

Habits That Handicap

by Gary N.

Habits That Handicap is a 1915 book written by Charles B. Towns, owner and founder of Towns Hospital, where Bill Wilson was to be treated for alcoholism not quite twenty years later. Towns was a fascinating personality in his own right and the originator of “the so-called belladonna treatment” that “cleared” Bill Wilson’s brain, as mentioned on page 7 of the Big Book.

Charles Towns opened Towns Hospital in 1901 with an address of 293 Central Park West, which was (and is) an address for the wealthy and borders on the main lake of the very famous Central Park in downtown New York. Towns believed that alcoholic patients “should have individual treatment” and “must be kept away from other” alcoholics which did not necessarily enforce anonymity but did enforce confidentiality. “When they get together they talk of their symptoms, conditions, and habits, and of drug effects upon them, and so help to feed their craving.” Towns thought it impossible to cure alcoholics as long as they were together “in sanitariums with constant freedom of conversation with one another.” Dr. Silkworth, hired by Charles Towns in 1930, recommended to Bill Wilson in 1935 that he share the hopelessness of alcoholism to help him stay sober, which would more effectively communicate recovery to other alcoholics. This wisdom was entirely contrary to Charles Towns’ published work!

Towns’ 1915 book documented that he didn’t believe that alcoholism was a disease. Instead, he referred to alcoholism as the result of a poison from which the body required a supervised relief. The belladonna treatment was first pioneered to treat drug addiction, particularly to opium, but Towns believed it was also an effective cure for alcohol addiction as well. The body could be purged of addictive poisons through Towns’ treatment, which was administered once an hour for up to fifty hours, and has been categorized today as a “puke and purge” approach. The patient could be released in five days or a few more. Rarely was any patient kept much longer than that.

Towns believed that his hospital and others should charge the same price for every patient otherwise “evils” could result “from the practices of the sanitariums of charging their patients according to the weeks or months of their stay.” Sanitariums could not be trusted otherwise because of the monetary incentives to keep their patients longer than necessary. And as Towns’ customer base was to the affluent, he predominately demanded the payment up front. Towns may have charged up to \$350 for a five day treatment, which was a lot of money back then.

Bill Wilson was almost always broke in those days. He was only able to be treated at Towns Hospital through the finances of his mother or his brother-in-law Dr. Leonard Strong. Otherwise, Bill Wilson may have had to go to Bellvue Hospital, as did most of the nameless drunks in New York City, and he would never have met Dr. Silkworth, taken the belladonna cure, or experienced his white light experience in December of 1934. One can wonder: would

Bill ever have become a co-founder of AA without the financial resources of his relatives to afford the four Towns Hospital visits it took for him finally to stay sober?

A short article such as this one can only give a glimpse to the fascinating history of a native Georgian named Charles Towns. One would think that he would have had a medical training to be the founder of the belladonna treatment. However, his background was in insurance, and there he gained the reputation of being able to sell insurance to a gate post. The idea of Bill Wilson writing *Alcoholics Anonymous*, originally intended to be a text book essential for the founding of alcohol recovery hospitals directed by co-founder Dr. Robert Holbrook Smith, seemed a very sensible choice when Charles Towns had been successfully managing a drug and alcohol recovery hospital for nearly thirty five years.

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