

Has the Machine Replaced the Message?

The Story of the 5 M's.

It's the story of what happens to spiritual institutions - ANY SPIRITUAL INSTITUTION - over time. As soon as I heard it, I understood the program and my own recovery differently. I hope you may as well.

Every spiritual institution starts with a man. That man could be Jesus or Buddha or Frank Buchman or Bill Wilson. That MAN (the first M) has a spiritual experience. It might be Jesus being baptized at the River Jordan, Buddha finding enlightenment under the banyan tree, Frank Buchman experiencing the power of the cross in a little church in England, or Wilson's white-light experience while detoxing at Towns Hospital. Each man has a direct encounter with the Divine. His consciousness is awakened to what the Big Book calls "the fourth dimension" of reality. It's the spiritual experience which is the goal of the 12 Steps. And what happens to each man, as a result of his encounter, is he comes back "changed." Each has a wholly new perspective on his relationship with God, himself, other human beings, and on his life work.

And so each "changed man" then tries to carry the MESSAGE (the second M) to those around him. He really has no choice but to do so as the message exerts such a powerful hold on him that he wouldn't be complete if he didn't share the good news. And it's important to understand that the message he carries isn't that the man who received it is so very special and unique - but only that he's awakened to a reality that's readily available to all who'll remove their blinders and come to see and experience it for themselves. Jesus called it the kingdom of God, Buddha termed it enlightenment or Nirvana, and Buchman called it being "maximal" or "fully surrendered," A.A. members call it serenity or recovery. For those who hear it, if they're ready for it, the message carried resonates deep inside those who hear it and they too are attracted to it. Often they know almost immediately that it is a message directed to them and their future path is clear. They must follow the same path as the man who carried the message to them.

And with this is born the third M: the MOVEMENT. Now we have Jesus with an ever-growing number of disciples, Buddha with his band of monks, Buchman with his dedicated Oxford Group followers and Wilson with the First One Hundred sober alcoholics. This is the glorious heyday of the movement as it tries to pass on the life-changing message of its founder's experience to an awaiting world. It's a critical time where the group is often viewed initially as a cult and a threat to the established order of things, but then finds greater respectability with increased numbers and leaders able to carry on the work of transformation even after the death of its founder. Before long, however, as the young movement grows, both in membership and in complexity, it is presented with an increasing number of issues that call for clarification and group conformity. The message must now be organized and codified so false prophets and false doctrines don't arise to lead the group astray. The message must also be written down and protected for future generations.

Enter the attorneys, the secretaries, and the theologians. They comprise the fourth M: the MACHINE. The job of the machine is to create traditions, and formulas, and rituals that

capture the spirit of the founder. And so we have bishops and bibles and creeds in the church, abbots and monasteries among the Buddhists, foundations and a castle in Switzerland set up for the Oxford Group and the Big Book and the New York Central office for A.A. Now the machine is absolutely necessary for the continuation of the movement, but over time, what invariably happens through machines is THE MACHINERY replaces THE MESSAGE - the law replaces the spirit. People go through the motions, but the power and the mystery are diminished as the machine waters down the message.

I knew the machine was at work in a 12 Step meeting I attended in Tennessee. A woman was playing solitaire at the table where the 5:00PM meeting was about to start. When the time for the meeting arrived she opened the meeting with the Serenity Prayer while she continued to deal her cards. THE MACHINE HAS ARRIVED! She would go through the motions but there would be no real "meeting." I was also reminded of it when I visited Bill Wilson's birthplace in Vermont several years ago. Someone, I'm sure with good intentions, had placed a lamp over the spot where Bill had been born. Now we have a "perpetual light" shining there that will never go out. GOOD WORK, MACHINE! No doubt in a few hundred years the sacred coffee pot from the first AA group in Akron will be on display and maybe even the cigarette ashes from the first hundred alcoholics will be rubbed on the foreheads of chronic relapsers in search of a miracle cure!

Rather than encouraging new members to go through the same transforming experience as the founder, the machine simply takes us through the motions. Left unchecked, the machine will grind on, spewing out new laws and literature, producing mindless but obedient adherents who follow the form but miss the message.

This, of course, leads invariably to the Fifth M: the MAUSOLEUM. The power of the movement is dead. It no longer has the spiritual energy to inspire and transform lives. When this happens - and it will, as it is the nature of institutions - then other men (BACK TO THE FIRST M) come along willing to challenge the lost vision of the group and willing to lead it through the 5 M's all over again. And when they do, they generally go back to the experience of the founder and ask the question, "WHO WAS THAT MAN AND WHAT REALLY WAS HIS MESSAGE?"

This may be the time for each of us to look to the experience of Jesus and Buddha and Buchman and Bill and ask:

Have I experienced what they experienced and has it transformed me and carried me toward that fourth dimension, or have I just put those guys on a pedestal, read a quote or two from them now and then, and continued to deal the cards in a lonely game of solitaire?

It's your deal!

Father Bill W., Austin Recovery