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GRATITUDE IN ACTION

The story of Dave B., one of the founders of A.A. in Canada in 1944.

IBELIEVE IT would be good to tell the story of my life. Doing so will give me the opportunity to remember that I must be grateful to God and to those members of Alcoholics Anonymous who knew A.A. before me. Telling my story reminds me that I could go back to where I was if I forget the wonderful things that have been given to me or forget that God is the guide who keeps me on this path.

In June 1924, I was sixteen years old and had just graduated from high school in Sherbrooke, Quebec. Some of my friends suggested that we go for a beer. I had never had beer or any other form of alcohol. I don't know why, since we always had alcohol at home (I should add that no one in my family was ever considered an alcoholic). Well, I was afraid my friends wouldn't like me if I didn't do as they did. I knew firsthand that mysterious state of people who appear to be sure of themselves but are actually eaten alive with fear inside. I had a rather strong inferiority complex. I believe I lacked what my father used to call "character." So on that nice summer day in an old inn in Sherbrooke, I didn't find the courage to say no.

I became an active alcoholic from that first day, when alcohol produced a very special effect in me. I

was transformed. Alcohol suddenly made me into what I had always wanted to be.

Alcohol became my everyday companion. At first, I considered it a friend; later, it became a heavy load I couldn't get rid of. It turned out to be much more powerful than I was, even if, for many years, I could stay sober for short periods. I kept telling myself that one way or another I would get rid of alcohol. I was convinced I would find a way to stop drinking. I didn't want to acknowledge that alcohol had become so important in my life. Indeed, alcohol was giving me something I didn't want to lose.

In 1934, a series of mishaps occurred because of my drinking. I had to come back from Western Canada because the bank I worked for lost confidence in me. An elevator accident cost me all of the toes of one foot and a skull fracture. I was in the hospital for months. My excessive drinking also caused a brain hemorrhage, which completely paralyzed one side of my body. I probably did my First Step the day I came by ambulance to Western Hospital. A night-shift nurse asked me, "Mr. B., why do you drink so much? You have a wonderful wife, a bright little boy. You have no reason to drink like that. Why do you?" Being honest for the first time, I said, "I don't know, Nurse. I really don't know." That was many years before I learned about the Fellowship.

You might think I'd tell myself, "If alcohol causes so much harm, I will stop drinking." But I found countless reasons to prove to myself that alcohol had nothing to do with my misfortunes. I told myself it was because of fate, because everyone was against me, because things weren't going well. I sometimes thought

that God did not exist. I thought, "If this loving God exists, as they say, He would not treat me this way. God would not act like this." I felt sorry for myself a lot in those days.

My family and employers were concerned about my drinking, but I had become rather arrogant. I bought a 1931 Ford with an inheritance from my grandmother, and my wife and I made a trip to Cape Cod. On the way back, we stopped at my uncle's place in New Hampshire. This uncle had taken me under his wing at the time of my mother's death, and he worried about me. Now he said to me, "Dave, if you stop drinking for a full year, I will give you the Ford roadster I just bought." I loved that car, so I immediately promised I wouldn't drink for a whole year. And I meant it. Yet I was drinking again before we reached the Canadian border. I was powerless over alcohol. I was learning that I could do nothing to fight it off, even while I was denying the fact.

On Easter weekend 1944, I found myself in a jail cell in Montreal. By now, I was drinking to escape the horrible thoughts I had whenever I was sober enough to become aware of my situation. I was drinking to avoid seeing what I had become. The job I'd had for twenty years and the new car were long gone. I had undergone three stays in a psychiatric hospital. God knows I didn't want to drink, yet to my great despair, I always returned to the infernal merry-go-round.

I wondered how this misery would end. I was full of fear. I was afraid to tell others what I felt lest they would think I was insane. I was terribly lonely, full of self-pity, and terrified. Most of all, I was in a deep depression.

Then I recalled a book given to me by my sister Jean about drunks as desperate as I was who had found a way to stop drinking. According to this book, these drunks had found a way to live like other human beings: to get up in the morning, go to work, and return home in the evening. This book was about Alcoholics Anonymous.

I decided to get in touch with them. I had much difficulty in reaching A.A. in New York, as A.A. wasn't as well-known then. I finally spoke to a woman, Bobbie, who said words I hope I never forget: "I am an alcoholic. We have recovered. If you want, we'll help you." She told me about herself and added that many other drunks had used this method to stop drinking. What impressed me most in this conversation was the fact that these people, five hundred miles away, cared enough to try to help me. Here I was, feeling so sorry for myself, convinced that no one cared whether I was dead or alive.

I was very surprised when I got a copy of the Big Book in the mail the following day. And each day after that, for nearly a year, I got a letter or a note, something from Bobbie or from Bill or one of the other members of the central office in New York. In October 1944, Bobbie wrote: "You sound very sincere and from now on we will be counting on you to perpetuate the Fellowship of A.A. where you are. You will find enclosed some queries from alcoholics. We think you are now ready to take on this responsibility." She had enclosed some four hundred letters that I answered in the course of the following weeks. Soon, I began to get answers back.

In my new enthusiasm, and having found an answer

to my problem, I told Dorie, my wife, "You can quit your job now; I will take care of you. From now on, you will take the place you deserve in this family." However, she knew better. She said, "No, Dave, I will keep my job for a year while you go save the drunks." That is exactly what I set out to do.

As I look back on it now, I did everything wrong, but at least I was thinking of somebody else instead of myself. I had begun to get a little bit of something I am very full of now, and that is gratitude. I was becoming increasingly grateful to the people in New York and to the God they referred to but whom I found difficult to reach. (Yet I realized I had to seek the Higher Power I was told about.)

I was all alone in Quebec at that time. The Toronto Group had been in operation since the previous fall, and there was a member in Windsor who attended meetings across the river in Detroit. That was A.A. in its entirety in this country.

One day I got a letter from a man in Halifax who wrote, "One of my friends, a drunk, works in Montreal, but he is currently in Chicago, where he went on a major binge. When he returns to Montreal, I'd like you to talk to him."

I met this man at his home. His wife was cooking dinner, their young daughter at her side. The man was wearing a velvet jacket and sitting comfortably in his parlor. I hadn't met many people from high society. I immediately thought, "What's going on here? This man isn't an alcoholic!" Jack was a down-to-earth person. He was used to discussions about psychiatry, and the concept of a Higher Power didn't appeal to him

very much. But from our meeting, A.A. was born here in Quebec.

The Fellowship started to grow, most particularly following the publicity we got in the *Gazette* in the spring of 1945. I will never forget the day that Mary came to see me—she was the first woman to join our Fellowship here. She was very shy and reserved, very low-key. She had heard of the Fellowship through the *Gazette*.

For the first year, all the meetings were held in my home. There were people all over the house. The wives of members used to come with their husbands, though we didn't allow them in our closed meetings. They used to sit on the bed or in the kitchen, where they would make coffee and snacks. I believe they were wondering what would happen to us. Yet they were as happy as we were.

The first two French Canadians to learn about A.A. did so in the basement of my home. All French-speaking meetings in existence today were born out of those early meetings.

At the end of my first year of sobriety, my wife agreed to leave her job after I found some work. I thought that would be easy. All I had to do was go see an employer and I'd be able to support my family in a normal fashion. However, I looked for work for many months. We didn't have much money, and I was spending the little we had going from one place to the other, answering ads and meeting people. I was getting more and more discouraged. One day, a member said, "Dave, why don't you apply at the aircraft factory? I know a fellow there who could help you." So

that was where I got my first job. There really is a Higher Power looking after us.

One of the most fundamental things I have learned is to pass on our message to other alcoholics. That means I must think more about others than about myself. The most important thing is to practice these principles in all my affairs. In my opinion, that is what Alcoholics Anonymous is all about.

I never forgot a passage I first read in the copy of the Big Book that Bobbie sent me: “Abandon yourself to God as you understand God. Admit your faults to Him and to your fellows. Clear away the wreckage of your past. Give freely of what you find and join us.” It is very simple—though not always easy. But it can be done.

I know the Fellowship of A.A. doesn't offer any guarantees, but I also know that in the future I do not have to drink. I want to keep this life of peace, serenity, and tranquility that I have found. Today, I have found again the home I left and the woman I married when she was still so young. We have two more children, and they think their dad is an important man. I have all these wonderful things—people who mean more to me than anything in the world. I shall keep all that, and I won't have to drink, if I remember one simple thing: to keep my hand in the hand of God.