovery, I’ve done my best to learn more about these early 11th Step practices and put them to work, however falteringly, in my life. The daily practice of Quiet Time has changed my life and I’ve watched it do the same for countless other men and women as well. Maybe Quiet Time is part of God’s plan for your life as well. I invite you to try the great experiment and see. More may be revealed!

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