

A Few Thoughts on Chapter Eight : TO WIVES

(Pages 104 - 121)

There are numerous stories concerning the authorship of this chapter - none are true. One, is that Marie Bray, wife of Akron A.A. member Walter Bray ("The Back Slider"), wrote a preliminary draft of "To Wives", or at least lent a hand in the writing of that chapter. However, a search of the Akron Archives by Bill Schaberg ("Writing the Big Book") produced nothing to support the claim. It can only be presumed that this bit of bad information grew out of someone's misunderstanding of the fact that Marie Bray did actually write a chapter for the First Edition, entitled "An Alcoholic's Wife". This was the same chapter Bill had first offered to Anne Smith, but she declined to write it.

Which brings us to the next apocryphal story, that Anne Smith was asked to write "To Wives" but refused to do so. In this legend of great conflict, Lois is pictured as being outraged when Bill - having previously made this offer to Anne - refuses to let her write "To Wives". Lois was, in fact, extremely angry at Bill's refusal to let her write that chapter, but only because she felt (and justifiably so) that she was the most qualified person to do so. Nowhere in any of Bill's or Lois's writing or recorded talks is there any mention of Bill offering "To Wives" to Anne Smith or of that being the prime cause for Lois's outrage. (See Hartigan's "Bill W. pg. 114, "Lois Remembers" pg. 114 and "Pass It On" pg 200).

According to Lois, when she "shyly suggested" to Bill that she should write this chapter (and perhaps "The Family Afterward" as well), he answered with a firm "No", that except for the stories, the entire book should all be written in the same style.

However, Bill Schaberg ("Writing the Big Book" pg. 351) suggests that Bill was more concerned that a non-alcoholic address the sensitive and complicated question of "What is an alcoholic?". Bill feared delegating this challenging task to a non-alcoholic, they would almost certainly get it wrong.

Moreover, Bill felt the wife must continue to treat her alcoholic husband as a fragile child in the "tentativeness of early sobriety", that it could buy him some precious time to achieve some degree of emotional stability before her long bottled-up resentments boiled over.

"And, that's just what he did in this chapter, constantly stressing the major concessions the wife must make to support the new man's tenuous sobriety, while simultaneously absolving the drinking husband from substantive responsibilities for his actions. One could hardly count on the long-suffering wife to see the issue from this more permissive and forgiving perspective. Still, Lois felt, she was more qualified than anyone else to write this chapter - and she might well have been - but if she had done so, "it is quite likely that the content would have been different" (Hartigan, Bill W. pg. 114). An understatement, indeed."

"Finally, there is the worrisome problem of the marital discord that might arise if Bill was forced to severely edit something Lois had written so that it conformed to the perspective he wanted to present in this chapter. Avoidance is a common tactic in many marriages and this likely figured in Wilson's decision to sidestep such a potentially explosive minefield by simply writing the chapter himself. Saying "No" is a single argument. Ongoing edits and corrections might have resulted in more disagreements than Bill Wilson was willing to contemplate or tolerate."

Lois was furious at being treated so dismissively. "I was mad," she said, adding that "I wasn't so much mad as hurt. I still don't know why Bill wrote it. I've never really gotten into it - why he insisted upon writing it. I don't think I have ever gotten over it," she said years later, "It still makes me mad just to think about it." (Bill Schaberg, "WTBB pg 352)

In the end, "To Wives" is a jumbled and mixed bag of "directions and advice". The focus of which seems to be that although both God and "the husband" share some responsibility for the matter, the heaviest burden of responsibility for whether or not "the husband" will ever quit drinking rests *largely on the wife of the alcoholic*. After careful reading this chapter, one might reasonably conclude that *the unhelpful wife* is the cause of most slips. And Wilson's response to this is a collection of demands requiring the wife to "continue to treat her husband as a 'fragile child' if she wants him to stay sober." And as the wife struggles to make the best of this bad situation, the drinking spouse is largely exempted from any of the consequences caused by his drinking escapades.

"He admonishes the wife to: Don't try to reform.....Don't complain.....Don't condemn.....Don't be critical.....Don't be resentful.....Don't question.....Don't argue.....Don't be angry.....Don't embarrass.....Don't let him get away with it (108:3)...Don't crowd...Don't belittle...Don't disagree...Don't lecture...Don't try to rearrange his life...Don't discuss past occurrences...Don't urge him to follow our program...Don't set your heart on reforming...Don't ask that he do it for you...Don't arouse hostility (!!!)" and finally "never, never" tell your husband what to do. That failure in any one of these areas will likely give him "one of those insanely trivial excuses to drink" - and then it will be the wife's fault if he drinks again.

Another notable feature of this chapter is the complete reliance on *the Big Book* as the only lifeline offered to the wives (and husbands) struggling with the drink problem. In October 1938, when this was written, there were no "AA hospitals or missionaries" (which were planned), no other AA literature, no treatment facilities advocating the "program of recovery", no other local sober men - and most importantly, there were only ***TWO weekly meetings in the entire country***. There were simply ***no other support mechanisms in place at this time***. The book was either going to carry the message of recovery - *all by itself* - or it would not. ***This was the only available option at this time for the still-suffering alcoholic.***