

The Blessing of Alcoholism

by Rupert Wolfe Murray

Books about therapy don't usually sell very well and when Dr M. Scott Peck, an American Psychiatrist, wrote *The Road Less Travelled* he wasn't sure he would sell any. After all it was about the role that spirituality can play in therapy, a concept that was widely ignored by western psychiatry at the time (the book was published in 1978).

The Road Less Travelled had a huge impact on psychiatry, therapy and people all over the world. It sold over ten million copies, was translated into more than twenty languages and is still selling like hot cakes on Amazon.com. David Sheff **interviewed** him for *Playboy* and wrote "Few books since the Bible have influenced so many people. Certainly, few have sold more."

Peck has a lot of good things to say about Alcoholics Anonymous, which has spirituality at its core. He calls alcoholism "the sacred disease" and says that "alcoholics and AA have a great blessing and a great genius." This is quite refreshing as I have seen a lot of rather cruel and cynical criticism of AA recently (Youtube is rife with it).

Peck's praise of AA isn't some feelgood technique to make addicts feel better about themselves. It is backed up by some really interesting points and can be read in his book *Further Along the Road Less Travelled*. He believes that we are all "broken" – full of grief and terror — even if we are not fully aware of it. And we are doubly cursed because we can't talk to each other about these things, even though they are critical to our happiness. We hide behind masks of composure.

Alcoholics, on the other hand, are not any more broken than the rest of us but they are unable to hide it anymore. "So the great blessing of alcoholism is the nature of the disease. It puts people into a visible crisis, and as a result into a community — an AA group."

Community is the key to personal development, spirituality and happiness, according to M. Scott Peck. He also says that community is what Jesus' message is all about, a message that he claims has never been properly understood. The tragedy of modern man is that we live such individualised lives that there is very little opportunity to share our deepest fears with each other. There is no real community and as a result most people are destined to be unhappy.

But creating a community isn't easy. It's not just a question of meeting up with friends or going to a club, as in those situations it's unlikely that you are going to open up and talk about your worries and fears. Scott Peck says that "community develops naturally only in response to crisis. So it is that strangers in the waiting room of an intensive care unit will rapidly come to share with each other their deepest fears and joys, because their relatives lie across the hall on the critical list."

The only problem is that as soon as the crisis passes so does the community. Peck writes about the “tens of thousands” of American veterans who meet up every weekend “drinking themselves silly, mourning the days of World War II. They remember those days with such fondness because even though they were cold and wet and in danger, they experienced a depth of community and meaning in their lives that they have never quite been able to recapture since.”

Peck’s praise for AA is based on the fact that they have a system which gives people the most important thing in life: an ongoing community. “The great genius of alcoholics in AA is that they refer to themselves as recovering alcoholics...and by using that word ‘recovering’ they are constantly reminding themselves that the process of recovery is ongoing. And because the crisis is ongoing, the community is ongoing.”

M. Scott Peck’s main criticism of western psychiatry is that it disregards spirituality, largely due to the overwhelming influence of Freud. In 1992 Peck was invited to address the American Psychiatric Association and he told them that people were turning away from the profession because they were unable to discuss spiritual issues with their psychiatrist. He urged them to incorporate spirituality into their thinking and stop the loss of patients to “the competition” – religious, fundamentalist and new age healers.

People who go into AA or other 12 Step Programmes get what is known as “a sponsor” This is effectively an amateur therapist. Although they are not formally trained in psychology or psychiatry Scott Peck considers them as good, if not better, than professional therapists. The main reason for this is that they address the spiritual needs of their charges and also people are encouraged to outgrow their sponsor, something that very few psychiatrists would be willing to accept.

Peck concludes his chapter on alcoholism (in *Further Along the Road Less Travelled*) with this bold statement: “I believe the greatest positive event of the twentieth century occurred in Akron, Ohio, on June 10, 1935, when Bill W and Dr. Bob convened the first AA meeting. It was not only the beginning of the self-help movement and the beginning of the integration of science and spirituality at a grass-roots level, but also the beginning of the community movement.”

Scott Peck was 69 when he died in 2005. Click [here](#) to see his obituary in the Washington Post.

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