

The Story Behind The Little Red Book

The Evolution of a Twelve Step Classic

Introduction: The Evolution of the Little Red Book

The Little Red Book, written by Ed Webster, was published in 1946 by Webster and his very close friend, Barry Collins. Initially it went by the title *An Interpretation of the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous* (this and the version that was eventually developed by Webster will hereafter be called the *Interpretation*). Thus it was one of a cast of the many educational tracts with the same title that preceded it and had been circulating within the A.A. communities throughout the country. Their purpose was to educate the increasingly large numbers of alcoholics seeking knowledge of and admission to the program outlined in the book *Alcoholics Anonymous*, or as it came to be known by its popular title, the Big Book.

What Dr. Bob and Bill W., the co-founders of A.A., had discovered needed to be passed on. For the first four years this was done by word of mouth, with “one alcoholic talking to another” about their own personal experience of recovery. Akron and New York were the principal centers from where the good news about recovery radiated outwards.

The essential elements of what brought about recovery which were first transmitted orally soon found a safe depository in a written tradition – the Big Book, published in 1939. Two years later a complimentary article by the popular journalist, Jack Alexander in the March issue of the *Saturday Evening Post* brought about an extraordinary number of inquiries about the program from all over the United States.

Soon the need for an instructional manual that would share and summarize in an abbreviated fashion the principles behind the 12 Steps program presented in the Big Book became clear to a number of the early members. One of the first of these was published by the New York Office in April, 1940 with the simple title AA. Ruth Hock the secretary at the New York office often sent a copy of this booklet to those inquiring about A.A. as she did to Pat Cronin, one of the most influential early members of AA in Minnesota, in August, 1940. It was intended for people who had little or no knowledge of the Big Book, could not afford one, or were intimidated by the sheer volume of material it contained.

The A.A. tract was composed of 6 articles that appeared in the Houston Press written by a newspaperman who had recently found his recovery in the Cleveland A.A. fellowship. These articles summarized the new program for alcoholics, and, in some respects, the tract was among the first of the many instructional guides that began to circulate throughout the Fellowship. Very early on Akron produced its own instructional manual. Cleveland, which separated itself from Akron in 1939, stands as an excellent model of the group’s consciousness of the need to separate newcomers into “beginners meetings” where they could become familiar with the basic principles of A.A. This was the expectation before attending the formal group meetings, a practice copied by the Nicollet Club, one of the earliest groups in Minneapolis, Minnesota and an important forum for Ed Webster’s development of the content for *The Little Red Book*.

What emerged as an accepted text adopted by groups throughout the United States, was a small generic manual that a version of the *Interpretation* used in Detroit and printed by the Washington, D.C. group. Usually all the steps were covered in four meetings with some minor variations as to the steps treated in each meeting.

A variant of this version of the *Interpretation* composed by Pat Cronin was the text in use at the Alano Club, another early AA group in Minneapolis when Ed Webster was selected as one of the instructors for the newcomers. It was also the tract upon which Webster would build his own manual that evolved at the Nicollet Club. Instead of covering all the Steps in four lessons, Webster had written a small book which together with an Introduction had 10 chapters, one for each of the steps except a chapter on Steps 6 and 7 and one on Steps 8 and 9. While the title was substantially the same as other texts already circulating throughout the country the text itself had been greatly expanded.

In a few years it became very popular throughout the United States and Canada. Webster’s version of the *Interpretation* which became *The Little Red Book* at the time of the 1949 printing, has a singular place in the early history of Alcoholics Anonymous. (1) Its purpose was to introduce the newcomer to the richness of a new life and personality change revealed by the study of the 12 Steps. In the tradition of the previous interpretations the language was clear and simple. Its core message, which attracted people from all over the world was this: Recovery from alcoholism means incorporating the spiritual principles contained in the 12 steps in one’s daily life, that is, restoring one’s relationships with our true selves,

with others and with the God of our understanding.

Over the course of the two decades that the book remained in control of Ed Webster he continued to make changes, some major and some minor, in many of the 21 printings, in order to clarify his thinking.

Initially, Webster's *Interpretation* found support with the two founders of A.A., Dr. Bob and Bill W. Dr. Bob read the original manuscript and endorsed it whole heartedly, encouraging people to buy it and personally sharing copies with friends. He insisted that copies be kept in the New York warehouse for purchase and distribution. Bill W. also signaled his positive regard for the book in his early correspondence with Webster. As the years wore on, however, Bill W proved to be less than enthusiastic about the book and he apparently became concerned that rather than being simply a locally disseminated tract about which the New York office had no opinion,, it was fast assuming the role of a "Text Book" used by many local chapters at home and abroad.

Bill W's letters clearly express the evolution of his thought from approval to concern, not about its contents but because of its widespread acceptance as a standard text not approved by the New York office. This popularity added weight to his support of the formation of the Conference on Approved Literature which would eventually determine the canon of books approved by the New York Office. One of these books, *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, was written by Bill and published in 1952 as AA's official interpretation of the 12 Steps. Fortunately *The Little Red Book* did not die at that point, but continued to attract many A.A. people as their own spiritual Magna Charta

The context for the development of *The Little Red Book* in Minneapolis allows us to examine in chapters one and two the major personalities in the Minneapolis AA circles—Barry Collins, Pat Cronin and Ed Webster—and the evolution of the Alano and Nicollet Clubs in the very early days of A.A. Underlying their differences was the question of who could become a member of A.A. Was the desire to stop drinking sufficient? The hard line that the Nicollet Club took regarding admission into A.A. has subtle undertones even in *The Little Red Book*.

The Little Red Book, in conjunction with parts of two other books by Ed Webster, *Stools and Bottles and Our Devilish Alcoholic Personalities*, provide clear insights into Webster's spirituality which is discussed in part 3. Taken together with his correspondence with Dr. Bob and to a lesser extent with Bill W., they speak to the simplicity of a spirituality based upon the 12 Steps. In particular with Steps 3 and 11, Webster seeks to reconcile the compelling dichotomy of the relationships between God's will and man's will.

Webster's spirituality can be clearly extracted from his writings, especially from *The Little Red Book*. It is what I often refer to as "relational" spirituality, that is, it is to be found in the ordered relationships that we have with our true selves, with others, and with the God of our understanding. Each of the Steps points to one of those relationships. With his continual reference to the alcoholic personality, Webster is pointing to the other person/self-residing inside the alcoholic which intends the individual no end of harm. Self-centered and disconnected from reality it is this self whose pernicious influence does everything in its power to destroy the loving relationships we have with others. Finally, it corrupts and corrodes whatever the nature of the relationship with one's High Power, the God of his/her understanding.

This alcoholic personality is the source of much mischief and misfortune. In contrast the discovery of one's real personality provides the lodestone that directs life into the re-discovery of those who wish to share our journey. Nurturing our real selves and cultivating those relationships intended to enrich our lives without the poison of alcohol puts us in a better position to explore our relationship with a God of our understanding.

One of the best descriptions of the A.A. fellowship, derived from its early history is that it is a non-professional, mutual help group of men and women organized for the purpose of assisting one another to lead sober and contented lives within the community and principles of Alcoholics Anonymous. People coming into the program needed to be taught the basic principles contained in the 12 steps. What evolved slowly in Minnesota (and elsewhere) were organized mutual help programs using the Fellowship as its basis, intended to supplement the educational elements of A.A. as passed on in the Big Book. This educational model would eventually become the motivation for the founding of the prototypes of treatment facilities using the 12 Steps as the basis for what became the Minnesota Model: Pioneer House, by Pat Cronin in 1948, and Hazelden Manor by Cronin's sponsee, Lynn Carroll, in 1949. Both Cronin and Carroll wanted simply to provide an environment for those who needed more time to immerse themselves in the study of the Big Book and the Steps and their practical application. Lectures on the 12 Steps and associated topics together with subsequent discussions were the heart of the program. They were taking the principles of mutual help and delivering them in a safe environment. Gradually the original 12 Step mutual help paradigm transitioned into professional treatment programs like the Hazelden-

Betty Ford Foundation with a multi-disciplinary staff that eventually included recovery from addiction to other drugs besides alcohol, as well as co-occurring mental health disorders as part of their integrated treatment programs. In tracing the history of *The Little Red Book* we are reminded of what it was like in the beginning of the A.A. movement - a simple and unvarnished approach to recovery based on the Twelve Step program documented in AA's Big Book.

The popularity of Webster's *Interpretation*, first published as a book in 1946, is an excellent barometer of how serious the early recovering community was about the message and simplicity of recovery. Almost half of Walker's book traces itself back to 1944-1945, talks that he gave to a variety of groups in the Boston area. They are great examples of the early and simple expectations of AA members, the importance of the Big Book and the program that it presented. The same can be said of the lectures on all the steps that Webster was giving at the Nicollet Group (1944 – 1946): Read the Big Book, practice these principles, attend meetings, and implement the 12th step through service to others. This is what *The Little Red Book* eventually encapsulated. This book has played a central role in distilling and disseminating the kernels of the spiritual principles contained in the Twelve Steps. In doing so, it brought an important measure of consistency and discipline to the educational role of the early AA fellowship. (G. Chesnut has provided the best review of the early years of *The Little Red Book*, 1946 to 1949 in his Essay on *The Little Red Book*, "A Comparison of the 1946 and 1949 editions of *The Little Red Book*, <http://hindsfoot.org/ed02.html>).

Chapter 4

Stage I: 1946 – 1949

G. Chesnut in his article "The First Edition of The Little Red Book," taps into many sources and covers this first stage of this development with his usual attention to detail. He leaves us with some thoughts as to why knowledge of this period is so important for the history of A.A. (1) He wrote: "We could describe The Little Red Book as the best compendium around of what Dr. Bob and his circle in the upper Midwest regarded as the most important things to teach newcomers."

He points out how the title by which the book is presently known evolved: "The early printings had a dark ruby red cover, so it came to be known affectionately by its users as 'The Little Red Book,' to distinguish it from the book *Alcoholics Anonymous*, which originally was called the "big red book" because of its red and yellow cover. The 1949 edition (printing) had the title '*The Little Red Book*,' the name which carried through to the present day."

The remainder of the article deals with the changes found in the Printings following the original 1946 edition: Two printings in 1947, a 4th printing in 1948 and the two versions of the 1949 Printing. The first version (1949), page 62 had an upside down text which was corrected by pasting a page over it. When the printing ran out a second 1949 printing was published with that page corrected. Chesnut believes that the 1949 edition "Should be taken as a kind of benchmark version for many purposes since this was the last edition where Dr. Bob had any input into the book."

What input Dr. Bob had in the printings subsequent to the original (first) one is not clear. However, the correspondence between Webster and Dr. Bob does make it clear that Webster was very mindful of letting Dr. Bob know the changes that were being introduced but it is not evident whether Webster had sent any proofs to Dr. Bob before the revised printings were published as he did with the first printing. Webster did however send copies of each new and revised printing. The correspondence between Webster and both Dr. Bob and Bill W which follows provides a description of the reasons for the changes that Webster was incorporating into his book. (2)

The Correspondence between Webster and Dr. Bob

The development of Webster's ideas, and indeed his spirituality, with which we shall deal in Part Three, as presented in the early printings of the *Interpretation* finds a valuable backdrop in his exchange of letters with Dr. Bob prior to the latter's death in 1950.

On the 3rd of November 1946 (three months after the publication of the first printing) Dr. Bob wrote to Ed Webster thanking him for the book which in his laconic style he found to be "quite alright."

Webster replied on the 13th of December 1946, noting that that day five years previous he entered Alcoholics Anonymous

and referred to it as a "Great Day." After relating what that day has meant for him he provided an important reason for writing the book. Presenting the 12 steps to newcomers had always been his attempt to pay back in small measure what AA had done for him and the appreciation of God's presence "was at the bottom of the 12 Step *Interpretation*. The purpose was long range sponsorship. It started in a small way with the boys in our group but has extended beyond that as a few other clubs seem to be using the little book as an outline for the study of the A.A. book. The demand is not great but the satisfaction is as I feel that others are getting a little help because of my co-operation with God, who saw fit to permit it." (3) The demand may not have been that great in the several months after the publication of the book but it had a phenomenal increase in sales in subsequent years.

In reply Dr. Bob wrote that he "enjoyed your little book very much & know that it will prove to be of a lot of help to many." (4)

In the few years prior to his death the correspondence between the two men shows that Dr. Bob became one of the strongest promoters of the book. Writing to Dr. Bob about the revisions in the second printing he thanked him for recommending the book for Mr. Ritchey of Fort Lauderdale, who placed an order for 50 books. Webster made certain that Dr. Bob had a generous supply of books for those to whom he wished to give the *Interpretation* .

Webster also mentioned the revisions in the second printing gave more complete coverage to the Program. Formerly he overlooked commenting on drugs, spiritual black outs, mental binges, mental blackouts, contemplated and attempted suicide, etc. These are included in the revised book as well as comments on serenity and a revision on the chapter of Fear, in Step Four. (5)

When Dr. Bob asked how much he owed for the revised copies he was informed there was no charge for them. They were sent to Dr. Bob as a more complete interpretation of the Program and were for his inspection and criticism. Any time Dr. Bob wanted more he only need ask. Once again Webster was grateful for the request from Fr. Lauderdale as a "certain number have to be sold to keep the thing going. We do not quite break even, but it is a form of sponsorship, and finance is not a consideration so long as we do not see too much red."