

"A MAN OF THIRTY", PAGE 32 IN THE BIG BOOK

One of the most intriguing coincidences in AA history--although it's never mentioned - is that Bill and Lois Wilson attended Calvary Church Oxford Group meetings while a recovering alcoholic named Richard Peabody was treating clients at his home less than a block away, at 24 Gramercy Park.

This was an important New York City connection for early AA understanding, but it actually had a Boston beginning under religious auspices. Peabody, who died in 1936, is best remembered today for his book, "The Common Sense of Drinking", which included important articles printed in medical journals in 1930 and 1931. Though he was a non-professional who came to be known as a "lay therapist," Peabody helped educate his generation of medical doctors about the hopelessness of the alcoholic's condition. He also won a very modest acceptance of lay therapists as co-workers with psychiatrists in treating alcoholics. He trained other recovering alcoholics to carry on the same work, and one of his best-known protégés was lay therapist Francis T. Chambers Jr., who worked in Philadelphia with Dr. E. A. Strecker.

Peabody's contribution to AA has to be inferred from his writings and the coincidental events that accompanied his work. But since "The Common Sense of Drinking" preceded the AA Big Book by some years and was one of the most highly regarded early books about alcoholism, it's believed that Bill Wilson consulted it as he set about writing his own material. It is startling, for example, to find in Peabody's writings some of the phrases and ideas that have become part of AA. "Halfway measures are of no avail," Peabody wrote, in discussing what the alcoholic must do to recover. Did Bill Wilson use this same idea when he said, "Half measures availed us nothing" in the famous Chapter passage that now serves as an introduction to AA meetings?

Peabody also put forth the idea that complete surrender had to precede getting sober: "The surrender to the fact that alcohol can no longer be indulged in without bringing disastrous results is of such importance that it requires extremely thoughtful consideration" (p.74). He deployed the "going-on-the-wagon point of view" as only a stopgap measure and referred to failed attempts to teach alcoholics "to drink like gentlemen" (p.81). He emphasized the need for honesty. "Once the alcoholic takes up treatment," he wrote, "he must be absolutely honest in giving an account of his thoughts and actions, and he must take great precautions against lying ingeniously (rationalizing) to himself." Quoting another source, Peabody affirmed that frankness and honesty were a first principle of mental hygiene (p.97).

Peabody also briefly mentioned (p.123) an unknown man who gave up drinking until he had made his fortune five years later. Resuming "moderate" drinking, he was soon back in his alcoholic difficulties, losing his money in two or three years and dying of alcoholism a few years after that. This anecdotal account may have been the germ idea for the Big Book story (PP.32-33) about the "man of thirty" who gave up drinking until successful retirement at fifty-five, and then picked up the bottle again, with disastrous results.

According to a talk Lee C. of California gave at the 25th Annual San Fernando Valley Convention this year, this story was dated by Bill from the chapter "First Steps" in Richard Peabody's "The Common Sense of Drinking."