

Gays Can Stay Sober in AA
Story of the First Gay Meeting in 1949 in Boston, Mass.

Given at:

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My name is Ed and I am a grateful recovering Alcoholic. I want to set your mind at ease. When we were chosen to speak we were chosen in the order of age before beauty, so don't get any ideas that I'm conceited. What was it like in the old days? In the old days AA was no different than it is today. There were drunks, such as I was, such as we all were. And lo and behold, I was glad I had found someone, someplace I could turn to, because I woke up after a prolonged term of drinking in a hospital. At least they called it that then. And the name of that hospital was the LaSalle State Hospital for the Criminally Insane. That would say enough.

But I woke up in a padded cell secured to the floor with an open sewer at my head so I could wretch out my guts. And all these demons around. And I thought, my God, my God, why did they put me in this zoo? I'd never seen such animals before in my life. And they were real. I could feel them. I could see them.

And a woman came in accompanied by two gorillas (laughter). And lying on the floor I couldn't see her face. She was that big bosomed. (Laughter.) There's a country singer today who has nothing to brag about, believe me. (Laughter.) And young people today talk about a trip. Well, they rattled this can with a rubber tube and she said, well, shut the bastard up. And with that they inserted this tube in my rectum and poured down a dose of paraldehyde rectally. And you talk about a trip. You young people don't know what a trip is. It raised me ten feet off that floor--concrete and all.

But after 15 days in this padded cell, after getting rid of the DT's I realized I was in this hospital for the criminally insane, and I realized that I had broken the law. I was a common drunk. And according to the statutes of the state of Illinois at that time, being a common drunk I could be incarcerated for the rest of my life. I said how could this be, and they said the court said so.

I didn't go to AA. AA came to me. I was very grateful that they came to me, because I was a real con artist. And they said to me, do you want what we've got? And I said, of course I do. When can I get out? They said just take it easy. We'll work on it. And they got me out, and they took me to what was then my home group and which I consider my home group and still appear there on my anniversary date of November 4th, on occasion when time permits. And I got to that first meeting. There was another man from Wisconsin there. His wife was pushing him and pulling him up the stairs. And I started up the stairs, and started back down. There were two guys who came in in back of me. That was the longest damn stairway in the world. I couldn't get past them. I walked up them backwards--I didn't even see where the hell I was going.

Well I got in there, and here was this group of people and I saw these people who had come to visit me at the hospital, the criminally insane institution. And they dragged me and sat me down, and they started talking about drunks and sobriety. And I felt pretty good, and they mentioned God and gratitude. And I became frightened, and they hadn't even barely sat down and got to the Lord's Prayer. And I ran through a rainstorm, underneath the elevated across the street to a tavern. And it was pouring rain and I got there without having been hit by a drop of water. (Laughter.)

And I sat on that stool in absolute gratitude, and I drank myself into oblivion telling any and all who would listen what a bunch of crazy kooks were meeting upstairs. They were going to teach me how to be sober, and they were forcing God down my neck. And this was a no go.

That's only the first of my drunk-a-logs, and the last that I will relate to you. My gratitude was short lived. But there's an old saying in AA, after you attend that first meeting, and listen those first words, a seed is planted, and if we've done nothing else we've loused up your drinking for the rest of your life. And did they ever! Those dirty bastards!

I couldn't even get creamed drinking any more. And they even interfered with my cruising, because I was a homosexual. In those days, as it was explained in the Third Tradition, I was a queer. It's printed that way. Queer. There weren't such fancy names as gay and some of these neat sounding French terms.

But I didn't have anything to go to. I came back. And that year, ladies and gentlemen, long before she was born--it was 35 years ago, 1945. (Applause.) But I didn't do it straight and out. I did it the hard way, because I could find sobriety, but I couldn't find the serenity. And I couldn't reach out and relate to the people who could understand me as I wanted to be understood, who I could share my heartbreak with and my happiness, as more than just sobriety.

And I was transferred to Philadelphia with my job, and it entailed traveling up and down the entire East Coast. And a young man, who I was staying with who I met in Biloxi, Mississippi many years before, was living with me, and we were considered--whispered in those days--lovers. But he had a friend in Boston, and this friend had other friends. And we felt comfortable because they were in the Fellowship, too. Not this friend of mine who I was living with.

But several people up in Boston had the same problem that I had, and there was nothing much we could do about it except sit on Myrtle Street in the back of the State House in Boston and talk to each other about how nice it was to be sober, but wasn't it awful to be queer in staid, old Boston. And the year was 1949.

And I had seen Bill Wilson in a brown-bagger lunch, in which the office workers used to run in, chomp on their sandwiches and listen intently to what sobriety was all about.

And in sort of a round-up, a workshop in those days, these gentlemen from Boston, two others--Skip and Buzz were their names--Clyde sitting in the background, he was a shy sort of thing--and they said, why don't you, seeing as how you know who Bill Wilson is and you have talked to him, why don't you go up and ask him whether we can have a special group, just for ourselves, our kind.

And I was hesitant, because I wasn't completely honest, and I didn't know how to be completely honest about a Fellowship that only referred to the pure alcoholics in the beginning, but who was trying to reach out. And in that time, in 1949, there were less than 100,000 recovering alcoholics in the United States. And that's what we were. So we argued amongst ourselves what we should do. And they said, well, let's draw straws. And I drew the first one, and they said, "that's the shortest, that's the shortest, you've got to go!"

And I'm going to tell you something--I'm shaking up here at this stand right now. So I didn't--you never saw anything like that. It was midway between now and the DTs at LaSalle State Hospital. And I approached the great man, and I said, "Bill, my name is Ed. And we have a problem. And we would like to start a specialty group or something special in Boston in AA." I could see by the pained expression on his face that he been beleaguered by many specialty things, and he had a lot of things on his mind. And he said, "What kind of a specialty group?" I don't know how I got that long word, "homosexual", out. He said, "Just a minute. Let's not go any further," he said. "Are these people alcoholics?" And I said, "Yes they are." He said, "Whatever you do to discuss your problem, and to stay sober, you will go to any length to achieve sobriety. Please do so." So in 1949--(applause)--queer AA came to Boston.

The group per se was probably doomed from the very beginning, because right across from this little Father, Son, Holy Ghost House in Boston was this fag hotel. Men only it said. Well, we met there, and there was a lot of distractions, as you might well imagine. But it did survive for the years that I knew of that I was on the East Coast. But that was nuclei, that was the seed that was planted on the East Coast as best I know. And the man that Nancy was talking about, when in year 2 of AA came with his special problem to the Akron group, it is because of his efforts, and his honesty and his sincerity and his sense of loving and sharing and caring, and his desire to go to any length to achieve and maintain his sobriety that you and I are sitting in this room today, in a special Fellowship, a special Fellowship to enjoy the cream of what we have, the joy of living. We know serenity, we know peace. We can stand up to the rednecks, we can stand up to the unbelievers, because we have in our own hearts a loving God that accepts us and understands him. Him that stands amongst us and is honest. And the direction of our progress in this program is a daily thing. And it is built upon a foundation of truth and honesty and loving and sharing and caring. And I swear unto you that with every sober breath that I can take in any 24 hour period I am glad that I can say to the other members, to a million and a half members, of this growing Fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous, that I have a drinking problem. I do not have a sexual identity problem.

I am just as much a drunk as they are. And by the grace of God and this mighty, mighty wonderful loving and sharing and caring Fellowship I am sober and alive today at age 65. And I did it one day at a time with the help of all of you. They--well, it's because God is all part of us. If we live it and accept it honestly, and use it as a tool, such as the 12 Steps, as an additional force in our lives, we can go in a good, orderly direction. And you lead, and I'll be only too happy to follow. Thank you.

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