



Poor Souls: Alcoholics Anonymous Experience

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Kate needs a blurb

'Poor souls'. The general practitioner that I have been attached to calls them this. She deals with 'poor souls' on a daily basis and from what I have observed so far, experience has taught her well.

They drift into the room, she closes the door behind them and, for the most part, they play the sobriety act well. They recite their stories of honest hardship with the hope it will earn them their next fix or a signature on their benefit forms. To the casual observer they may appear much in control of their situation, yet it is often only a transient mask the drug gives them; the desperate hold of their eyes gives them away and tells me the world they see is a different one to mine.

It is just past nine in the morning and they sip meths from a water bottle already half empty. The room quickly fills with an acrid stench – yesterday it was paint, the day before glue. As the senses settle a new odour, that of one who has not washed in days comes in waves that compliment the 'poor souls' every move. On the desk, next to the sphygmometer, stands two air fresheners but their use will have to wait until the end of the consult – one would not want to appear rude.

Now I am not as naïf as to think that every alcoholic presents to a clinic as such. In an AA meeting the members take turns to share something about their life. This might be their story of alcoholism or rather their 'alcoholic career' as many of them like to redefine it. Or it simply may be an account of their day, their trials, their successes – whatever may be plaguing their thoughts at that moment. A lot of them talk of bottoming out; the lowest of lows. Alcohol ends up drinking them dry of life: it drinks their money, their relationships, their careers, but most viciously, it drinks their spirit. One could argue everyone's bottom is different and that it is all relative to their situation, but when I see these 'poor souls' at the clinic they seem to hold the definition fairly.

I have been to quite a lot of meetings in the past with friends playing a support role and once as a second year medical student so was reasonably aware of what to expect. I felt welcome as a student by most, but there were a few who seemed hesitant to have me there. However this did not shake me up too much as I knew how much the therapy of these meetings is based on the idea of comradeship: the ability to confide in one another, an understanding that cements an instant friendship.

Anyone who attends these meetings is offered the gift of a sponsor. These sponsors are long time AA members who have achieved a lasting sobriety and who nominate themselves to be an on-call support man for any particular member. There is no monetary payment for this job even though the task of acting as a counsellor to a broken man is surely a grueling one. Yet there is no lack of volunteers. Such has been the effectiveness of the AA programme for these volunteers that they feel honoured to offer their time to those who shoes they once filled.

The use of spirituality could be seen as a short cut to encompass a feeling of well being – a wet hand to offer someone who is so lost in themselves. The common stone of these people is that they have searched themselves and their lives and have found both lacking. They identify their lack of control over alcohol and turn the responsibility over to a 'greater power,' whether that means their God, Allah or any other religious nomination. It could also be anything else they identify as being a power greater than themselves; their own AA group could even fill this role. They use this same philosophy to encompass all aspects of their life. They come to realise they can not control everything or everyone, and by releasing such stressors to their greater power in turn releases them from such responsibility. I think this is a fantastic concept for those who have difficulty coping with the stressors of life and struggle with addiction, though this could result in forfeiting too much responsibility when they should in fact own it as their own burden.

On the whole this programme is clearly effective to a huge number of alcoholics in achieving sobriety. The founders of this group have uncannily incorporated George Valiant's four factors to address addictions. Such a programme has shown to be effective in treating other addictions with the formation of Narcotics Anonymous (NA) and even a Food Addictions Anonymous (FA). It would be a rare occasion to sight one of those 'poor souls' from the clinic at an AA meeting. The fact that a fair handful of this group rolled into their first meeting in such a state is surely testament to the success of AA.