

AA Interview with Robert S September 20, 2023

Bob: This is Bob G. Today is September 20th, 2023, and I'm at the Clubhouse. I will be interviewing Robert S. Thank you for your time today. I'll ask you some questions about your experience in AA and recovery, your service work, and the history of AA, both past and present. To begin, I'd like to ask about your sobriety date.

Robert S.: My sobriety date, at least the claimed sobriety date, is May 5th, 1985. I say "claimed" because it was somewhere between the fourth and the seventh, and the fifth seemed like a solid number. People say that if you can't remember your last drunk, you probably haven't had it. And my response to that is: if you can remember it, it probably wasn't bad enough.

Bob: Okay. Well, I'm going to start by asking you to tell me a little about your life before you found AA. When and where were you born? Where did you grow up, and how would you describe your childhood?

Robert S.: I was born in Augusta, Georgia. My dad was in medical school then, so we spent a year or so there. Then, we moved to Macon for more of his residency and later to Tyndall Air Force Base in Panama City, Florida, until I was about five. Then we moved to Dalton, Georgia, where I call home. I grew up there from age five until I left the house. My parents and sisters are still in Dalton.

My childhood seemed standard, but that was only because it was my only frame of reference. Looking back on it now, with the hindsight of experience and knowledge, I can see that my father was creating his own story to come into AA while I was growing up.

Bob: Okay. Tell me when and how you started drinking.

Robert S.: When I started drinking—I don't know. I would always sneak a sip. Probably when I was around ten, someone—when we were camping out behind a friend's house—stole a beer from their parents, and we passed it around. But the first time I started using any chemicals, I focused more on pot than alcohol. At 11 or 12 years old, it was easier to get pot than alcohol.

The key for me was that I was trying to change the way I felt. And I'm sure we'll get into some of the reasons for me drinking at such a young age later on in our talk. But I'm not one of those believers that I became an alcoholic over time—I believe I was born an alcoholic. My first use of any chemicals was addictive, and I went at it as hard as I could, as heavy as I could, as fast as I could until something stopped me.

Bob: How old were you when it got out of control? You're obviously describing an out-of-control situation.

Robert S.: The first serious consequences I had with alcohol were in the seventh grade. I was suspended from school for a couple of weeks because I was caught with some stuff in my locker. Then, I had a history of lots of car wrecks between the ages of 15 and 19. When I got sober, I had a lot—probably, at one point, I had counted them all up, and including fender benders and totaled cars, I had about 17 wrecks.

Bob: Wow. Wow.

Robert S.: Yeah, that's a few.

Bob: When did you hit rock bottom?

Robert S.: Well, I wouldn't say I believe in strict singleness of purpose. My drink of choice—or my drug of choice—was whatever you had. If you had it, I didn't even have to like it—I would do it and drink it. I just wanted to feel different than I felt.

About a year before I got sober, I stopped doing all—(and I'm doing air quotes here)—all "hard drugs." So, my drinking and pot smoking skyrocketed. About six months before I got sober, I quit smoking pot. So, at that point, I was drinking, and the frequency and quantity of my drinking were just crazy.

Right around the time I was hitting bottom, which was in the spring or early summer of '85, my father went into treatment. I thought this was probably the worst thing ever because he was my enabler—he got me out of all sorts of trouble. But I had to go to his family week weekend, and everyone there was in the treatment center for impaired health professionals.

That weekend, I heard about people who had significant sobriety. I realized that they had been where I had been and done what I had done, yet they were laughing about it. I didn't see a damn thing funny about it. It was deadly serious to me.

And the big thing that all recovering alcoholics know is this: I had no clue why I did what I did. I knew bad things were going to happen. I knew alcohol was going to be involved. But until that point, I hadn't seen alcohol as even potentially being a problem. To me, alcohol and drugs weren't the problem—they were the solution. And I couldn't fathom the idea that they could be the problem—until then.

That experience stuck with me, and about a week later, I had a hangover. I was in school in a small college town in Tennessee—Sewanee—and I looked at the newspaper and saw that there was an AA meeting that night. So I decided to go.

I didn't understand open meetings, closed meetings, or any of that, so I just showed up. It happened to be a closed meeting. I told them I wanted to see what my dad was learning about and to hear about AA. They said, "That's just wonderful. We're so glad you're supportive," but then added, "This is a closed meeting—it's for alcoholics only. You can come back on Saturday night."

I wasn't about to get kicked out of a meeting by a bunch of drunks, so I proceeded to convince them that I, too, might have a problem. And that was a blessing—I wouldn't have admitted it otherwise, even to myself.

I bought a Big Book, but I didn't pick up a white chip because, in my mind, I still wasn't an alcoholic. I wasn't ready to consider not drinking yet—I didn't want to drink the way I *had* been drinking.

From my dad's family week, I learned that alcoholics tend to be obsessive-compulsive types. I didn't want to go home and compulsively read the whole 164 pages of the *Big Book* in one night—so I divided it into three nights. I read 50 pages the first night, 50 pages the second night, and 64 pages the third night, highlighting, underlining, and making editorial suggestions in the margins.

I still have that Big Book, and it's funny to look back at my comments.

That was in Sewanee. The next night, I visited Athens, Georgia, to see REM play at Legion Field. I was so high-spirited, thinking, "Now that I know how not to drink like I had been drinking, I just *know* I'll never get that drunk again."

Well, I got drunk. Very drunk. Not only did I violate my new "no more than three drinks" rule, but I also smoked pot, did cocaine, and shot tequila. I woke up the following day absolutely dumbfounded.

I knew I was a good student. I had learned from the experts. I had read the manual. And I *still* got drunk. That was when I realized intelligence alone wouldn't solve this problem.

Bob: You were in Athens at that time. When did you finally get a white chip? When did you really start AA, and where?

Robert S.: Sometime between the fourth and the seventh of that month, which would have been a day or two after I left Athens.

Bob: So, where was the first meeting you went to?

Robert S.: It was up on Monteagle Mountain in Tennessee. It was in Grundy County, and I believe it was a Tracy City meeting.

Bob: Did you have a sponsor?

Robert S.: I very quickly got a sponsor—an interesting fellow. His name was Bob H. He had a Ph.D. in spirituality, taught at the seminary at the University of the South, and had been sober for a good while. It's been so long that I can't remember exactly, but it was 12 or 18 years. Both seemed incomprehensible to me back then.

He had done some fascinating things, like participating in one of the first AA-sponsored trips to the Soviet Union. He had also been involved in a lot of AA-related work. He was a great first sponsor.

Bob: Well, tell me about your relationship with him.

Robert S.: Early on, with all my sponsors, I treated them like pinch hitters. I would either spew all my problems at them or avoid them until I had a new issue to unload.

It wasn't until many years—decades—into my sobriety that I learned the absolute blessing of using a sponsor regularly. It was Steven Korn who ingrained that in me. He told me, "Regularity is so important in many aspects of life. If we meet every week, it's going to get boring. But I'd

rather it be boring than have your hair on fire whenever you talk to me." That really stuck with me.

Bob: Okay. Did you ever leave AA, or did you stay continuously from that time? Did you ever go back out?

Robert S.: Physically, I have not taken a drink since that first white chip, and that's a blessing.

As for meetings, I've always attended regularly, but "regularly" is a flexible term. Sometimes, regular meant once every two or three weeks; other times, it meant two or three times a day. Both can be called regular—it's just the interval that changes.

For many years, I've found a sweet spot of about three weekly meetings. If I go to fewer, it's not as good. If I go to more, it's a little better—but not that much better than three. If I go to five or more meetings a week, it usually means I'm hiding out in meetings to avoid dealing with something for the rest of my life.

To me, we get sober so that we can *have* a life, not just *be* in AA.

Bob: How long did it take you to go through the steps? Tell me about your step work.

Robert S.: Oh, golly.

Bob: Did you go through them with your first sponsor?

Robert S.: I always tell people that the *Big Book* says, "Sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly," and I am the *poster child* for "sometimes slowly."

I worked the first three steps reasonably quickly—probably within the first 90 days. Then, I started working on my fourth step.

Back then, every meeting seemed to have its four-step guide, often mimeographed and available for purchase or given out for free. I would always pick those up, trying to find an easy one.

The problem was that I overthought. I'd start working across the rows in the *Big Book* or one of these guides and get hung up overanalyzing everything. Then, I'd get frustrated, put the work away, and return to it a week later.

I spent two *years*—two years and two months—working on my first fourth step. I wouldn't recommend that to anyone. It was not a pleasant way to do things.

What finally worked for me was someone suggesting that I go *down* the columns instead of *across* the rows. If I went down the columns—listing the people, events, and causes—I couldn't get stuck in my head. I got all the data down first, then analyzed it afterward. That simple shift made it *remarkably* more straightforward to complete.

Bob: Okay. Well, there's a lot of literature in the program. What literature was most helpful to you in recovery? The *Big Book*, *Grapevine*, *12 and 12*? What did you gravitate to?

Robert S.: The *Big Book* and *12 and 12* have always been foundational for me.

I enjoy reading the *Grapevine*, but it's never been a critical part of my program.

I was pleased when AA published the meditation book *Daily Reflections*. Before that, most people used the Hazelden *Twenty-Four Hours a Day* book, which I liked in some ways. However, it was a bit too religious for my leanings, and I couldn't hear the messages as well as I could when they were presented in another way.

Bob: How has that changed over time? How do you engage with AA literature now?

Robert S.: The *Big Book* is still my go-to. My home group has a *12 and 12* meeting on Tuesdays, so I read and engage with that.

I receive an email every morning with several daily meditations, including the AA one, which I enjoy.

I also appreciate some of the other AA literature. Books like *Dr. Bob and the Good Oldtimers* are interesting, but I rarely return to them. *As Bill Sees It* has been helpful as a topical reference—I use it when I want to focus on a particular issue.

Bob: Earlier, we talked about prominent people in your sobriety. Tell me more about the important individuals in your early years and beyond—people who made a lasting impact in the program.

Robert S.: So many people made a difference—some with just one key thing they said that really stuck with me.

I'll mention one: Gene L. from Dalton, Georgia.

As I mentioned, I was 19 when I got sober. After a few months, I started questioning whether I was an alcoholic. Maybe I was just immature. Perhaps I was overreacting.

I talked to Gene about this one day after a meeting, and he said, "Well, Robert, maybe that's true. And if you're not an alcoholic, don't drink for the rest of your life. It won't be a problem."

Then he added, "If that sounds scary, I'll see you tomorrow night."

That conversation had the greatest impact on me. It allowed me to remain open to the program.

In Athens, my first sponsor when I returned was Philip M. He was a wonderful, no-BS guy who could see straight through me. Later, I was sponsored for a short time by Carl M. before he passed me off to Steven C. My current sponsor is Larry M.

Each of them has been wise in their own ways—and foolish in their own ways. And I think hearing both their wisdom and their foolishness has been important. If all they had was wisdom, I don't know if I would've believed I could ever get to where they were. But knowing they had their moments of foolishness, too, made their example feel attainable.

Bob: That's one of the reasons we like interviewing people with long-term sobriety. Their insights are invaluable. Have you had memorable experiences as a sponsor?

Robert S.: Absolutely. I wanted someone to ask me to be their sponsor early on. I was ready. But it seemed like whenever someone asked, it was the last time we saw them at a meeting.

Over time, I've had some great relationships with sponsees. And I truly believe what my sponsors told me: "You get more out of sponsorship than you give." At first, I thought that was nonsense. But now, I know it's true.

Bob: Have you done other service work over the years?

Robert S.: Early on, I was a GSR for a group in Dalton. I haven't been asked to do that again—maybe that's for the best. I've never really run across a role that fully applies to me, and asking me to be in a position of authority or responsibility that way might not be the best fit.

I have been a treasurer, though. Nobody wants me to be a secretary—I have terrible handwriting and a touch of ADHD, so that's a disaster waiting to happen. But I've worked with public information, cooperation with the professional community, and other service opportunities over the years.

Bob: Have you attended conferences, conventions, or assemblies in Georgia?

Robert S.: I've been to several pre-paid conventions and have always enjoyed them. Every time I go, I tell myself I need to do it more often, but then I don't.

Bob: Now, I want to shift gears a little. Since you've been in AA for so long, how have you seen the program change over the years? You've been in Athens for decades—you've seen a lot. How has AA evolved since you got your white chip?

Robert S.: It is remarkably unchanged in many ways.

I used to travel a lot for work, so I've attended meetings all over the country and even in a few other countries. Meetings always have a local flavor, but here in Georgia, the meetings I attended 38 years ago would still be very recognizable to someone coming in today.

One of the most significant changes I've seen is that AA has become more accepting and egalitarian. Like society as a whole, we've come to see more similarities than differences between people, whether that's race, socioeconomic background, gender identity, or even addiction history.

There are still a few people who hold tightly to the idea of "singleness of purpose" and get uncomfortable when drugs are mentioned in AA meetings. But that's much less common than it used to be. Overall, I'd say the program has become more open and welcoming.

Bob: Do you remember the formats of the meetings back then? I met with you at noon—the Noon Timers at the clubhouse. It had one person leading, a calendar sign-up, the usual readings, and the basket at the end. Was that similar to what you saw early on?

Robert S.: Yes, a lot of it was very similar.

Meetings are larger now, simply because there are more of us. But structurally, most of the formats haven't changed that much.

Back then, many meetings were in church basements, with 10 to 20 people sitting in a circle—often in those tiny children's chairs. Many meetings didn't even have a designated leader. Someone would start, and we'd go around the circle.

That said, I can still find all the types of meetings I attended in my first ten years in Athens today. The program has evolved, but its core remains the same.

Bob: What about the treatment of newcomers? I remember when I was a newcomer, there was this whole ritual—people made a big deal about it. Everyone did their first step, and I sat there like a deer in headlights. Was it the same when you came in?

Robert S.: Yes, very much so.

When I came in, you even had to *know* someone in AA to *find* a meeting. It wasn't like today, where you can Google it. Back then, meetings were often listed in classified ads in the newspaper—sometimes under "Public Calendar," but often just in the *classifieds* under "Alcoholics Anonymous."

Newcomers were a big deal. If you showed up, you would get a white chip, whether you wanted one or not. First-step meetings were a major part of the process.

Bob: You mentioned earlier that your fourth step nearly killed you—as it does for a lot of people. Have you seen changes in how people approach step work over the years? Do you use worksheets with your sponsees?

Robert S.: I really appreciate that those old, non-AA-approved worksheets that every meeting used to have have mostly disappeared.

These days, most people say, "Do it like it says in the *Big Book*." And that's a good thing.

I have used the worksheets associated with the Joe and Charlie speaker series, but even those are *based on the Big Book*. So, I think we've moved back toward sticking with AA-approved literature, which is a positive shift.

Bob: You've been in Athens for a long time, which is excellent for all of us. How did the community view alcoholism 20 or 25 years ago? How did they perceive AA? Was AA respected?

Robert S.: When I first got sober, a lot of doctors gave *lip service* to the idea that addiction was a disease—but their *actions* didn't necessarily match their words.

Today, it's hard to find a medical professional who *doesn't* recognize addiction as a disease. Whether they fully understand it is another matter, but at least they acknowledge it as a legitimate condition.

Even in schools and universities, there's a much greater understanding and acceptance of addiction as a disease than there was back then. That's been a significant shift.

Bob: What about technology? How has that changed AA—especially with COVID? When everything shut down, how did technology affect how you attended meetings and maintained your sobriety?

Robert S.: I've always believed that AA is a *step* program, not a *meeting* program.

That being said, I always knew I *needed* meetings. I couldn't imagine being one of those people in the *Big Book*—the lone AA member stuck in the Arctic or on a ship somewhere.

Before COVID, I never thought Zoom meetings would work for me. But looking back, I can confidently say that *a lot* more people—including me—would have relapsed if we had been completely cut off from meetings during the pandemic.

Zoom meetings aren't the same as in-person, but they serve a crucial role. And like anything else, it's about intent—if you're using Zoom meetings because they're your only option, that's one thing. But if you *could* attend in-person meetings and choose Zoom because it's easier, that might not be the best choice for your recovery.

Bob: Most people don't fully appreciate how many lives Zoom meetings saved during the pandemic. Regarding impact, they were right up there with vaccines and masks.

Now, before we wrap up, I want to touch on something we discussed earlier: the controversy around "singleness of purpose" and the presence of multiple addictions in AA meetings. What are your thoughts on that?

Robert S.: Here's how I see it: addiction is addiction.

If you look at brain chemistry, all addictive substances and behaviors—alcohol, heroin, cocaine, gambling, sex addiction—all affect *dopamine*.

So, who am I to say that *my* chosen way of chasing dopamine is somehow more legitimate than *yours*?

I understand that some people feel more comfortable in meetings where everyone has the same experience. But I try to go one level deeper. If I don't connect with someone on the surface, I keep going because, at the core, we *all* experience the same emotions.

Bob: That's a great insight. And this is an issue that isn't going away.

Before we close, is there anything else you'd like to share? Do you have any final thoughts about AA, recovery, or your experience?

Robert S.: Just this: Recovery is not a straight line.

There have been times in sobriety that were *way* harder than anything I faced when I was drinking. But the key is you *keep going*.

Sobriety is a process. And for me, AA has given me a life worth staying sober for.

Bob: Robert, thank you so much for your time and insight. This has been invaluable.

Robert S.: Thank you.