

That shape am I

by [Carol Zaleski](#) in the [January 23, 2013](#) issue



The [documentary film *Bill W.*](#) tells the story of Alcoholics Anonymous co-founder William G. Wilson.

Some people start life, William James tells us, “with a bottle or two of champagne inscribed to their credit; whilst others seem to have been born close to the pain-threshold, which the slightest irritants fatally send them over.” James himself was the latter sort, a chronic sufferer who identified with the “sick souls” he describes in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. His diary entries speak of a time in the late 1860s when he “about touched bottom.” When he saw a catatonic patient, James’s identification was instant and visceral: “That shape am I, I felt, potentially. Nothing that I possess can defend me against that fate, if the hour for it should strike for me as it struck for him.” The experience led James to conclude in *Varieties*, “Here is the real core of the religious problem: Help! help! No prophet can claim to bring a final message unless he says things that will have a sound of reality in the ears of victims such as these.”

There are also, as James knew well, some people who start life with a bottle or two of champagne inscribed to their doom. For nearly 80 years, the quasi-religious fellowship Alcoholics Anonymous has been saying things that have a sound of reality—beginning with “that shape am I”—in the ears of thousands of people.

The early history of AA has always fascinated me, so I was eager to see the much heralded new documentary, *Bill W.* The DVD was released on December 11—the day, 78 years ago, when Bill Wilson, a Wall Street stock analyst in the grip of delirium tremens, checked himself into New York’s Towns Hospital for the fourth

time. Towns Hospital was the state-of-the-art detox facility at that time, an expensive sanitarium where addicts were treated with belladonna, cathartics and sedation. It was here that Wilson experienced the mystical “hot flash” from which he emerged transformed, never to drink again.

The story has all the marks of an origin myth. First there was Wilson’s drinking buddy, Edwin “Ebby” Thacher, who “got religion” in the Oxford Group and tried to share his secret with Bill. “I learned that I had to admit I was licked,” Ebby told Wilson. “And if I did not believe there was any God, then I had better try the experiment of praying to whatever God there might be.” Wilson wanted no part of this religion business, but on his fourth visit to the Towns Hospital he was desperate enough to try the experiment. He cried out *de profundis*, “If there be a God, will He show Himself!” In an instant, as Wilson later described it, “the place seemed to light up, blinding white. I knew only ecstasy and seemed on a mountain. A great wind blew, enveloping and penetrating me. To me, it was not of air but of Spirit. Blazing, there came the tremendous thought, ‘you are a free man.’” The sense of divine presence remained after the rapture subsided, but it was fragile: “Soon my so-called reason returned, my modern education took over and I thought I must be crazy and I became terribly frightened.”

Fortunately, the “little doctor who loved drunks,” William Silkworth, convinced Bill he wasn’t crazy. “If he had said, ‘hallucination,’” Wilson recalled, “I might now be dead.” Ebby’s gift to Wilson, a copy of *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, confirmed this generous verdict. Wilson rejoiced to learn from James that the soundness of his experience was proven by its “fruits for life.” Indeed, *Varieties*, with its testimony of alcoholics restored to sanity, its all-purpose concept of God and its pragmatic assessment of conversion experience, reads like a prequel to the Big Book (*Alcoholics Anonymous*).

Although the film *Bill W.* focuses understandably on Bill Wilson, it recognizes that AA has multiple sources. Born from Wilson’s collaboration with the alcoholic surgeon Bob Smith and the compassionate Sister Ignatia Gavin of Akron, influenced by Carl Jung as well as by William James and Silkworth, informed by the Oxford Groups and deformed by internal conflicts and schisms, AA’s development is too complex to be captured in a biographical film.

Further complicating the picture are the tragic undercurrents in Wilson’s life. The film is a vivid tribute to Wilson’s sacrificial devotion to the cause, but it does not

gloss over the fact that he was in many ways the victim of his own charisma. He had affairs; he experimented with LSD and niacin therapy. And he could never enjoy the gift he gave to his fellow alcoholics: real anonymity, the one sure safeguard against the extremes of pride and self-abnegation. Yet for all that, Wilson was extraordinarily self-aware, conscious of his own unquenchable thirst, of the risk of fame and of the elusiveness of freedom.

AA remains true to its origins in appealing, in the nondogmatic tradition of William James, to the “spiritual but not religious” among us. Yet for anyone who has ever felt “that shape am I,” for anyone who has ever looked squarely at human fallenness, for anyone who has ever hoped for an enduring freedom, “spiritual but not religious” can only be a beginning. Beyond AA’s “God as we understand him” is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, as he has made his saving presence known.