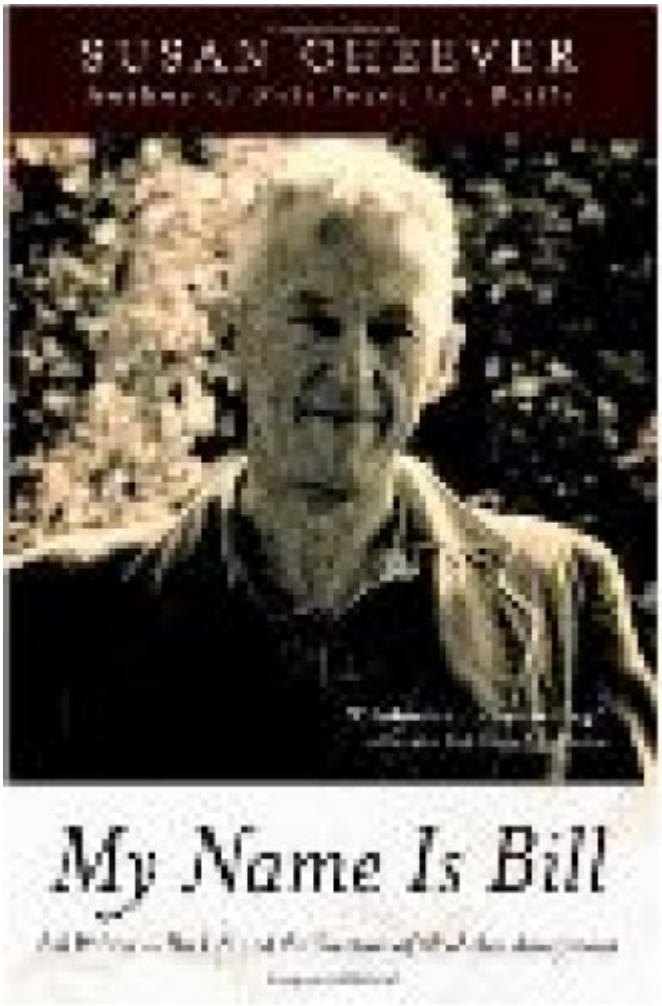
Sober stories

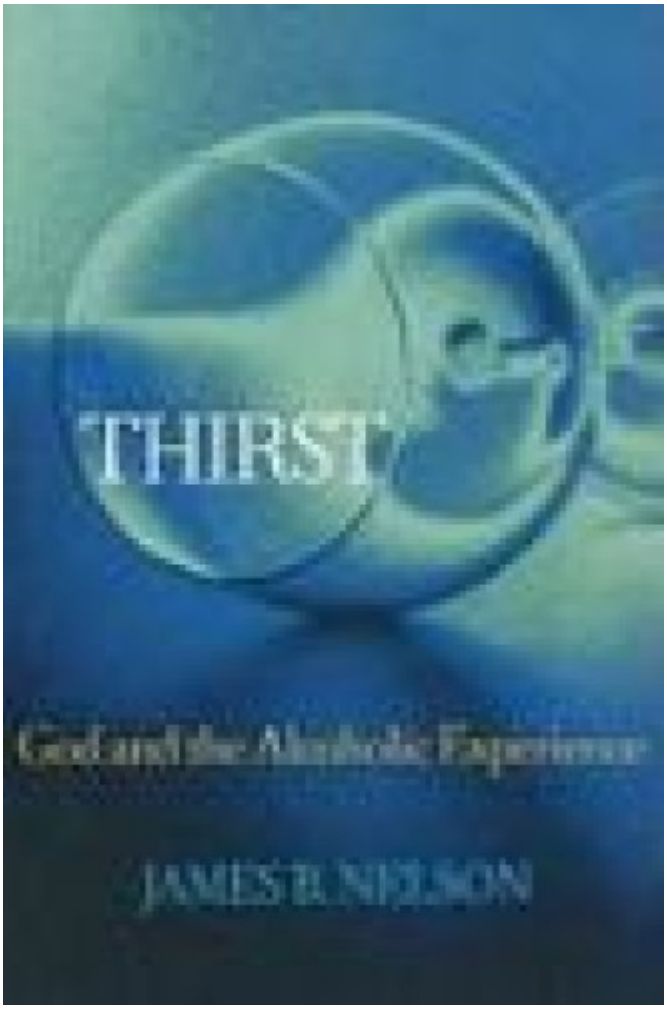
By Lloyd H. Steffen in the May 18, 2004 issue

In Review



My Name is Bill: Bill Wilson, His Life and the Creation of Alcoholics Anonymous

Susan Cheever
Simon & Schuster



Thirst: God and the Alcoholic Experience

James B. Nelson
Westminster John Knox

When Bill Wilson and Dr. Bob Smith founded Alcoholics Anonymous in 1935, they created one of the landmark organizations of the modern era. Two new books, one a biography of Wilson, the other a personal theological reflection, offer penetrating insights into the problem of alcohol abuse and the spiritual nature of the AA recovery program.

In a compelling, well-researched and beautifully written—even poetic—biography of Wilson, novelist Susan Cheever tells the story of this intellectual dynamo. Born in a small Vermont town in the waning years of the 19th century, Wilson was a child of divorce. Abandoned first by his father, then by his mother, he was raised by his grandparents. His life was haunted by loss—not only of parents, but of a true love

who died young, friends, home, numerous jobs—and sobriety.

When Wilson joined the army he discovered that alcohol reduced his social anxiety. But this conviviality enhancer eventually consumed his life. His career as soldier and Wall Street stock researcher was intertwined with blackouts, binges, hospitalizations and serious bouts of depression—as well as constant but failed efforts to control his drinking.

Wilson discovered that alcoholics could help one another, as he and fellow problem drinker Bob Smith did. Together they formed AA. The organization's content included Wilson's "Big Book," the Twelve Step program, and an understanding that alcohol abuse can be stopped only by "an experience of God, a spiritual reawakening, a surrender of the rational mind."

Wilson himself placed his faith not in God but in his own mind, yet he experienced what Cheever describes as "a genuine conversion" moment in 1934—a bottoming out, a dark night of the soul. From this experience came Wilson's "gospel of surrender and recovery," as well as his last.

Cheever discusses Wilson's penchant for Ouija boards and séances, and his sexual charisma, which led to dalliances, jealousies and broken friendships. He corresponded with Carl Jung, made friends with Aldous Huxley, reflected on the insights of William James (e.g., "the only cure for dipsomania is religomania") and sought understanding through LSD. Sober for 37 years, this complex man died begging for a drink.

Cheever presents a man who wanted to "help other people by sharing his own experience, strength and hope." Though he did not seek to be a model for anyone, Wilson's life work has made a lasting imprint on the world. His ideas, Cheever writes, "have entered common consciousness and changed how we define being human in a way certainly as powerful as the ideas of Sigmund Freud or Thomas Jefferson."

Cheever's statement that "we understand our lives by telling ourselves stories about what happens to us" could serve as the theme of James Nelson's book. In a deeply personal work, he shares his experience with alcoholism and reflects on the meaning of recovery.

To help people "think theologically about life and its important events, including addiction and recovery," he employs the categories of faith and the language of

spiritual discernment—including grace and gratitude, paradox and discovery, sin and brokenness, God and the demonic, sanctification and mystery.

Spiritual thirst and the thirst for alcohol became intertwined for Nelson. He argues for the AA disease concept, analyzes alcoholism as a gendered disorder and testifies to the sustaining power of community and the life-altering Hazelden treatment he underwent. Nelson continually reflects on the sources of “thirst.” He argues that addiction and recovery are spiritual experiences, encompassing such things as the “desire for existence” and concern about the future: “I was anxious about the future, for it meant limited time, mortality and death. Yes, the future could drive a man to drink.”

Painful to read at times, the book is honest to the core and unflinching in refusing to gloss over either the hurt Nelson caused others or the shame he experienced. Yet it is so infused with wisdom, theological depth and hope that one cannot come away from it unaffected. Nelson’s honesty, humility and humor are moving. He calls for “more public conversation by recovering people” in order to mitigate “some of the persisting fear, shame and embarrassment about alcoholism.”

Unfortunately, Nelson gives short shrift to moral resources, even as those resources are invoked page after page. (He rightly condemns moralistic attitudes.) His search for self-understanding through theological thinking, however, is a model of spiritual discernment. *Thirst* offers a profound and moving reflection on the mystery of the human encounter with the divine.