

# Bill Wilson's Fourth Legacy

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Bill Wilson and Dr. Bob left us three remarkable legacies. Their first legacy was the 12 Steps. The 12 Steps have helped millions of people find freedom from their addiction to alcohol and other drugs. Their second legacy was the 12 Traditions. The 12 Traditions do for the fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous what the 12 Steps do for the individual. We can think of the 12 Steps as a design for daily living that promotes emotional well being and peace of mind while the 12 Traditions provide guidelines for the healthy functioning of the AA fellowship as a whole. Their third legacy was the formation and structure of the General Service Office. These three legacies formed the foundation of Alcoholics Anonymous as we know it today. Recently I realized that there is another legacy that Bill Wilson left us. A legacy that has not been fully recognized for its value and role in recovery. Bill Wilson's fourth legacy was his insights into emotional sobriety.

Bill originally wrote about emotional sobriety in a letter he sent to a depressed friend in 1956. I feel quite certain that this must have been something Bill shared about in meetings but didn't write about it until he wrote the letter. This letter was eventually published in *The Grapevine* in 1958 titled, *The Next Frontier: Emotional Sobriety*.

I personally have found the contents of this letter very helpful. This is one of Bill's most important contributions to recovery. In it he unravels the source of his basic flaws and emotional deformities - issues necessary to understand and address if he was going to recover from his recurring depressions and experience a sense of emotional well being.

In this letter Bill shared the insights he gained while understanding and unpacking the emotional causes of his depression. Bill worked hard on his recovery. He also received psychological help from his friend Dr. Harry Tiebout who was the first psychiatrist to recognize the importance of AA.

Dr. Tiebout befriended Bill and the fellowship and left us with many important insight into the process of recovery. You can learn more about his work in a Hazelden publication of his collected works. Bill also received spiritual direction from some very prominent spiritual leaders of his time like Sam Shoemaker Father John Dowling.

Bill sought to understand himself and to understand how to best live his life. From these efforts he developed the ability to be deeply honest with himself and identify emotional and behavioral patterns that were causing him distress and anxiety. The letter that Bill wrote is a synthesis of what he had learned about himself and his dilemma after being sober to 21 years.

At this point in Bill's recovery he was working on what we now refer to as Stage II Recovery. This second stage of recovery was appropriately labeled by Earnie Larsen. Stage II Recovery is concerned with healthy human relations. This is something that has eluded us throughout our lives because of our emotional immaturity. The 12 Steps help us grow up by identifying our emotional deformities and the unhealthy patterns in our human relations so that we can become aware of our basic flaws. So let's take a closer look at the issues Bill discovered.

Do you ever find yourself overreacting to a comment someone important makes to you and then find yourself silently wondering, "Why did I react so strongly? What makes their opinion of me more important and true than what I know?" This situation and others like it have much to teach us about our emotional immaturity.

Reflecting on what caused him to be upset and react helped Bill figure out some very important things about himself. In a way, we can say that he took an emotional inventory. As a result of the insights he gained from these self-reflections, Bill realized that his depression was a result of how he responded when things didn't go his way. When people or situations didn't go according to his specifications. His expectations created unenforceable rules.

Bill discovered that he imposed unenforceable rules on others and demanded that they should submit to his unreasonable expectations. When they didn't, he fought them and when they didn't cave in, he felt deflated and defeated. When this happened he became depressed. But don't think for a minute that Bill is the only one of us that acts this way. I must confess that I do too. Less today after over 43 years of recovery, but it's definitely still a part of my reaction at times. I'd bet if you are honest with yourself you will see evidence of this kind of behavior in your reactions too.

Bill realized that his emotional state was dependent on the outcome of his interaction with others, that he was *emotionally dependent* on how other people behaved towards him for his self-esteem, for his emotional wellbeing. Bill described his epiphany this way: "*Suddenly I realized what the matter was. **My basic flaw** had always been dependence —almost **absolute dependence**—on people or circumstances to supply me with*

*prestige, security and the like. Failing to get these things according to my perfectionistic specifications I had fought for them. And when defeat came so did my depression.”*

I believe we are all emotionally dependent to one degree or another, and that’s why we relate to Bill’s struggle. Emotional dependency is the result of being emotionally undifferentiated. The more differentiated we are the less reactive we are to others and the better we can soothe ourselves. (You can read more about the concept of differentiation in my book *12 Smart Things to do When the Booze and Drugs are Gone*).

If you want to achieve emotional sobriety, then you need to get honest with yourself about your current level of emotional maturity. Your level of emotional maturity relates to your level of differentiation. The more mature you are, the more differentiated you are. But none of us are perfectly differentiated. We all exist somewhere along a spectrum of undifferentiated to differentiated.

Differentiation can be assessed by how well we balance our need for togetherness with our need to honor our individuality. The more differentiated we are, the more these two parts of us will be balanced. The more balanced we are the less chance there is of becoming lost in a relationship. The more balanced we are the better we hold on to ourselves in a relationship.

Emotional sobriety is the result of learning to soothe ourselves and hold on to ourselves rather than manipulating other people to comfort us or validate us. Emotional sobriety is the movement away from manipulating others for validation towards supporting and validating ourselves. *If we require other people to act and behave a certain way for us to feel safe then the world will never be a safe place.* When I learn to stand on my own two feet and support and validate myself then what others do or don’t do becomes less important. Emotional sobriety means that we stop taking what other people do personally and we stop letting their limited perceptions of us define us.

Emotional sobriety involves maintaining autonomy while sustaining our connection. It means not losing ourselves in the relationship. As Dr. Erich Fromm stated, “Mature love is union with the preservation of integrity.”

Emotional sobriety is what Stage II Recovery is all about. As it turns out, emotional sobriety is Bill Wilson’s fourth legacy.

## Bio for Dr. Berger

Dr. Berger is an internationally recognized expert in the science of recovery. He is a popular recovery author and wrote Hazelden's popular recovery mainstay *12 Stupid Things that Mess Up Recovery (2008)*; *12 Smart Things to do When the Booze and Drugs are Gone (2010)* and *12 Hidden Rewards of Making Amends (2013)*. He is widely known for his work on several areas of recovery that include:

- Integrating modern psychotherapy with the 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous
- Emotional Sobriety
- Helping new patients understand the benefits of group therapy and helping them get the most out of it
- Helping families adjust to the challenges of recovery
- Training therapists and counselors in Gestalt Experiential Therapy

You can learn more about Dr. Berger and his work at [www.abphd.com](http://www.abphd.com).

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