

Sponsorship, 1st Hiawatha Land Get-Together

1989 | Reading edition

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Transcript

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He took my script. My name is Don and I am an alcoholic. I'm a member of Alcoholics Anonymous and my home group is the Denver Thursday night group. And if you're ever in Denver, please come visit with us. We hope we will make you as welcome as you have made me. I know I'm in Minnesota and I know I'm okay because Denny Bauer has a two-way radio and Bob's answer is late. So God is in his heaven and all is well. That's the damn thing I've ever seen. I gave some thought to what I was going to talk about tonight and then I stopped that because I learned years ago that I'm really dangerous when I begin to think. I hope we get around to sponsorship. We were talking about earlier and the fact is I know how to do is share what I was like, what happened, what I'm like now in some general way. And that's a result of some sponsorship by the way. I'm also glad to get to make, we're going to explore my mind a little bit. And I get to make a statement that I've been making quietly, publicly. And if I don't say anything else tonight, this I believe. Every problem that Alcoholics Anonymous has today or will have in the future can and should be solved.

By face-to-face contact and we call that sponsorship. If we don't tell people how we operate, they're not going to know. Or more frighteningly, they will find out from somebody else who doesn't know. Do you notice that lately? Yeah, we've got a lot of people telling people what Alcoholics Anonymous is and not members of Alcoholics Anonymous. And that's our fault. Sponsorship, as I encountered it, was appropriate. It was a privilege and a duty all wrapped up in one kind of a deal. My first three sponsors were a wonder. Now, I had three because that's the way it was. I came into a prison group and it was sponsored by three people because they knew that more than four of us took at least three of them.

The first thing they said at my first formal meeting, we were in a 12-step study school, a five-week, 12-step study school. And the first thing that we heard from them was you knew people for the next five weeks have nothing to say. If you knew anything at all, you wouldn't be here. And that was the truth. And then using the big book of Alcoholics Anonymous and their own personal experiences using that method, they described to me what was wrong with me, what could and could not be done about that, and the very precise nature of how I could go about deciding whether I wanted to live or not. But mainly they told me what was wrong with me.

I believe one of the first obligations I have is a sponsor. And the way I sponsor you get this is to help you find out what the hell's wrong with you. Our recovery process will work for anybody that applies it. It's very ancient spiritual principles. But our fellowship won't work for everybody. I see people, I had two examples walk into my house about three years ago. It was wonderful. We had a kid who was an alcoholic and a drug addict and a codependent and he was confused.

And he was going to AA and he was going to NA and he was going to the little embryonic CA group. And he was going to ACA and he was confused. And I did what I had been taught. Sponsors are somewhat teachers. We sat down with a big book of Alcoholics Anonymous. And we read the physical description given us by a medical doctor of what Alcoholism is. And we asked the question you're supposed to ask. Does that happen to you?

And we spent about two weeks going through that. And some of the mental twists. And one day in one of

those sessions this young man said to me, that in me, that does not happen to me that way. That in me. Now he is a moving force in Narcotics Anonymous today because he found out what was wrong with him. And I still work with him. We go through the steps together because after that first death there in a hell of a lot about drugs or alcohol. But his fellowship is straight.

And about three weeks after that another young man came to me very much in the same condition. Because he had used some drugs and he came through some place that told him that automatically makes you a drug addict. He thought he was an alcoholic and a drug addict and an ACA and he was confused. And we did the same thing. And one day he said to me, that's me. That's me. That happens to me when I drink alcohol. Now we don't know whatever else he is, but that day he discovered he's an alcoholic and is an alcoholic.

He belongs in Alcoholics Anonymous. And he's okay now. He isn't confused anymore. Now the privilege I got as a sponsor was to sit there and watch that discovery take place. And I know that's what they did with me. They helped me discover what was wrong with me and what to do about it and who I was. You'd love my first sponsors. I do. Oh mercy. I was brought up in black ballet and didn't even know it. I honestly didn't know there was anything to do except work the steps just exactly the way the big book said you should work them.

I didn't find out for years that there are a million different ways to do this. One of my first sponsors was a man who had murdered some people one morning in the middle of an alcoholic rage. I had never done that. And I had to identify with what he did. I couldn't be here. I wouldn't have identified. He helped me to identify with why he did it. And that I understood. He woke up one morning. He said painting that nobody cared whether he lived or died.

And the pain of that was too much. So he started drinking alcohol because it had always killed the pain before. And this particular day it didn't work. It got him involved in the pain. And he began to get angry and he began to get frightened. And the only response to nobody cares whether I live or die eventually is rage. And in that rage he killed some people. Well I have wakened in the morning knowing nobody cared. And I took my medicine and it didn't work. And I did my own bizarre things.

He shared with me what he was like and what happened when he was like that. But most importantly as he was telling me the story it became apparent to me this man was no longer capable of killing anyone. He had been changed. He demonstrated that change. I could see it in his eyes. Here's a guy who's saying out front I care so little for human life I took to him. And he's taking his time with me because he cares about me at a time when I am my most unlovable.

When I've taken my name from me and given me a number and made me put me in custodial care because I'm not fit in the world anymore. And this man who didn't care enough for human life that he took to cared for me. That's a pretty drastic change. Phil Gateris was a wonderful man. Phil came to us from Guam. Phil was one of my other sponsors. He'd been sent from Guam when he was 17 years old because they couldn't stand having him on the island anymore.

And several years later the state of Colorado says Phil you either got to go home we're going to lock you up. They didn't want him back home. Phil had a bad habit. When Phil drank alcohol Phil liked to throw things out of windows. And the last time he had done that it was people and it was three stories up. And Phil looked just

exactly like the kind of men that would do that when he wasn't smiling. When Phil smiled the whole room lit up. He came to me one day and he says you know Don he was smiling.

And I learned when Phil smiled I'm in trouble. He said you know Don I have been sober in this penitentiary seven years and I hate. And you're the very first person I've ever sponsored. You will stay sober. I lived up on the fourth tier. What Phil demonstrated to me and I wanted what he had. Phil taught me to touch physically in a penitentiary. Well that's risky. The quality of his touching was such that no one in there ever ever questioned it.

Never. Phil knew we're all a bunch of little puppies. We got to be patted and patted. The carpenter did that. He'd see him land on the street full of sores and wine and he patted him on the head. He said hey you don't have to do that. And the patting on the head did something. What do we do in our groups but that. The new person walks in the room and the very first thing we do is put our hand out and touch them. And make them welcome. We touched them.

I had to be taught that. I didn't know that. My sponsors did that by demonstrating it. They touched me. That's all I learned to touch. I will always be grateful for that. Years ago there was a lady used to in our area and I had become a toucher. When God hit me he made me a toucher. And I'm a hugger. If you don't like that don't get too close. When I'd go hug on her and she'd tense up. Gosh she hated that. And I couldn't stop.

And the day came when we were caught on a state convention and she walked all the way across the room to get her hug. And I had been thinking in between then maybe I should stop doing that. That makes her uncomfortable. And she died two weeks after that. And I'll be forever grateful but I didn't stop doing that because it made her uncomfortable. Because she came all the way across the room to get it. And in the coming to get it. I got it.

That's what this is about. It's a two way street. They made me real uncomfortable at the beginning. Good sponsorship seems to do that. I find myself saying things like when somebody says God I'm miserable. Enjoy it. Because you may not get a chance to do that again. My young bachelor is no better than to come to me in the first year and complain about she left me. One of them made a mistake the other day of calling me and saying she left me.

I'm in agony and it was on a Friday and I had other things to do. And I said my God that's awful. Do you suppose you'll feel the same way Monday? And he said oh yeah and he said good we'll talk about it then. By Monday we didn't have to talk about it. They shared with me what they knew and what they thought. They didn't pussyfoot with me. My early sponsors had been changed and I said how did that happen? And they said God did that. And I didn't care who did that.

I didn't know of a God. Didn't care about who did it. They said God did it okay. They made a very plain that the only hope for me was for me to have my own spiritual awakening and to learn to live by spiritual principles or die an ugly death and those were the choices. And how do I do that? They showed me precisely how to do that. Precisely what a wonderful thing we have here. There's no guesswork here. We never do it right but it's there to do. I remember the day when I was allowed to sponsor.

Oh my goodness what a scary day that is. See we had this 12 step study school and at the end of that deal

there's a new bunch of guys coming out of the fish tank to go through that. And I was told if you want to keep what you have you must give it away. And then when they said that they had demonstrated that and I had begun to experience that within myself. So five weeks in Alcoholics Anonymous in six months sober I was given a big book in the responsibility for the lives and the next group of people that came out into the 12 step study school.

And you know the first thing I said to them? For the next five weeks you knew guys have nothing to say. If you knew anything at all you wouldn't be here. And using the big book of Alcoholics Anonymous and my limited experience and the help of the two backup guys that stayed we did the same thing. Now if you ask me today to sponsor you I will say this to you. We better talk about that because here are the requirements you must show up at my house on a regular basis.

Whether it's every day or once a week I don't care on a regular basis you must show up at my house. You know what I have? Go where I go. I go home a lot. And we will go through the big book of Alcoholics Anonymous from the very beginning of the book and I will read to you. And then we will do every single thing it says together all the way. And if you'd like to do that I'll be glad to sponsor you. I know people who fire their sponsors and I know sponsors who fire their people.

I don't know about that. My personal experience is I don't know about that. If you don't show up for two times somebody else gets the slot that's all. I just assume you don't want to do that. And that's none of my business. One of the spiritual awakenings that I had is that my life is none of my business. And if mine isn't, sure as damn sure isn't. I love the people I work with. I just love them. One of my early street sponsors told me that the great joy of my life at that time and he was right was the changes that were taking place with me personally.

For a year and a half I kept a daily log of where I could see the hand of God at work in my life. And it was thrilling. But he said the day will come when the great joy will be to watch this happening in the lives of other people. Oh I've got one right now I love. He got five years of sobriety and drank. And then he got eight years of sobriety and became a counselor and a famous speaker. And woke up one day and he didn't have a Cadillac so he drank.

And he came to me and everybody, God sends me the psychopaths because there was one. I know who they are. They're the frightened little boys. See that sponsors know that about us. They know who we really are. It's kind of like God. He didn't see me in the shape I was in. He saw me as one of his kids. And I see them that way. He is so angry when he came to me. We started to talk about God. He said I can't wait to die.

So I can get right up in that son's bitch's face and tell him what I think of him. And I thought isn't that wonderful he believes. We didn't have any trouble with that. And he hates God stories. And I've got 21 years full of them and that's all I know how to talk about. And he got one honest driving him crazy. First of all we inventoryed God. And he came back to me and he said I ask him what he find out. And he says I don't know why but I feel like a spoiled brother.

He had three charges he had to go to court on the other day. And I love it when this happens because I know what's going to happen. If you are in the middle of trying to recover using the 12 steps of Alcoholics Anonymous, whether you like it or not, things are going to happen. If you don't want what we have for crying out loud don't do what we do. It'll happen anyway. And we're working on this deal and he's making meetings.

And he's trying real hard not to pray to that son of a bitch. And we got to go to court and I don't go to court with the people I sponsored. But something told me driving out there. I've got a good feeling about this. Two of these charges required the judge to put him in jail. He didn't have any choice. And we got out there and we got there an hour early. And he ran into a brand new district attorney who still had some compassion.

And she wouldn't let me go in a room with him. But I was, as his sponsor, I was able to say, I'll be here when you need me. You go ahead on it. We came out of there and she had plea bargain in such a way that she dropped those two mandatory things and reduced the other one down to a little fine. And he's scratching his head. He said, did you arrange that? No, but I said I know who did. We got into court and I saw the damndest thing I've ever seen.

A judge with compassion. This judge told this young man, he said, not only did you get a break. This district attorney gave me a break. I don't have to send you to jail. And we're on the way back home and here's the joy of sponsorship. He's giggling. And I said, I know what's going on with you. You got a God's story and you don't know how to deal with that. That's right. He doesn't want to believe so bad. Now that's the benefit of sponsorship.

I'm watching a human being who didn't have a chance in hell of ever going anywhere except to die. And he's being changed. He's still a little scary to be around for most people. Now he's doing something that is important that new people do. One of the reasons I asked them to come to my house, I couldn't surrender to God when I got here. And surrender is the bottom line of our whole recovery process. I had to surrender to something.

And in my state of mind, I prefer the word submit. I submitted to someone else and to something else. They said to me, we suggest you forget everything you think you know about anything. And I did. And I counted on him and I trusted them to tell me what to do next. And that's a two-way street. If you sponsor me, I will trust you with my life. And I do trust you with my life because I will do what you ask me to do. And as a sponsor, I must be very careful to never tell you anything if you're one of those.

It will do anything except lead you to the next thing along the path. So I use the big book. Can't go wrong with that one. I'm all in experience with it. And it works every time. There's a tremendous commitment in sponsorship, tremendous commitment. My sponsor said it this way. I will be there. Period. And I said the same thing, I will be there. And in doing that, I learned some other dimensions of this business. I have a home group.

I have made a commitment to one particular group of alcoholics anonymous, not a meeting, a group. But unless there's something like being out of town or something really, really that I can excuse it, I will be there. You can find me there. I will be there. And I expect you to be there. I really expect you to be there, if you've made the same commitment. And I happen to belong to a group where that's really easy. They get their half hour 45 minutes ahead of time.

You've got to run them off with a stick. And they are very wise. They don't let me make coffee. I make really bad coffee. And they don't call on me every week. And I don't sponsor everybody in the group. I like the idea that one sponsor for 30 years. But as I came into it, and as it has gone over the last few years, that's really not been possible for me. I have one sponsor who now lives in Indianapolis, Indiana. But I picked up because of something you all had told me.

If you see somebody in alcoholics anonymous who has something you want, you get in their hip pocket. You don't get out until you find out first of all what it is. And then weren't how they got that. And I was out, and I was busy, and things were good, and I was a member of a group. And my sponsor had just died from my first street sponsor. I had to leave those other three guys there. They wouldn't want to come with me.

My first street sponsor was one who, in addition to teaching me about recovery, was a gentleman. And he taught me to eat with a knife and a fork instead of a big soup spoon. And how to go to a play, and what to wear, and how to clean up. Just little stuff. How to behave in such a way they don't ask you to leave. How to come into a room in such a way that everybody else doesn't leave. And I saw this fella. And I was 12 stepping, and everything that I knew about the program at that time was happening.

But there was a piece missing. And this fella had it. And I could see it in his eyes, and I can see it in his life. And he fit the description in the big book. We were people who would normally not mix. At that time I was a little flat-topped, snaggle-tooth man who had just gotten out of prison. I bought my clothes at Goodwill. I worked on a truck, and I went to a... This guy was about six foot two, and college educated.

If you wanted to sell clothes, just put them on Gary and let him walk around in them. Some people would buy them. He had a family, a wife and some daughters. And I still was just barely on speaking terms with my family, and my children were still in the foster home. We didn't have much in common, except to say anything. But he had something I wanted. He was the GSR of the Denver Young People's Group. And at that time I didn't know whether GSR was a condition or a job.

For you young people in the room, by the way, this is what happens to young people if they stay sober long ago. They get old. He and his wife and his youngest daughter were going to an area assembly this particular weekend. I'd had no idea what that was. But I got in his hip pocket. I said, I'm going to. And I could see from the look on his face that it's not what he had in mind. He and his wife and daughter were going to go off over there and have a nice time.

But he was a genuine sponsor. Despite the look on his face, he said, okay, we'll pick you up at such and such a place and such and such a time. And of course my first area assembly was a psychic shock. At that time I really thought everybody in AA had been sober forever and they all loved each other without any reservations whatsoever. And that afternoon they talked about each other's mothers. They argued about stuff that didn't make any sense at all and still doesn't.

And it frightened me. And I think he knew that. That night at the dinner, you know, in the restaurant the long table was laid out and they were all the same people were sitting around laughing. And that's what I heard. It was the quality of the laughter. And I wondered, will I ever be part of that? And the area chairman and great big fellow got up and invited me to join them at the feast. And I caught the worst case of G.S. only you've ever seen.

I've been at it ever since. What was missing, I knew that I had to carry this message to you tonight sitting here. But part of my spiritual awakening is the certainty, the absolute certainty that I'm also responsible that this message be available to the people that are here 50 years from now when I'm dead and gone. And that's what that was all about. And he had it and now I've got it. And it isn't so much in what I do.

I've got some wonderful ideas on how AA could be better. And I promise you, you will never hear them. Never. He was there when I needed him despite anything else. He'd made that commitment. And still is to this day. And we began to develop that new dimension of sponsorship where friendships gets added to it. And we've been kind of co-sponsoring each other for years. We went through a three year period of some of the most wonderful growth.

Every single day we were in phone contact doing this tent step. Doing this stuff. And I learned another dimension from him. And one of the reasons I still love him, he has never, ever tried to fix me. Ever. He knows when I call with this information I have already done what's suggested. And I'm just telling him about it because that's what you're supposed to do. And if there's something missing he'll fill it in. But he usually answers, it tells me this.

When we're all through he said, do you have any amends to make? And we examine that. Now that's good sponsorship. That's good sponsorship I think. If I don't call him on a regular basis he calls me just to touch base and make sure I'm all right. I have another sponsor now. When I got into service he hadn't been on the path I went. And I think a sponsor should travel the path ahead of you. And they come back and tell you where the bushes are and where the brambles are.

And that's roughly what they do. What an act of love. What an act of love. A man or a woman has a spiritual awakening and begins to live in a different dimension. And could stay right there and be at peace but they come back into the pain to help somebody else out. Now that's an act of love. I don't like to listen to what these new people tell me. That hurts. They're in real pain. And I feel that and I don't like that.

But that's what they did for me. I know the answer. You come to me and you say you have me. I don't want to say to you but I don't. Run your head for a while. Then we'll get down to how you can get out of that. They did that for me. They listened. I just rotated off your general service board and that's a shock. Four years of that kind of activity. I'm a roofer again. Highly respected in my own area. Worshiped by my little home group.

I lied to you. I'm home. And I'm delighted to be home. And rotating was not a big problem. But I'm home. And the activity was different. And a number of new doors opened. I began to wonder, okay, what's next? Because I believe life is always what's next. And a number of doors opened. And one of the sponsors I picked is a former trustee. It makes sense if you're going to be a trustee, talk to some former trustees. Because every system has a system to it.

You better earn a working. Well, some things occurred in my first year and they'd really disturb me. I was very unhappy with some things were going on. So I knew that this fellow had served with this fellow and they didn't get along at all because they thought differently. And they both happened to be in New York at the same time. So I took them both to dinner, posed a question and sat back and watched them fight about it.

And I got the answers I needed. Out of that, this man became not only my service sponsor, but a very close personal friend. Because he has a knack. Let me tell you what that knack is because this is good sponsorship too. A number of good opportunities have come my way since I've rotated. And I examined them. And then one of them really caught me because it has to do with a dream I've had for over 18 years. And I'd really like to go do it.

And it sounded good. Someone offered me a sum of money that's beyond my imagination. To help them open up a center, to help alcoholics and blah blah blah. I don't want to work in a treatment center, but there are people who are tired need a place to rest. Anyway, it sounded nice. And I called him and I told him about it. And he said this. They want you to be in the guru? Oh man, that punctures the balloon. You see, I hadn't asked myself that question.

And we talked about it. And we talked about how that opportunity could be okay and what circumstances it wouldn't be okay. And under these circumstances, it wouldn't have been okay. So I said no to that one. And then he did what other good sponsors do. As we examined how it would be okay. And he said, yeah, that looks good. That'll probably develop over a period of time. In the meantime, keep roofing. That's a good sponsorship.

Where I am today is where I need to be today. Doing what I do today. And he loves me enough to make sure that I ask the right questions. He doesn't give me the answers, but he makes sure I ask the right questions. There are times that my group has to sponsor people. There have been times along the way that it doesn't happen so much anymore when my little group got sponsored by a stronger group. They helped us, particularly in the Denver Young People's Group, because like all young people, we were out of our minds.

We watched you old devils drag in your heels when we were out to save the world. Millions of alcoholics hadn't been touched yet. And we listened, but not too closely. And some of those groups helped us to find that balance. And so our little group tends to do that too. We've got a lot of young people in our group. Because our group shows up at different places. Don't do that together. One of them is here with me. We tend to do that in the AAI come from.

We go together to places. If you want what I've got, go where I go. If I want what you've got, I'll go where you go. That's an aspect of that. As I was talking earlier tonight with someone about how the hell am I going to come up with more than ten minutes' worth of information on sponsorship? It occurred to me I've gotten to participate in one of the greatest sponsorship activities, which is a spiritual activity you can imagine.

As a direct result of my just being in the right room when the invitation came, I got an opportunity last November to go to the Soviet Union with a group of AA General Service Board members to talk to their doctors and just kind of carry the message and do some things and see what we could do. We came back from there knowing all we need to do for those people now is provide the information, the literature, the big books, that stuff.

We don't need to send bodies. Individual A's can keep going. One of our problems is we don't want to be big brother to anybody, but one of the things that sponsors do for new people is give them big books until they can afford it by their own. So we just printed the first edition of the big book in Russian and we just gave them 5,000 copies of that because there's no other way to get it to them. And we grew up a little bit.

When I sponsor you, I get to grow up a little bit. Whatever happens to you, I grow up a little bit. Our policy in Alcoholics Anonymous at the General Service level has always been we will print recovery literature in any language and give it to the people in the new countries that are sick. The information that says you're sick. And then we in effect were saying to them, just as soon as you're well enough that you can get big enough to handle it yourself, we will give you the rights and the book that tells you how to get well.

And that's kind of silly. That's really kind of silly. So out of this experience, we learned as world sponsors, if you will, that we must have the big book of Alcoholics Anonymous. Our basic text available in any language, at least in manuscript form, that might be coming up next. And that's what we're doing. I understand that we're now doing it in Chinese, right? Yeah. Because that's a big population. We have a lot of them here too.

There's a dimension that I love to explore. I get to grow. I learn. I'm just about done here. Because I don't know a whole lot. But I know that sponsorship is probably the most single important activity outside of working the steps that we can do. And I almost don't like the word. I'm currently doing battle with AA lingo, so don't let that bother you. Because I'm a word mechanic. I will try to contain spiritual ideas into a word idea and put a little box around it.

There are some fallacies that I personally, since we're playing in my head, we'll play a little bit. I've heard for years. Men sponsor women. Women sponsor women. I agree, if you're new. I've grown because a number of ladies have come to me two or three years sober and want to go through the steps. And I can do that. It's a form of sponsorship, but it doesn't fit in the box. If you're brand new, it won't do that. And if you want to do that, you still have to have a female sponsor.

We can go through the steps again. I believe in AA's primary purpose. For alcoholics, that's who we're for. In expanding my sponsorship, I believe that AA's drug problem will be solved just as soon as NA and CA are strong enough. So I do a big traditions workshop with CA every week. They want to know about that. So they don't make the same mistakes. That's technically outside our primary purpose. I spent some time sponsoring some people from OA once.

They were just flooding the clubs in Denver because nobody else knew how to do the steps. So a few of us took them aside and took them through the steps. You know what happened? They quit coming to our meetings. They started sponsoring each other. Worked pretty good. That's outside our primary purpose. Technically. The more I've learned to adhere to the traditions, the looser I've gotten. That probably makes sense to you.

It does to me. I want to thank you very much for letting me just explore this. There's a whole bunch more. I do this once a month in a treatment center and it's a lecture. And I'm about to get into that and rather than do that to you. We will stop this. I want to thank you all for particularly the old timers who are more than 22 years sober for holding it together so I could get here and encourage those of you who are not to do the same thing.

Face to face eyeball to eyeball touching one another to help the new people understand why we have to hold this together. I came here knowing I did not fit out in that world. Tonight I tell you with no hesitation I don't fit out in that world. I fit here. I get to live out there just as if I did but I don't. I need you. The basics of sponsorship have always been I need you. And that's never been more true than it is for me tonight.

I need you. So thank you for letting me come here. Thank you. Thank you.