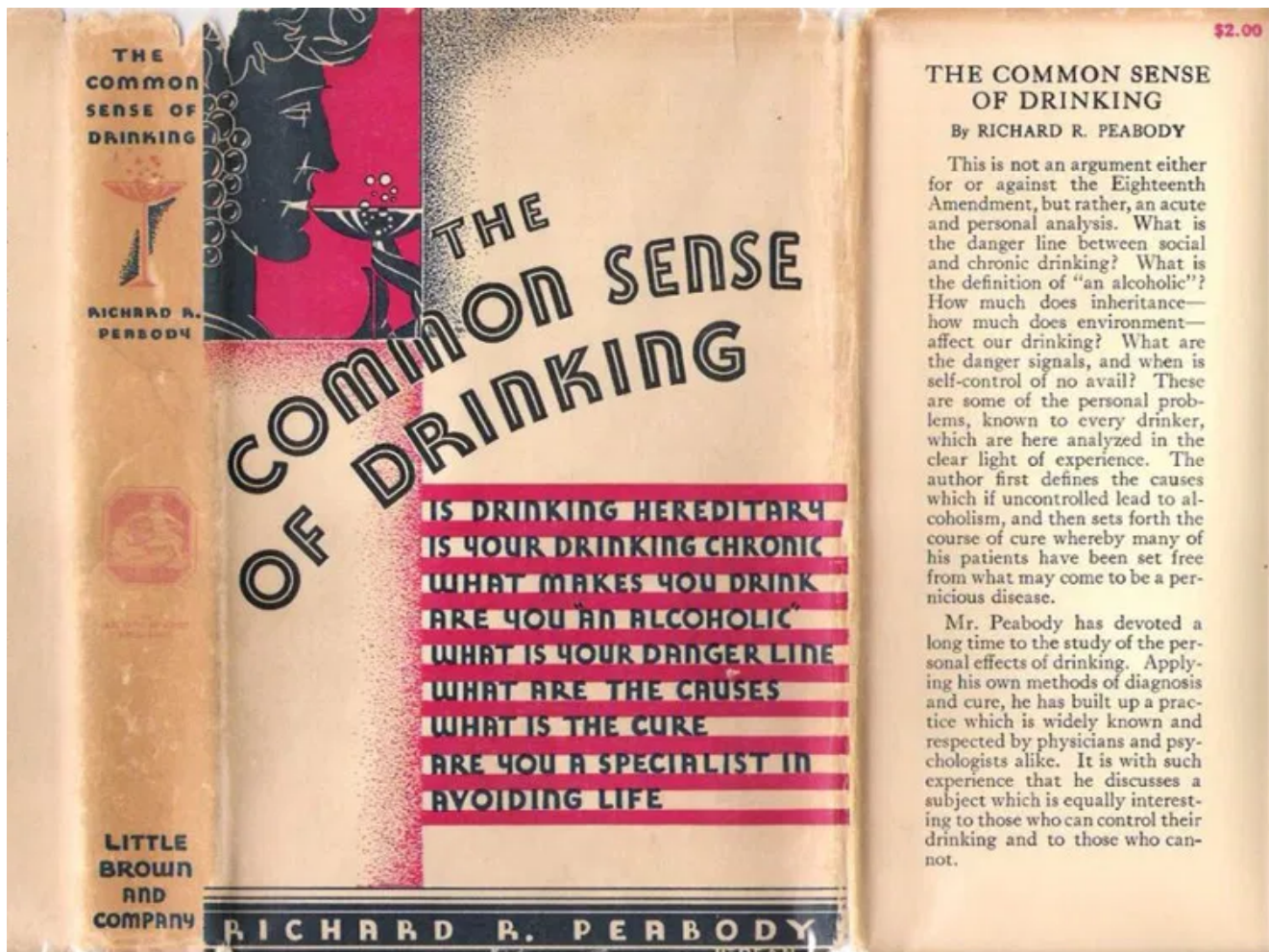


THE COMMON SENSE OF DRINKING | Richard R. Peabody (1931)

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By bob k

Alcoholics Anonymous was not the only therapy for alcoholics that flourished in its time. Other approaches to treating alcoholism, although they derived from sources very different from the influences that impinged on AA, used similar methods and even incorporated some of the same ideas that a forgetfulness of history leads later thinkers to associate with Alcoholics Anonymous. In particular, the approach of Richard R. Peabody...not only preceded Wilson's own sobriety, but well into the 1950s was accepted and endorsed by many doctors and clergy much more enthusiastically than was Alcoholics Anonymous.

—Not-God, Ernest Kurtz, P. 158

Richard Peabody's 1931 book on alcoholism treatment, *The Common Sense of Drinking*, reached a broad audience that included "several physicians interested in the new 'scientific approach'..." (K. McCarthy, Rutgers Center for Alcohol Studies, Silkworth.net) Bill Wilson's personal copy rests in the AA Archives, and contains this inscription, "Dr. Peabody was as far as is known the first authority to state 'once an alcoholic, always an alcoholic,' and he proved it by returning to drinking." The rumors of Peabody's return to drinking prior to his death, in 1936, supported AA's thinking that there is no "cure" for alcoholism.

Surprisingly, there is little other mention of Peabody to be found in AA's literature.

In relation to the Bill's 1937 employment offer from Charles Towns, there is a single brief mention of the Peabody precedent in working as a paid counselor. "Peabody, a recovered alcoholic himself, had recently died after a short but successful career as an independent lay therapist helping alcoholics on a fee basis." (Pass It On, P. 176)

Perhaps the Peabody influence went unacknowledged because his approach was secular, antithetical to AA's perceived need for pleas to the divine. He had "systematically eliminated from his terminology and concepts anything that hinted of the church and 'feather-decorated painted medicine men.'" (McCarthy) Nonetheless, there can be no doubt that many of the ideas found in *The Common Sense of Drinking* regarding the nature and treatment of the alcoholic condition, found their way into the thinking, and writing, of AA co-founder, Bill Wilson.

A portion of Chapter 5 of AA's big book has been read tens of millions of times at AA meetings. The phrase "**Half measures availed us nothing**" (P. 59) is embedded into members' minds at their earliest stages. Eight years before, Richard Peabody had written "A man must make up his mind to do everything in his power to co-operate in such work as there is to be done. **Halfway measures are of no avail.**" (Common Sense of Drinking, P. 85)

Peabody's influence on AA is beyond question.

"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...Richard Peabody was treating clients at his home less than a block away at 24 Gramercy Park... Peabody helped educate his generation of medical doctors about the hopelessness of the alcoholic's condition... He trained other alcoholics to carry on the same work." (New Wine – The Spiritual Roots of the Twelve Step Miracle, Mel B., P. 117)

Richard Rogers Peabody

Dick Peabody was born in 1892, into one of the elite families of Boston society. Great-great-grandfather Joseph was a Salem ship owner who amassed an enormous fortune by importing pepper from Sumatra and opium from Eastern Asia. At the time of his death in

1844, he was one of America's wealthiest men. Succeeding generations ranked with the Cabots and the Lodges among the region's most prominent families.

After attending Groton School, an exclusive academy for the progeny of the well-heeled, young Dick Peabody advanced to Harvard where his less-than-stellar performance was attributable, at least in part, to a burgeoning fondness for liquor. He failed to graduate. In 1915, he married fellow "blue-blood" Polly Jacobs, and started a shipping business. A booming economy at the time brought prosperity to many American entrepreneurs, but Peabody lost money.

In April of 1916, with his excessive drinking being scrutinized by his in-laws, the young man was prompted to flee to Mexico where he joined Boston's crack militia, and engaged in defending America against border raids led by Pancho Villa. By 1917, the young officer found himself in Plattsburgh, the very town where "war fever ran high" for an even younger officer, Bill Wilson. It is not unreasonable that the two men may have found themselves in each other's company at one of the soirees hosted by the local citizenry. They may even have raised glasses to wish each other good fortune.

Or, perhaps they met, and didn't get along.

Following Armistice, and some additional months of cavorting in the post-war party that was Paris, Dick Peabody brought home a full-blown and debilitating alcohol problem. His wife Polly, who in his absence had been involved in a long term, and less than secret affair, made efforts to rebuild her marriage. Unfortunately, she found her husband to be a well-educated, but undirected man, and a reluctant father. Large promise, and poor performance, perhaps.

For his own part, Peabody found domestic tranquility to be stultifying dull in comparison to his recent grand adventures. His alcoholism, which had earlier led to disinheritance, now brought divorce, depression, and institutionalization. The summer of 1922 found him committed to a sanitarium, and he subsequently sought sobriety with some desperation at the Emmanuel Church. There, some enlightened clerics were achieving some substantial victories against an historically tough opponent through the use of psychological techniques, blended with a surprisingly liberal spirituality.

One of their successes had been with Courtenay Baylor who, in 1912 or 1913, began working with them as, in all likelihood, America's first "lay therapist" in the field of alcoholism. To this point, psychiatry had not yet come to view alcoholism as something falling within its province. Baylor worked with Peabody, and later would have another patient who would play a role in the development of AA. The second client of note was "a certain American businessman," Rowland Hazard.

Following his own recovery, Peabody supplemented what he had learned from Baylor with the study of abnormal psychology, and developed his own system of re-education, incorporating modern psychological principles. He professionalized the lay therapist position

to the point of not telling clients his own alcoholic history, and he totally secularized the therapeutic process. Through the 1920's he made very nice living bringing healing to the sybaritic sons of wealthy families, all the while honing his techniques. In 1930, he wrote a book addressing the subject.

The Common Sense of Drinking

When Alcoholics Anonymous exploded into the American consciousness in the 1940s and 1950s, the public and professional perception of alcoholism and alcoholics came to be radically changed. The world was impressed with AA's new ideas on the subject matter, but many of these had appeared in the earlier *Common Sense of Drinking*, which was, by then, relegated to virtual obscurity.

Here are a sampling of quotations from the 1931 book that may have some familiarity to modern AA members:

Anonymity: The patient's "private affairs can be told to nobody without his express permission." (P. 75)

Cease Fighting: AA's goal is not mere abstinence through a daily battle with the will, but to reach instead a state of neutrality, not WANTING to drink. "A man will usually act according to his desires, if it is possible for him to do so...The mind must be retrained so that in the course of time it ceases to want to drink...When this has been attained, he is no longer in conflict." (P. 91)

Cucumbers & Pickles: "Suffice it to say –ONCE A DRUNKARD ALWAYS A DRUNKARD—or a teetotaler! A fairly exhaustive inquiry has elicited no exception to this rule." (P. 71)." "The carefree days when the nerves were strong are gone forever." (P. 72) This was not an entirely new idea, but still it was an era where compulsive drinkers were commonly being exhorted to drink like gentlemen.

Delusional Thinking: Before AA, Peabody identified the drunk's persistent notion that "this time is going to be different." (P. 73) "He casts longing looks...at a successful career of hard but controlled drinking.." (P.25)

Denial: The subject of a case study reports: "At times I will think up the queerest systems of reasoning rather than admit I am licked." (P. 40) Peabody recognized the drunk's tendency to an idealization of the past.

Dry Drunk: The man who is "on the wagon" may be sober physically "but mentally he may be almost as alcohol-minded as if he were drunk. He is sorry for himself." (P. 92)

Fear: See Causality below

Fitting In: Sober alcoholics are seen as being prone to boredom and feelings of not fitting in, especially in social environments, feeling “out of place, tongue-tied... an inferiority complex.” (P.41)

Hard Drinkers: The range of normal indulgence includes a group who are “at worst hard drinkers going soberly about their business in the daytime, seeking escape from social rather than subjective suppression, and to be definitely distinguished from the morning drinkers who are...chronic alcoholics.” (P. 4)

Hitting Bottom: “There is nothing so convincing as personal experience, and there is very little use trying to persuade a man who has had an insufficient amount of it.” (P. 83)

Honesty: “Once the alcoholic takes up treatment, he must be absolutely honest in giving an account of his thoughts and actions and he must take precautions against lying ingenuously (rationalizing) to himself.” (P.84)

Immaturity: “Alcoholism is a disease of immaturity regardless of the actual age of the patient suffering from it.” (P. 107)

Obsession/Insanity: “The alcoholic is often motivated by inner forces of which he is unaware and over which, without scientific assistance, he has no substantial control.” (P. xiii) “It seems hard to believe that an otherwise sane person will deliberately ruin his life against his own best judgment for the sake of an immature form of enjoyment unless he is motivated by a strong, compelling force of which he is unaware and from which he is at times trying to escape.” (P. 74)

Once an alcoholic, always an alcoholic: “Suffice it to say—ONCE A DRUNKARD ALWAYS A DRUNKARD—or a teetotaler! A fairly exhaustive inquiry has elicited no exception to this rule.” (P. 71)

Psychic Change: Peabody’s therapies produced an educational variety of psychic change. “The complete change of heart can only be explained on the grounds that the effects of persuasion and suggestion were accumulating and that had been opened by analysis.” (P. 77)

Restless, irritable, and discontented: “The victim is caught in an increasingly vicious cycle...acute nervous hangovers, remorse, feelings of inferiority, then drunkenness again. A sanitarium may check temporarily the outward expression of this state of mind, but the inner urge continues to exist.” (P. 7) “

Self-diagnosis: As with AA, “whether he wants to stop drinking or not is most decidedly his own business...If a person thinks he can drink, let him continue to do so.” (P. 68)

Selfish Program: “A man must be impressed with the fact that he is undergoing treatment for his own personal good and because he believes it to be the expedient thing to do. In other words, he is doing it selfishly as far as the guiding motive goes.” (P. 87)

Surrender: Peabody’s ideas regarding “surrender” closely parallel AA’s Step One. “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. This surrender is an absolute starting point as far as the conscious mind is concerned...an intellectual surrender by no means settles the question because there are unconscious motivations working...” (P. 64)

Causality

Peabody, more so than AA, ventures into an exploration of the causality of alcoholism. More or less dismissing hereditary factors, Peabody saw shy fathers and cold, domineering, prudish, and neurotic mothers producing children with a proneness to alcoholism. AA co-founders, Bill Wilson and Bob Smith, as well as Cleveland pioneer, Clarence Snyder, had such mothers. “Fears are educated into us.” (P. 16)

“As a background to almost every case of chronic alcoholism, there exists an inner nervous condition akin to ‘unreasonable’ feelings of anxiety and inferiority suffered by the abnormally nervous. It is precisely this condition of which moderate drinkers...are fortunately unaware that makes hard and persistent drinking...so incomprehensible.” (P. xii) “The large majority of cases are found among those who are shy, egocentric, and shut in. Jung had designated these people as introverts.” (P. 9)

He further makes the point that the group “designated as ‘pathologically alcoholic’ comprises persons from all walks of life...{alcoholism} tends to be predominant among those who have a large surplus of easily stimulated nervous energy and hence feel the need of something that in the last analysis soothe far more than it elates.” (P. 8) Peabody continues his description of the ubiquity of severe drinking problems to include the religious and the unbeliever.

Underlying all, Peabody sees a nervous dis-ease, neurosis, and not “spiritual malady.”

Treatment

“His system was a secularized and intellectualized version of the Emmanuel Movement method, with the spiritual component removed, and with no understanding on his part of the importance of fellowship among recovering alcoholics. Alcoholics were to get sober by practicing a rigid self-control and bringing their feelings and emotions under the control of reason. But his book did have an effect on Bill W.’s thoughts.” (hindsfoot.org)

“From the alcoholics as a class, Peabody eliminated certain groups as unfit for treatment. One consisted of people who were psychotic; another was comprised of those who did not sincerely wish to help themselves.” (AA The Way It Began, Bill Pittman, P. 103) In AA, these same groups became – “Those who do not recover are people who cannot or will not completely give themselves to this simple program.” (BB, P. 58)

AA views alcoholic drinking as insane, as did Peabody, who went to some lengths to further convince his patients that continuing to drink was “stupid,” inexpedient. The treatment of the alcoholic was based around Courtenay Baylor’s ideas of surrender, relaxation, catharsis, and suggestion.

“As willpower was seen as relatively impotent against misdirected thinking, changes were to be effected in the thought process itself. A believer in the merits of discipline and order, Peabody imposed rigid daily schedules preventing idleness. Adherence to these schedules gave clients a sense that they were taking concrete action affecting their condition.

“Self-esteem and self-confidence grew with each new day, week, and month of sobriety. The enforced schedule served the purpose of reintegrating a demoralized person...” (Key Players in AA History, bob k, P. 88)

“Faye R., the longtime AA member interviewed by Katherine McCarthy, was a patient of Baylor and two Peabody-Method therapists during her beginning efforts to find sobriety.

“But Faye’s success came only when she found AA. Her observation just about says it all: ‘They {the Peabody therapists} had many wonderful ideas but they didn’t have the magic of AA.’” (New Wine, P. 125)

For some, the magical missing element would be seen as spirituality. For others, it would have been fellowship. Remarkably perhaps, Richard Peabody, employing neither, was able to rehabilitate a number of alcoholics.

About the Author, Bob K

Bob K. lives in the Metropolitan Toronto area, and has been a sober member of Alcoholics Anonymous for 24 years, and an out-of-the-closet atheist for that entire time. He has been a regular contributor to the [AA Agnostica](#) website for almost 5 years, and in January, 2015, published “*Key Players in AA History*” In 2013, he cofounded the Whitby Freethinkers meeting.

***Key Players
in
AA History***



by bob k

***With a Foreword by William L.
White and Ernest Kurtz***