

Bill Wilson's Vision of the Light at Towns Hospital

December 14, 1934

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Bill W. was admitted to Towns Hospital once in the autumn of 1933, and three more times in 1934 (around July probably, and then on September 17 and December 11).¹ It was most likely during the first 1934 stay that Bill W. met Dr. William Duncan Silkworth for the first time. As Bill describes this in the Big Book (on page 7):

I was placed in a nationally-known hospital for the mental and physical rehabilitation of alcoholics. Under the so-called belladonna treatment my brain cleared Best of all, I met a kind doctor who explained that though certainly selfish and foolish, I had been seriously ill, bodily and mentally.

Bill Wilson employed an odd phrase here: “the so-called belladonna treatment.” Why did he use the word “so-called”? Was it because even though ordinary people in New York still referred colloquially to “taking the belladonna treatment at Towns,” patients were no longer necessarily being given belladonna? Or was it because even if they were, they were not given very much belladonna, and only for as long as they seemed on the verge of going into delirium tremens?

The reader needs to be strongly warned that a good many of the statements in A.A. histories about the medical treatment which Bill W. was given when he was admitted to the hospital are still based on what is known about the bizarre early theories held by Charles B. Towns, the man who had founded the hospital in 1901, along with journal articles written by Dr. Alexander Lambert in 1909 and 1912,² a physician whom Towns brought in to give medical credence to his strange ideas. The original Towns-Lambert treatment was quite appalling: every hour, day and night, for fifty hours (that is, for a little over two days) the patient was given a mixture of belladonna, henbane, and prickly ash. Every twelve hours, the patient was given carthartics (medicines that accelerate defecation), and after abundant stools were being produced, castor oil was administered to completely clean out the intestinal tract. The doctor gave the patient very small amounts of the belladonna mixture until the first symptoms of belladonna poisoning began to appear, that is, “when the face becomes flushed, the throat dry, and the pupils of the eye dilated.” The doctor then stopped the belladonna until the symptoms had disappeared, then began giving the belladonna again until the symptoms reappeared, in an endless cycle through the first fifty hours. It was quite literally a witches brew, because belladonna and henbane had been used for centuries by witches, sorcerers, and shamans to produce scary drug-induced mental states.³

But this was 1934, a whole generation later. Towns’ theories had now fallen out of popularity, Lambert had broken his association with Towns, and a totally new figure, Dr. William Duncan Silkworth, was now the hospital’s medical director. Towns had insisted vociferously that the medical doctors were wrong, and that alcoholism was not a disease. Silkworth on the other hand insisted that alcoholism was an illness, “an obsession of the mind that condemns one to drink and an allergy of the body that condemns one to die,” and he had devised an entirely different method of treating incoming patients, which he described in 1937.

The first phase of the Silkworth treatment was as follows, and even this was used only for those who were at an acute crisis stage

where delirium tremens was imminent, and was used only for as long as long as the patient seemed to still be in danger:⁴

1. About an ounce of alcohol every four hours, with an occasional ounce in between if symptoms are growing worse.
2. “To relieve the pressure in the brain and spinal cord (unless spinal puncture is contemplated), dehydration must be begun at once” by using a cathartic (a substance that accelerates defecation) and a purgative (a laxative to loosen the stool and ease defecation). If there is enlargement of the liver, high colonic irrigations of warm saline should be used instead. Dehydration is continued for from three to four days.
3. Sleep must be induced. Morphine should be avoided if at all possible. And what must be especially avoided is a combination of alcohol and sedative which results in a state of mental confusion leading to hallucinosis. Sedatives should be “given in moderation ... not enough to cause a sudden ‘knock-out.’”
4. “On about the fourth day the alcohol can be entirely withdrawn, as by this time the crisis has been avoided or safely passed through and, hence, the patient is in the second phase of the treatment.”

Silkworth did not say what kind of sedatives he used, except to note that he almost never used morphine, and that he administered only the minimum amount necessarily to calm the patient down and make the patient drowsy so he could gently drift off to sleep. You were not trying to knock the patient out, he warned, and you wanted to avoid anything that would produce mental confusion or hallucinations.

In my own reading of the literature from that period, the commonest sedatives used to calm down alcoholics were paraldehyde, barbiturates (colloquially called goofballs), bromides, chloral hydrate (colloquially called a Mickey or Mickey Finn), and codeine. Belladonna was normally spoken of as a “sedative” only in

certain specialized cases (such as whooping cough and Parkinson's disease). Nevertheless, at Knickerbocker Hospital in New York City (where Dr. Silkworth was also involved), even as late as 1952, we read of alcoholics who showed signs of going into delirium tremens being given "bromides and belladonna for [their] jagged nerves."⁵

But even if Dr. Silkworth was still giving some of his patients belladonna (those who showed symptoms of going into violent delirium tremens) the dosage could not have been very high. Belladonna was, quite literally, a standard ingredient in witch's brews, and was not something that you gave people to make them gently and pleasantly drowsy, so they could drift off to sleep. Giving people belladonna could sometimes knock them out for a while, but the delirium it produced was even more apt to make them disruptive and uncontrollable. They would often compulsively repeat bizarre actions, and frequently could not even be made to sit still. This was what Dr. Silkworth was trying to prevent.

The object, as Silkworth explained in his 1937 article, was to *normalize* the alcoholics' mind and mood, so you could then start to talk sense to them, and attempt to get them to make a rational decision (with full intellectual commitment) to stay away from alcohol permanently from that point on. Drug-crazed patients, hallucinating and imagining things, swearing mighty oaths that they were never going to drink again just to impress the doctor with how "sincere" they were, in Dr. Silkworth's experience, just went back to drinking again the moment they left the hospital. Dr. Silkworth knew all these things. He wasn't some Charles B. Towns character with a quack "cure" for alcoholism which he was peddling.

At any rate, on December 11, 1934, Bill W. went to Towns Hospital for the fourth and last time. As he says in the Big Book, "treatment seemed wise, for I showed signs of delirium tremens."⁶ But his condition was apparently not all that serious, because once he had been checked into the hospital, Dr. Silkworth seems to have done little more than give him enough of some sort of sedative to make him drowsy. As Bill reported later, the diagnosis was that "I was not in too awful a condition. In three or four days I was free of

what little sedative they gave me, but I was very depressed.”⁷ This was from Bill W.’s own account of what happened, as given by him in 1955, which has to serve as the standard for judging later secondary accounts.

Was he then given belladonna? As we have seen, he may have been, or he may not have been. We just do not know for sure. But if he was given belladonna, it would not have been very much, because Dr. Silkworth (as opposed to Charles Towns and Dr. Alexander Lambert a generation earlier) was simply trying to relax and calm his patients.

But suppose belladonna was administered to Bill W? The next major confusion in the modern literature on his Vision of Light arises from the fact that belladonna is listed in medical sources as a “hallucinogen.” People who know very little about the pharmacology and symptomatology of mood-altering drugs do not realize that what are called hallucinogenic drugs fall into three quite different categories, and that belladonna and henbane do not give you joy-filled visions of glorious divine light that leave you feeling at peace with yourself and the world:

1. *Dissociatives* are one class of hallucinogens which produce a feeling of being unreal or totally disconnected from oneself, or a kind of derealization in which the outside world seems completely unreal. This is not a pleasant or life-affirming experience, but is extremely unnerving and disturbing to the person undergoing it.

2. *Psychedelics* have a very different effect. These drugs include LSD, psilocybin from magic mushrooms, and mescaline from peyote buds. At low doses, the effects can be similar to those produced by meditation and trance states. At higher doses, the drug takers can experience the warping and distorting of shapes and surfaces, and strange alterations in color. Some people see repetitive geometric shapes. Some people may experience what they believe to be higher spatial-temporal dimensions. People who take psychedelics claim on some occasions that the drug put them in contact with God,

the Infinite, or some other kind of divine realm, and that it was a profound and inspiring religious experience.

If Bill Wilson had been given a psychedelic at Towns Hospital in December 1934, it is possible that his Vision of Light could have been drug-induced. But Sandoz Laboratories did not start producing LSD as a psychiatric drug until thirteen years later (in 1947) and Bill W. himself did not take LSD until August 29, 1956.

3. *Deliriants* are not at all like psychedelics; they produce a state of delirium. Deliriants include belladonna (deadly nightshade), Hyoscyamus niger (henbane), and Datura stramonium (Jimson weed), which contain the alkaloids atropine, scopolamine, and hyoscyamine.

In the case of the deliriants, the drug takers fall into a stupor, or a state of complete mental confusion. They may be unable to recognize their own image in a mirror. They may start mechanically taking their clothes off, or plucking at themselves. Sometimes they hold long conversations with completely imaginary people. Some of the effects can be terrifying and extremely unpleasant. People who have taken drugs in this category sometimes describe the experience as being like going insane—going totally mad—in a very bad and unpleasant way. Governments do not pass laws against people taking deliriants, because it is unnecessary. The effects are so unpleasant that no one would use any of these drugs repeatedly for recreational purposes.

There were also Native American shamans who swallowed large amounts of raw tobacco to produce the same kind of effects. Nicotine, at high enough dosages, is also a deliriant. But again, getting sick on tobacco does not cause people to experience visions of standing on mighty mountain tops surrounded by glorious light, nor do they relax into a peaceful and satisfied state of mind after the experience is over! In shamanism, things like this were done, not to produce pleasant contact with the divine world, but as unpleasant initiation rituals, and/or to render new disciples frightened,

obedient, and pliable. It should also be remembered that in popular myth, you turn people into zombies by giving them datura (which contains the same psychoactive drugs as belladonna): people who have taken delirants are left totally psychologically wasted by the experience.

So what happened to Bill W. on December 14, 1934 was as unexpected to Dr. Silkworth as it was to Bill. If Bill had been given belladonna and then had been psychologically turned into a numb and stumbling zombie, Dr. Silkworth would have said, “Oops, I gave him a bit too much of the belladonna, all I wanted to do was to stop him shaking so much.” But that was not what happened at all.

The first time Bill described this Vision of Light in any detail was while talking to the AA International Convention in St. Louis in 1955, so we will use this for our basic statement of what happened. “In three or four days I was free of what little sedative they gave me, but I was very depressed.” After a brief visit from Ebby, Bill said that

My depression deepened unbearably and finally it seemed to me as though I were at the bottom of the pit All at once I found myself crying out, “If there is a God, let Him show Himself! I am ready to do anything, anything!”

Suddenly the room lit up with a great white light. I was caught up into an ecstasy which there are no words to describe. It seemed to me, in the mind’s eye, that I was on a mountain and that a wind not of air but of spirit was blowing. And then it burst upon me that I was a free man. Slowly the ecstasy subsided. I lay on the bed, but now for a time I was in another world, a new world of consciousness. All about me and through me there was a wonderful feeling of Presence, and I thought to myself, “So this is the God the preachers!” A great peace stole over me and I thought, “No matter how wrong things seem to be, they are still all right. Things are all right with God and His world.”⁸

There was another reference here to the book of Acts in the New Testament, not to the conversion of Paul in this case, but to the story of the first Pentecost in Acts 2:1-4. This was the occasion (in the New Testament story) on which the disciples were given the power and the mission to spread the message to people of all the languages of the world, and it was the occasion (in Bill W.'s story) on which he felt the sense of being sent by God to spread the healing message to alcoholics of all the languages of the world.

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues as of fire, distributed and resting on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.

Bill Wilson said in yet another account that he felt at “one with the universe.”⁹ And the account given in *Pass It On*, the 1984 biography of Bill W., is also useful to look at, because it gives a bit more detail about his mental state after the vision was over:¹⁰

“Savoring my new world, I remained in this state for a long time. I seemed to be possessed by the absolute, and the curious conviction deepened that no matter how wrong things seemed to be, there could be no question about the ultimate rightness of God's universe. For the first time, I felt that I really belonged. I thanked my God, who had given me a glimpse of His absolute self. Even though a pilgrim upon an uncertain highway, I need be concerned no more, for I had glimpsed the great beyond.”

Bill Wilson had just had his 39th birthday, and he still had half his life ahead of him. He always said that after that experience, he never again doubted the existence of God. He never took another drink.

What Bill Wilson experienced was a sense of the divine Presence even more intense than the one he had had in Winchester cathedral, when he had stood gazing at a bright beam of sunlight shining through the top of one of the stained glass windows. This time the light appeared to be supernatural and otherworldly. It was an incredible experience, but one which we read about numerous times in the history of spirituality. We hear about men and women having visions of the divine Light in the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox monasteries and convents of the middle ages, and also among the ancient pagan Neo-Platonic philosophers (who called it the Vision of the One).

Bill's paternal grandfather, William C. ("Willie") Wilson, had had a serious drinking problem. But he climbed to the top of Vermont's Mount Aeolus one Sunday morning, and while praying to God, "saw the light" in some sort of life-changing way. He walked the mile back to East Dorset, and

When he reached the East Dorset Congregational Church, which is across the street from the Wilson House, the Sunday service was in progress. Bill's grandfather stormed into the church and demanded that the minister get down from the pulpit. Then, taking his place, he proceeded to relate his experience to the shocked congregation. Wilson's grandfather never drank again. He was to live another eight years, sober.¹¹

In Bill Wilson's own native New England Puritan tradition, one can find the great authoritative statement on the nature of this vision in Jonathan Edwards' famous sermon on "A Divine and Supernatural Light, Immediately Imparted to the Soul by the Spirit of God."¹² Edwards observed that when the true divine light shone on the human soul, the impact was so enormous, that the human imagination might be overwhelmed with what seemed to be the sensation of a powerful physical light. But that part of the experience was purely imaginary:

This spiritual and divine light does not consist in any impression made upon the imagination. It is no impression upon the mind, as though one saw anything with the bodily eyes. It is no imagination or idea of an outward light or glory, or any beauty of form or countenance, or a visible luster or brightness of any object. The imagination may be strongly impressed with such things; but this is not spiritual light. Indeed when the mind has a lively discovery of spiritual things, and is greatly affected by the power of divine light, it may, and probably very commonly doth, much affect the imagination; so that impressions of an outward beauty or brightness may accompany those spiritual discoveries. But spiritual light is not that impression upon the imagination, but an exceedingly different thing.

I would prefer to say that the human mind, when powerfully contacted by the divine realm in this fashion, attempts to make better sense of the experience by “translating” it into physical images and the physical sounds of human words (or rushing wind or angelic singers or whatever). Most of the time, we apprehend these “translations” in the form of *internal* images seen in “the mind’s eye,” or *internal* sounds which are heard “kind of like a voice inside our heads” (as Henrietta Seiberling once described her sense of inner divine guidance). But sometimes the images and sounds are so vivid and overwhelming, that we seem to see and hear them *in the external world*, as Jonathan Edwards notes above.

The real divine and supernatural light which saves our souls and remakes our character, in its real essence, is nevertheless not seen in itself. Jonathan Edwards also says that it does not impart new information in the ordinary sense, or point out things in the Bible which we had never noticed before, or anything else of that sort. Instead it is a sense that suddenly comes upon us, that all the important things that good religious leaders had been trying to teach us all our lives, are not only absolutely true, but the most important things in the whole universe. Before we always ultimately brushed these things off. We might be emotionally titillated by them when

we heard a particularly moving preacher talk about them, but their importance never sunk home in such a way as to actually change our continuing long term behavior in the real world.

A true conversion, however, had to pass the “Jonathan Edwards test.” In the small New England communities where he preached his revivals, Edwards was able to observe all the details of how people who *claimed* to have been saved at his revivals were actually acting in everyday life. People who claimed to have found God, but who continued to be completely dominated by all their old anger, fear, resentment, arrogance, dishonesty, violence, and so on, were simply deluded.

A true sense of the divine and superlative excellency of the things of religion; a real sense of the excellency of God and Jesus Christ, and of the work of redemption, and the ways and works of God revealed in the gospel. There is a divine and superlative glory in these things; an excellency that is of a vastly higher kind, and more sublime nature, than in other things; a glory greatly distinguishing them from all that is earthly and temporal. He that is spiritually enlightened truly apprehends and sees it, or has a sense of it. He does not merely rationally believe that God is glorious, but he has a sense of the gloriousness of God in his heart. There is not only a rational belief that God is holy, and that holiness is a good thing, but there is a sense of the loveliness of God's holiness. There is not only a speculatively judging that God is gracious, but a sense how amiable God is on account of the beauty of this divine attribute.

What makes Jonathan Edwards' theory so important, is that first, he and John Wesley were the cofounders during the 1730's of the modern Protestant evangelical movement, along with the kind of frontier revivalism derived from it, which swept America in the nineteenth century.¹³ And second, he is the only American-born philosophical theologian whom we have had in this country so far, who can be placed in the company of the truly great Europeans. There is furthermore a direct line of development between Edwards'

understanding of preaching for conversion and the Oxford Group's idea of conversion as a "life-changing" experience, and from there to the early AA concept of total surrender to our higher power as the only way to produce a true psychic change.

The Vision of Light which Bill W. experienced in Towns Hospital on December 14, 1934 passed the "Jonathan Edwards test." Bill Wilson not only never drank again, he made a decision to spend the rest of his life helping other alcoholics, and stuck by that decision to his life's end. At one level, there was nothing new that he learned in that experience. At some level, he had known everything he really needed to know about spirituality since he was a small child, listening to the preacher's voice from outside the church, and *knowing at some level* that he really should start acting the way the preacher was telling him, but *not yet being deeply enough impressed by it* for it to actually have any major effect on his long-term continuing behavior in the world. Now in December 1934 he finally "saw the light" and realized that this was the most important thing in the world. The proof that his change of heart was genuine was that he changed his whole life, and that the change it produced was not temporary but permanent.

What is most important of all, however, is that Bill W.'s psychic change was based upon contact with something real and external, which he could only describe as the intuited Presence of something infinite and eternal, extending into a dimension totally outside our material world, but also permeating the entire cosmos with a light which illuminated everything which was good and beautiful. No matter how desperate our situation, when we let ourselves become fully aware of this divine Presence to a great enough degree, we would abruptly cease feeling overwhelmed by the fear of death, and would find ourselves given the power to face whatever we were called to do.

In Bill Wilson's case, this meant being given the power to stop drinking, and the resolution and force of character to found a great spiritual movement which was going to spread all over the world, bringing serenity, grace, and new life to this troubled planet.

NOTES

¹ Arthur S., *Narrative Timeline*; Kurtz, *Not-God* 15 and 310 n. 26.

² A. Lambert, "Care and Control of the Alcoholic," *Boston Med. Surg. J.* 166 (1912): 615-621 and A. Lambert, "The Obliteration of the Craving for Narcotics," *Journal of the American Medical Association* LIII, 13 (1909): 985-989—both as cited in Bill Pittman, *The Roots of Alcoholics Anonymous* (Center City, Minnesota: Hazelden, 1999; orig. pub. as *A.A.: The Way It Began* by Glen Abbey Books in 1988) 164-169.

³ From A. Lambert, "Care and Control of the Alcoholic," as cited in Pittman, *The Roots of Alcoholics Anonymous* 164.

⁴ William D. Silkworth, "Reclamation of the Alcoholic," *Medical Record* (April 21, 1937), available online at <http://www.aa-nia-dist11.org/Documents/silk.pdf>.

⁵ Anonymous, "I'm a Nurse in an Alcoholic Ward," *Saturday Evening Post* (Oct. 18, 1952), written by a nurse who worked in the AA ward at Knickerbocker Hospital in New York City. "We give them vitamins to re-establish nutritional balance, fruit juices to combat dehydration, and bromides and belladonna for jagged nerves."

⁶ *Alcoholics Anonymous* 13.

⁷ *AA Comes of Age* 62.

⁸ *AA Comes of Age* 62-63.

⁹ Bill W.'s 1958 talk to the New York City Medical Society, AA History Lovers message 6281.

¹⁰ *Pass It On* 121.

¹¹ Francis Hartigan, *Bill W.; A Biography of Alcoholics Anonymous Cofounder Bill Wilson*, 11.

¹² Jonathan Edwards, "A Divine and Supernatural Light, Immediately Imparted to the Soul by the Spirit of God," available online in the Christian Classics Ethereal Library, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/edwards/works2.iii.i.html>.

¹³ I trace all this out in detail in Glenn F. Chesnut, *Changed by Grace: V. C. Kitchen, the Oxford Group, and A.A.*, Hindsfoot Foundation Series on Spirituality and Theology (New York: iUniverse, September 2006).