

Big Book Text Changes - Post-publication

By Jerry F.

The first issue I would like to address is the title. This paper is the second of a two-part report on changes made to the text of the Big Book. The first part is the various changes made to the Big Book prior to the first printing. That explains "Post-publication." Next is the usage of the word "text." The usual meaning of "front matter" is the half-title page, the title page, the copyright page, the table of contents, the preface, the forwards to each edition, the Doctor's Opinion, and the front and rear fly. Another way of saying this is that it includes everything in the Big Book except the stories and the appendices. However, I have restricted the scope of this article to mean only that which we usually mean by "the first 164 pages." There were post-publication changes made to these other sections but, in the interest of simplicity, they are mentioned only once in this article.

When I sobered up and was advised to read the Big Book, I came to page 114 in the third edition and read "Since this book was first published, AA has released thousands of alcoholics from asylums and hospitals of every kind. The majority have never returned. The power of God goes deep!" This confused me because I was already hearing in our meeting rooms that "the first 164 pages have never been changed." But clearly they had; at least in this one instance. Through the years I heard of and read of a number of other changes. I also read statements by AAWS, most of which, while not explicitly stating that changes had not been made, nonetheless seemed to indicate that the first 164 pages were intact as they were first written. An exception is page 357 in " 'Pass It On: The Story of Bill Wilson and How the A.A. Message Reached the World." Regarding the second edition of the Big Book it states "Unchanged in the new edition was the original text of the first 11 chapters, dealing with the principles followed by early members to achieve sobriety." This is a false statement. Does not "unchanged" mean that changes weren't made? I decided that, when I retired and had the time, I would try to determine what changes had been made, when, and how many there were.

When that day arrived I sat down with a Tenth Printing of the First Edition and a Fifteenth Printing of the Second Edition. I held them side by side and began to record the changes. My first mistake was that I was making value judgments. If the change was in punctuation or grammar I decided they didn't matter. And then I came to a punctuation change that altered the meaning of the sentence. In Chapter I there is a sentence: "I had always believed in a power greater than myself." But power is capitalized in one edition and the 'p' is in lower case in the other. I threw out my work and started over. Working almost every day it took me five weeks. That was because, recording every minute change, I realized that I would probably miss some in my first read so I did a second read and I did find several more that way. The count for the first 164 pages? 401 changes.

The Preface to the third edition includes these two sentences: "Because this book has become the basic text for our Society and has helped such large numbers of alcoholic men and women to recovery, there exists a sentiment against any radical changes being made to it. Therefore, the first portion of this volume has been left untouched in the course of revisions made for both

the second and third editions." This is a false statement. The revisions made in the second edition were extensive. And there are even a few changes made in the third edition.

Now, I think that we all have somewhat different opinions on changes to what has been called "our sacred text." I might think that half, 200, of these changes are not material. The program of recovery is not affected although that still leaves 201 changes that do present us with a somewhat different text. If you read through every change you might conclude that 250 are meaningless and only 151 are meaningful. Your neighbor might disagree with you and with me. Often a word is deleted or added and, in my judgment, the alteration was beneficial. The sentence made better sense. But you might not agree. Sometimes entire paragraphs have been deleted. In one case the word "not" was inserted into a sentence so it negates the meaning of the original text. In my opinion, everyone who reads the list of changes would have at least a dozen changes they would find objectionable. As for those other, very minor changes, the question arises: If they're so inconsequential, why were they changed? This is our basic text and I think that we can all agree that it should not be changed for whimsical reasons.

One final comment on punctuation. Many of us recall when the Fourth Edition was released in October 2001. Punctuation changes had been made to "Doctor Bob's Nightmare" and the membership was so outraged that the story was rapidly restored to its original punctuation.

I was shocked at the 401 changes and especially disturbed by some of the rewrites that created meaningful changes in the program of recovery. The third pertinent idea was changed- twice. The twelfth step was changed- twice. Every usage of "ex-alcoholic" was changed to "ex-problem drinker." Some sentences had two or three changes made to them. I wrote to the Literature Committee of Alcoholics Anonymous World Services pointing out some of the more remarkable changes and asking why AAWS seemed to deny the existence of changes to the Big Book when there were so many that were relevant to our program of recovery.

Six weeks later, without a reply, I wrote again. Six weeks later still, I called and was assured that my letters would have been forwarded to the Literature Committee and they would surely respond. They did not. I picked four members, all with more time than me, knowledgeable in AA after serving in various positions, and all intelligent. I gave them a copy of the report and of my letters to AAWS and asked their opinion of what I should do next. One said do nothing. Three said I needed to pursue it in any way I could. All were surprised and disturbed by the changes.

Continuing my search, I was amazed to find that there were six changes made in the second edition to The Doctor's Opinion. Made me wonder what Dr. Silkworth actually wrote. And, as every AA member knows, every edition has the Foreword to the previous editions. Except that they don't. One Foreword was edited when it appeared in the later edition. I won't go into detail on these because they are not part of the 401 changes.

Late in 2001 the fourth edition appeared. The Preface in that book reads: "Therefore, the first portion of this volume, describing the A.A. recovery program, has been left untouched in the course of revisions made for the second, third, and fourth editions." Untouched means untouched. Or it should. In 2003, "Experience, Strength and Hope" was published. The Introduction stated "Since the first edition of the Big Book, Alcoholics Anonymous, came off the

press in 1939, there have been three revised editions - a second published in 1955, a third in 1976, and a fourth in 2001. In all four editions, the first 164 pages have remained unchanged, preserving A.A.'s message just as it was originally recorded by the founding members." This is a lie.

"Experience, Strength and Hope" and the fourth edition of the Big Book were published as a boxed set that included a pamphlet entitled "A Brief History of the Big Book," copyrighted 2003. On page three is "Originally published in 1939 when Alcoholics Anonymous had about 100 members, the Big Book has come out in three later editions. But the first 164 pages, which have been the foundation of recovery for so many alcoholics, remain unchanged." This same statement is incorporated into the artwork of the slipcase of the boxed set. This is a lie.

At this time, I was no longer active in General Service as a GSR or DCM but I knew the ropes. I spoke to an ex-delegate who was extremely upset when he read the changes to the text. In 2005 I made a Topic Submission to Arizona Area. I didn't expect to meet with success but it felt good to make the attempt. The motion carried. At the next General Service Conference in New York it was presented by the Arizona Delegate from the floor. I'm told that the GSO reps fought hard but as the details of the changes began to emerge from the floor, and the deliberate deception of AAWS became apparent, more and more delegates grew angry. The delegates across the country instructed AAWS to repeal the lies in the Preface of the Fourth Edition of the Big Book, the false statement in "Experience, Strength and Hope," in the artwork of the slipcover, and in the pamphlet in the boxed set.

The lesson here is that, working with the A.A. Service Manual and the Twelve Concepts for World Service, one little old man in Gilbert, Arizona, along with many caring members of our unique Fellowship, can change the Big Book. That is the enduring strength and wisdom of our extraordinary organization, Alcoholics Anonymous. But it will take care and diligence to keep it.