

"Rarely - or Never?"

How co-founder Bill Wilson answered a frequently asked question.

The AA Grapevine, December 1978

From time to time over the years, some AA members will question the wording of the first sentence of Chapter 5 of Alcoholics Anonymous: "Rarely have we seen a person fail who has thoroughly followed our path." Why, the enthusiastic member asks, doesn't the Big Book say, "Never have we seen a person fail...?"

This question was answered - several times - by an AA well qualified to speak on the subject, since he wrote the book, with the assistance of other early members.

Bill Wilson, AA's co-founder, answered a 1961 letter from Minnesota with these words (preserved, like those of the following letter, in the archives at the AA General Service Office): "Concerning your comment about the use of the word 'rarely' in Chapter 5 of the Big Book: My recollection is that we did give this considerable thought at the time of writing. I think the main reason for the use of the word 'rarely' was to avoid anything that would look like a claim of a 100% result. Assuming, of course, that an alcoholic is willing enough and sane enough, there can be a perfect score on [a person of this sort]. But since willingness and sanity are such elusive and fluctuating values, we simply didn't want to be too positive. The medical profession could jump right down our throats.

"Then, too, we have seen people who have apparently tried their very best, and then failed, not because of unwillingness, but perhaps by reason of physical tension or some undisclosed quirk, not known to them or anyone else. Neither did we want to over encourage relatives and friends in the supposition that their dear ones could surely get well in AA if only they were willing. I think that's why we chose that word. I remember thinking about it a lot.

"Maybe some of these same reasons would apply to present conditions. Anyhow, I do know this: The text of the AA book is so frozen in the minds of tens of thousands of AA's that even the slightest change creates an uproar."

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In 1967, Bill made the following reply to a Florida member asking the same question: "Respecting my use of the word 'rarely,' I think it was chosen because it did not express an absolute state of affairs, such as 'never' does. Anyhow, we are certainly stuck with the word 'rarely.' My few efforts to change the wording of the AA book have always come to naught - the protests are always too many."

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And at the 1970 General Service Conference, this Ask-It-Basket question was addressed directly to Bill: "If there was any change you would make in the Big Book, would it be to change the word 'rarely' to 'never' at the start of Chapter 5.

Bill answered, "No."

Just Love,  
Barefoot Bill

-----Original Message-----

From: Robert Stonebraker [mailto:rstonebraker212@insightbb.com]

Sent: Sunday, February 20, 2005 11:43 AM

To: AAHistoryLovers@yahoogroups.com

Subject: RE: [AAHistoryLovers] change ? to BB text

Pages 200, "Pass It On" states: (According to an apocryphal story, Bill was asked in later years whether there was any change he wished he could have made in the Big Book, and he replied he would change "rarely" to "never." . Bill himself said he never considered that change.)

And

On page 245 of "Not God," by E. Kurtz, Bill states in a 1961 letter: "I think the main reason for the use of the word "rarely" was to avoid anything that would look like a claim of 100% result."