

"Never" have we seen a person fail...?

Question: Is it true that there was a version of the Big Book which had Chapter 5 begin: Never have we seen a person fail who has thoroughly followed our path? I've heard it said that Bill W. wanted it to read that way or there was an early version like that.

Answer: There has never been a pre-publication or published version of the Big Book that uses "Never" in place of "Rarely" at the start of How It Works.

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."

From 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. Any how, 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."