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ENTER HONESTY

(WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO ALCOHOLISM)

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Dr. Harry M. Tiebout, a distinguished psychiatrist and one of AA's early medical friends, was the first to refer alcoholic patients from his practice to Alcoholic Anonymous

SINCE becoming a sideline observer of Alcoholics Anonymous in 1939, my approach to alcoholism has undergone an almost total reorientation. For the first time I saw what peace of mind means in the achievement of sobriety and I began to consider the emotional factors involved from a very different viewpoint. In AA meetings, the role of resentments was a recurrent theme. This seemed significant. Continuing this line of observation, I found that another enemy of sobriety was defiance, which Dr. Sillman had already described as "defiant individuality," a major hallmark of the personality of alcoholics.

Another significant emphasis in AA was humility and "hitting bottom," completely new points of emphasis for me. It was clear that if the individual remained stiff-necked he would continue to drink, but I could not see why. Finally the presence of an apparently unconquerable ego became evident. It was this ego which had to become humble. Then the role of hitting bottom, which means reaching a feeling of personal helplessness, began to be clear. It was this process that produced in the ego an awareness of vulnerability, initiating the positive phase. In hitting bottom the ego becomes tractable and is ready for humility. The conversion experience has started.

Hitting bottom must produce a result, and this result is surrender.

The surrender concept has not generally been well received except by some AAs who recognize its validity in their own experience. One or two psychiatrists have told me they are beginning to see the usefulness of this concept but no one, to my knowledge, has as yet come forward with a paper supporting the thesis of surrender out of his own observations.

One reason for this lag is the resistance to the idea of surrender. It seems too completely defeatist.

In an article on surrender in 1949 I said:

One fact must be kept in mind, namely the need to distinguish between submission and surrender. In submission, an individual accepts reality consciously but not unconsciously. He accepts as a practical fact that he cannot at that moment conquer reality, but lurking in his unconscious is the feeling, "there'll come a day"--which implies no real acceptance and demonstrates conclusively that the struggle is still going on. With submission, which at best is a superficial yielding, tension continues. When, on the other hand, the ability to accept reality functions on the unconscious level, there is no residual battle, and relaxation ensues with freedom from strain and conflict. In fact, it is perfectly possible to ascertain to what extent the acceptance of reality is on the unconscious level by the degree of relaxation which develops. The greater the relaxation, the greater is the inner acceptance of reality.

In that paragraph the words "accept" and "acceptance" are each used three times. I saw at that time that surrender lends to acceptance. What I failed to see and emphasize was the very important relationship between surrender and the capacity for acceptance.

The first of the Alcoholics Anonymous twelve steps reads: "We admitted we were powerless over alcohol--that our lives had become unmanageable." The second word is "admitted," which in many ways is a blood brother of acceptance although many an AA meeting has been devoted to quibbling about the difference between admit and accept. Time and again slips are explained on the basis that the one who slips has not truly accepted his alcoholism.

Acceptance appears to be a state of mind in which the individual accepts rather than rejects or resists: he is able to take things in, to go along with, to cooperate, to be receptive. Contrariwise, he is not argumentative, quarrelsome, irritable or contentious. For the time being, at any rate, the hostile, negative, aggressive elements are in abeyance, and we have a much pleasanter human being to deal with. Acceptance as a state of mind has many highly admirable qualities as well as useful ones. Some measure of it is greatly to be desired. Its attainment as an inner state of mind is never easy.

CANNOT BE FORCED

It is necessary to point out that no one can tell himself or force himself wholeheartedly to accept anything. One must have a Feeling--conviction--otherwise the acceptance is not wholehearted but halfhearted with a large element of lip service. There is a string of words which describe halfhearted acceptance: submission, resignation, yielding, compliance, acknowledgment, concession, and so forth. With each of these words there is a feeling of reservation, a tug in the direction of nonacceptance.

It is one thing to see reasons and quite another thing to behave with corresponding rationality. One patient neatly punctured this assumption. After eight years of analysis with four therapists of different schools, he began to get some inkling of acceptance as a state of mind which he sadly lacked. Finally, in a burst of awareness, he remarked, "I know all the reasons but I don't know how to be reasonable." That statement aptly summed up his predicament. His logical mind could perceive and believe all the factors underlying his difficulties but he remained cantankerous and unreasonable as far as his feeling life was concerned. In his head, or conscious mind, he could "accept" the explanations but deep inside where the heart, or the unconscious, operates there was no feeling of acceptance. That capacity still had to be developed. Uncovering reasons for behavior, no matter how convincing, does not and cannot insure acceptance of those reasons. Acceptance is a step beyond recognition, a further operation in the process of therapy.

Experience has proved that in the alcoholic a halfhearted reaction does not maintain sobriety for very long. The inner doubts all too soon take over. The alcoholic who stays "dry" must be wholehearted. Here we meet a complication. People accept the necessity of being wholehearted about alcoholism but not about everything else. They are determined to maintain their capacity for resistance. They fear the fact that if they become total acceptors they will have no ability whatsoever to resist and will become "push-overs," complete Caspar Milquetoasts.

WHAT PRODUCES ACCEPTANCE?

We are thus confronted with the question, What does produce wholehearted acceptance? My answer is, as before, surrender. But surrender is a step not easily taken by human beings. In recent years, because of my special interest in the phenomenon of surrender, I have become aware of another conscious and unconscious phenomenon, namely compliance--which is basically partial acceptance or partial surrender, and which often serves as a block to surrender.

Compliance needs careful definition. It means agreeing, going along, but in no way implies enthusiastic, wholehearted assent and approval. There is a willingness not to argue or resist but the cooperation is a bit grudging, a little forced; one is not entirely happy about agreeing. Compliance is, therefore, a word which portrays mixed feelings, divided sentiments. There is a willingness to go along but at the same time there are some inner reservations which make that willingness somewhat thin and watery. It does not take much to overthrow this kind of willingness. The existence of this attitude will probably appear as neither strange nor new. Nor is it, until one begins to see how it operates in the unconscious of the individual.

An illustration at this point may be helpful. An alcoholic, at the termination of a long and painful spree, decides that he has had enough. This decision is announced loudly and vehemently to all who will listen. His sincerity cannot be questioned. He means every word of it. Yet he knows, and so do those who hear him, that he will be singing another tune before many weeks have elapsed. For the moment he seems to have accepted his alcoholism but it is only with a skin-deep assurance. He will certainly revert to drinking. What we see here is compliance in action. During the time when his memory of the suffering entailed by a spree is acute and painful he agrees to anything and everything. But deep inside, in his unconscious, the best he can do is to comply--which means that, when the reality of his drinking problem becomes undeniable, he no longer argues with uncontrovertible facts. The fight, so to speak, has been knocked out of him. As time passes and the memory of his suffering weakens, the need for compliance lessens. As the need diminishes, the half of compliance which never really accepted begins to, stir once more and soon resumes its sway. The need for accepting the illness of alcoholism is ignored because, after all, deep inside he did not really mean it, he had only complied. Of course, consciously the victim of all this is completely in the dark. What he gets is messages from below which slowly bring about a change in his conscious attitudes. For a while drink was anathema but now he begins to toy with the thought of one drink, and so on, until finally, as the noncooperative element in compliance takes over, he has his first drink. The other half of compliance has won out; the alcoholic is the unwitting victim of his unconscious inclinations.

It is the nature of the word to have this two-faced quality of agreeing and then reneging. It is only by realizing the widespread ramifications of the compliance tendency that its far-flung importance can be appreciated.

YES CAN MEAN NO

One of the first things to recognize is that fact that the presence of compliance blocks the capacity for true acceptance. Since compliance is a form of acceptance, every time the individual is faced with the need to accept something he falls back on compliance, which serves for

the moment--the individual consciously believing that he has accepted. But since he has no real capacity to accept, he is soon swinging in the other direction, his seeming acceptance a thing of the past. In other words, the best an inwardly complying person can do toward acceptance is to comply.

Compliance creates other problems for the individual. Since it says "yes" on the surface and "no" on the inside, it contributes to the sense of guilt. The person who says yes and feels the opposite has an inward realization that he is a two-faced liar; this stirs up his conscience and evokes a feeling of guilt. Compliance also adds mightily to the problem of inferiority. The guilt reaction increases the sense of inferiority but the compliance response engrafts it even more. The unconscious situation can be outlined thus: Compliance is a form of agreeing, of never standing up for oneself. When that response is automatic, routine and unvarying, the individual gets a feeling he cannot stand up for himself; this inevitably augments his inferiority problems.

It is now possible to link compliance with the problem of alcoholism and also to the theory of surrender. The link between alcoholism and compliance has already been shown in the alcoholic's repeated vows that he would never take another drink, vows which go by the board because of the inner inability to do more than comply. The presence of a strong vein of unconscious compliance in the alcoholic can be demonstrated in other ways. Alcoholics are a notably pleasant and agreeable group with a marked tendency to say yes when approached directly. They claim they want to be well liked--hence their willingness to promise anything. Yet--and here the other side of the compliance reaction is manifest--they balk at the showdown and are ever likely to renege on their original promises.

The next point, the relationship between compliance and surrender, has already been intimated in the remark that compliance blocks the capacity to surrender. The inability to surrender may seem a small loss until the matter is studied more thoughtfully.

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After an act of surrender, the individual reports a sense of unity, of ended struggles, of no-longer divided inner counsel. He knows the meaning of inner wholeness and, what is more, he knows from immediate experience the feeling of being wholehearted about anything. He recognizes for the first time how insincere his previous protestations actually were. If he is a member of Alcoholics Anonymous, he travels around to meetings proclaiming the need for honesty--usually, at the start of his pilgrimage, with a certain amount of surprise and wonder in his voice. Quite frankly, before he was able to embrace the program, he had no idea he was a liar, dishonest in his thoughts; but now that AA is making sense--that is, he is accepting AA wholeheartedly and without reservations--he sees that previously he had never truly accepted anything. The AA speaker does not follow through to state that, formerly, all he had been doing was complying; but if asked, he nods his head in vigorous assent, saying, "That's exactly what I was doing." A more articulate individual, after a little thought, added: "You know, when I think back on it, that was all I knew how to do. I supposed that was the way it was with everybody. I could not conceive of really giving up. The best I could do was to comply, which meant I never really wanted to quit drinking, down inside. I can see it all now but I certainly couldn't then."

Obviously this speaker is reporting the loss of his compliant tendencies, occurring, let it be noted, when he gave up, surrendered, and thus was able wholeheartedly to follow the AA program. Let it further be noted that this new honesty arises automatically, spontaneously; the individual does not have the slightest inkling that this development is in prospect. It represents a deep unconscious shift in attitude and one certainly for the better.

It is now possible to see the usurping, dog-in-the-manger role of compliance. As long as compliance is functioning, there is halfway but never total surrender. But the halfway surrender and acceptance, serving as it does to quell the fighting temporarily, deceives both the individual and the onlooker, neither of whom is able to detect the unconscious compliance in the reaction of apparent yielding. It is only when a real surrender occurs that compliance is knocked out of the picture, freeing the individual for a series of wholehearted responses--including, in the alcoholic, his acceptance of his illness and of his need to do something constructive about it.

Surrender is essential to wholehearted acceptance, and unconscious compliance, which, is a halfway surrender, can be a vital block to genuine surrender. Alcoholics frequently show marked unconscious compliant trends which not only help to explain some puzzling aspects of their behavior but also account for their frequent inability to respond meaningfully to treatment. Since the presence of these trends has been more clearly recognized, the response of many patients to therapy has been considerably more satisfactory. A recognition of the processes of surrender, acceptance, and compliance can be a source of help in tackling the alcoholic psychotherapeutically

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