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English 110H

Insight, Revelation, and the Paradox of Powerlessness:

An Argument for Epiphany

*What in me is dark Illumine, what is low raise and support; That to highth of this great Argument I
may assert Eternal Providence, And justify the ways of God to men*

--John Milton

The most significant quest in the history of man is his pursuit of happiness and fulfillment. Every man and woman born into this world - whether consciously or not - will spend most of their lives seeking a way of living which gives them peace and a lasting happiness. But in the course of this journey to a desired shore of fulfillment we are frequently confronted with powers outside our control and often outside of human understanding. The appearance of insurmountable obstacles and perilous traps in the human experience are unavoidable and remind us of our innate imperfection and powerlessness.

Yet we are reasoning beings capable of profound intuitions; moreover, phenomena may sometimes occur in our lives that remove obstacles and set us on roadways to higher equilibriums of existence. The epiphany is one such singular phenomenon that has been the subject of documentation and critical analysis in the Western tradition for centuries.

The Oxford Dictionaries defines epiphany as both “a moment of sudden revelation or insight” and “a manifestation of a divine or supernatural being.” The latter speaks to the traditionally religious connotation and the former invokes the modern sense in which the word is used. However, the use of the terms “revelation” and “insight” to describe the nature of an epiphany raise more questions than they answer. “Insight” implies an active thought process in which one uses reason to evaluate experience and arrive at a conclusion while “revelation” implies that a great truth

is simply revealed to one through some variant of divine or supernatural grace. I would suggest, rather, that the division between “revelation” and “insight” is a false one that subverts the very meaning of epiphany. A reconciliation between insight and revelation, however, could establish new light on the true nature and potential of epiphanies, which by definition, are life-changing.

Due to the often ambiguous and subjective descriptions of epiphanies and their outcomes in both literature and history it is exceedingly difficult to put one's finger on exactly what qualifies as an epiphany. In the present discussion I wish to deal with a specific kind of epiphany and its relationship to the concept of human powerlessness. As we shall see, epiphanies of powerlessness and the mindset which they make available to human beings are fundamentally experiential, and the nature of the experience has a part which certainly involves insight, and another which seems to defy logic and imply revelation. This is because when a human looks on her life and realizes just how powerless she truly is, she has the option of living and exerting her will with the full consciousness of her ultimate powerlessness. But the recognition of this powerlessness would be useless and academic if not supported by something else, a belief or faith in a power greater than oneself which fills the void once occupied by the human will. Interestingly, many people come to belief not through mental processes or with the help of a religious upbringing, but simply as a consequence of their realization or insight. Although this cannot be verified in a very scientific sense, it appears that some mysterious force sometimes manifests itself in the lives of men who realize their powerlessness and allows them to live happier, more satisfied lives. After realizing their powerlessness and coming to believe that a benevolent power, not a malevolent power, occupies the space outside of their own will, men gain a peace and serenity which paradoxically gives them *more* power over their lives. This is especially true in the case of hopeless alcoholics who are often restored completely to sanity by epiphanies of powerlessness.

The reasonable fact that humans always have at least some power over their circumstances does not negate the clear benefits of living life with an attitude that they have none. My extension

of this point into the definition of “epiphany” is quite obscure, but I wish here to ask my reader to be open to seeing in the examples I will discuss presently a possible meeting of insight with revelation as men take a realization and watch it transform into a spiritual experience. Through a recognition of personal powerlessness and a faith in a positive power beyond themselves they come to a profound conclusion that can only be called an epiphany.

As I stated in my introduction, epiphanies of this kind are well recorded in history and appear to offer some important clues about the nature of human experience. In the reminiscences of the author David Whyte and the stories of Bill Wilson and countless other recovering alcoholics we find two common elements which provide evidence for a marriage of insight and revelation in the context of epiphany. These two elements are recognition of personal powerlessness and surrender to a power beyond themselves which they love and trust.

This type of epiphany, an epiphany of powerlessness, has different effects for different people. In the case of the first members of Alcoholics Anonymous, who realized that they were powerlessness over alcohol, they underwent rearrangements which opened the door for them to enjoy real and fulfilling lives that were always within their grasp, but were obscured by a relentless willful pursuit of serenity that rendered them drunk and hopeless. There is also a another group of people, whom I identify through Whyte, without severe problems who come to recognize their ultimate powerlessness, develop faith in and love for a power beyond their control, and thus are thrown into epiphany. But the fact remains that when people come face to face with their own powerlessness over circumstances they are elevated to a new perspective over their lives in which they can come to terms with the reality of their situation and paradoxically develop a way of thinking which gives them the power to make better choices and live happier, more satisfied lives.

I will begin my examination with the story of William Wilson, a stockbroker from New York and a co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous who developed a chronic addiction to alcohol during the 1920s and 30s. He records: “liquor ceased to be a luxury; it became a necessity” (AA 5).

Here we see the nature of Wilson's illness. We know from earlier in his story that at first alcohol was an “important and exhilarating” (AA 3) part of his life. But by the early 1930s he makes the claim that it had become a “necessity.” The use of the word necessity in this context effectively conveys how Wilson was losing control of his life and happiness. If he truly needs alcohol in the way that normal people need food and water then he has no more control over alcohol than we have over our need to breathe. We find it written that Bill knew he “was to plunge into the dark, joining that endless procession of sots who had gone on before” (AA 8). This effectively means that Bill knew alcohol had made him a “sot” and that he had no hope but to carry on into a miserable alcoholic death because of his inability to control his drinking. Critically important to understanding the importance of the epiphany of powerlessness which will be the beginning of Bill's recovery is understanding why, even with this grim knowledge, Bill continued to drink. He states, “Nevertheless, I still thought I could control the situation, and there were periods of sobriety which renewed my wife's hope” (AA 5) This indicates the single most important fact of the mental state of people proceeding an epiphany of powerlessness. Bill Wilson, like David Whyte whom we shall examine later, believed that he was in “control” of his life. It appears that the very human belief, however delusional, that one is in control of their destiny always precedes the emergence of an epiphany of powerlessness. As we shall see the great paradox of these epiphanies is that they actually open the door to a way of thinking which puts one more in control of one's own destiny.

We read in *Alcoholics Anonymous* how Wilson's drinking steadily got worse, and he became desperate for a way to achieve permanent sobriety. The arrival of a friend and fellow alcoholic who had achieved sobriety through the practical spirituality of the prominent 20th Century Christian organization The Oxford Group began his journey towards epiphany and freedom. This friend of Bill's explained to him that a program of action in which the first step was an admittance of powerlessness could solve Bill's alcohol problem and teach him a way of living which would be far more satisfying than his alcoholic life. In the following quotation from *Alcoholics Anonymous* Bill

will use the concept of “God” as part of his description of his epiphany. We should not allow for prejudice to label Bill's experience some kind of religious nonsense, since we are told that Bill was not a Christian nor did he have any concrete religious beliefs. He used the term only to indicate a power beyond his own, what members of AA have come to call one's “higher power.” The recognition of a power beyond one's self represents the inherently spiritual side of epiphanies of powerlessness. Implying a more spiritual basis for epiphany, it is this recognition which determines whether or not the realization of one's powerlessness will lead to the peace and serenity which will allow for the paradoxical power which results from the epiphany. It appears that unless one can fill the dearth of their own power with a benevolent power an epiphany of powerlessness will not have the immensely positive effects it did for Bill W. and the non alcoholic example we will discuss.

Returning to Bill's story we read: “I admitted for the first time that of myself I was nothing; that without Him [God] I was lost” (AA 13). Here we find Bill “admitting” that by himself he “was nothing”, or in other words powerless. The use of the word “admit” betrays that Bill's experience is mental. He has had, through reflection on his hopeless alcoholic past and the wisdom of his now sober friend, an insight that his power is not great enough to overcome his illness. Therefore, I would suggest that this is the first part of his epiphany, the mental recognition that one needs a greater power than the human will to overcome life's challenges and be satisfied. We should also note here that an integral part of Bill's ideas is a hope and faith that there does exist a power which can indeed help him, a power which he chooses to call God. This faith is exceedingly slippery for most people to hold on to, but in the case of Bill and my later example, we find that the human experience often forces one into contact with forces outside our control which make acceptance of our helplessness unavoidable.

Before proceeding into the remarkable effects produced by the second half of Bill's epiphany I will introduce a piece of evidence that supports the link between insight and revelation I have been trying to establish. In their book “The Spirituality of Imperfection” scholar Ernest Kurtz

and author Katherine Ketcham argue for an understanding of spirituality which rejects cries for perfection and instead focuses on the intricacies of the human condition and the potential for happiness and imperfection to coexist. At one point they write, “Our very imperfections. . .are precisely what brings us closer to the reality that no matter how hard we try to deny it, we are not the ones in control here. And this realization, inevitably and joyously, brings us closer to 'God'” (Kurtz & Ketcham 29). Here we find a way of looking at powerlessness from a different angle, from the angle of the fact of human imperfection. The authors here make an interesting connection between these ideas in which they claim that the existence of “imperfection” can eventually force us to accept that we may not be “perfectly” in control.

Applying this idea to the example of Bill Wilson I would point out that it appears he did have but little control over his actions for most of his life, and the authors of “The Spirituality of Imperfection” imply that few really do. The authors call this recognition a “realization,” a term which is closely related to insight in that it involves rational thinking and often results in a change of attitude. The next part of the quotation is exceedingly interesting as the authors claim that this realization “inevitably and joyously” brings us closer to “God.” Again “God” should be understood in the sense of a power beyond human control with attributes of benevolence and love. The fact that these authors insist that a closer contact with a higher power is an inevitable result of an insight into one's innate powerlessness is a strong piece of evidence for a possible reconciliation between insight and revelation which occurs through a recognition of powerlessness in the context of epiphany. This is because it seems as though the realization of powerlessness becomes a segway into a new way of living and thinking which manifests many attributes of divine grace, as we shall see presently.

Continuing in Bill's account, after admitting his powerlessness he records: “There was a sense of victory, followed by such a peace and serenity as I had never known. There was utter confidence. I felt lifted up, as though the great clean wind of a mountain top blew through and

through. God comes to most men gradually, but His impact on me was sudden and profound.” This statement of Bill's is flowing with the textbook signs of an epiphany. He uses the words “sudden and profound” which are usually associated with the concept in dictionary definitions. Furthermore he leaves evidence supporting my idea that one's powerlessness can empower them. He states that he felt “utter confidence” and “a sense of victory.” The truth of this paradoxical idea has been explored by recent scholarship and has revealed a very ancient philosophical basis for these new applications. In her paper “The Paradox of Powerlessness” Sandra Herndon connects the idea to several Eastern philosophical schools including Hinduism, Taoism, and Buddhism in the section titled “The Paradox” (Herndon 2-3). She comes to the conclusion that, “The paradox is that one may become empowered by accepting one's powerlessness” (Herndon 3). In the context of my examination of integrated epiphanies of powerlessness involving elements of insight and revelation the existence of the paradox may represent a “revelation” or an instance of grace. It appears on all accounts that Bill, powerless as he is, has no right to feel so confident and victorious, yet whatever force is behind his epiphany has led him to feel as though he has all the power in the world. He is powerless in the sense that he cannot make himself happy, but by recognizing this, his belief in “God” has given him a confidence and a “peace and serenity” which he “had never known.” The paradox, powerlessness equaling power, is beyond our common human understanding but in epiphanies of powerlessness it opens a door to an other-worldly, spiritual kind of revelatory happiness.

The experience of Bill Wilson has been shared by hundreds of thousands of alcoholics who followed the lessons of his writings and came to understand and admit their powerlessness just as he did in in the winter of 1934. The epiphanies of powerlessness shared by members of Alcoholics Anonymous are potent examples of how “insight” and “revelation” can occur in an epiphany. The experience of AAs seems to imply that a mental recognition, an insight, is necessary for the grace, or revelation, of a source of peace and serenity within man that is seemingly inexhaustible, and is a

paradoxical source of power. I can account from personal experience with applying the lessons from the book *Alcoholics Anonymous* to my own struggles with addiction and alcoholism that admission of powerlessness truly opens one up to a peace and serenity which consequently gives one the power to do many things which would have been otherwise impossible. But affliction with addiction is not at all a necessary condition to enjoy the “peace and serenity” which Bill and I and countless other alcoholics have come to enjoy.

In “Crossing the Unknown Sea: Work as a Pilgrimage of Identity,” author David Whyte gives us evidence of the universal availability of epiphanies of powerlessness. In the chapter “Out of Ireland” Whyte describes the many travels and adventures of his youth and at the same time reveals a mental state which bears some resemblance, and some difference, to the attitude of Wilson prior to his experience in the hospital. He writes, “One fatal event would follow another and I began to see myself like one of Napoleon's favored generals, except God was *my* supreme commander, someone who had bestowed upon me, rightfully, more than my share of luck” (Whyte 96). After the central importance of the “God” idea to the recovery of Bill and the onset of his epiphany it is somewhat confusing to find it used in the description of Whyte's attitude just before his own epiphany of powerlessness. But a closer look reveals that the important thing in Whyte's statement is that he feels that God shows him favor “rightfully,” or based on his own merit. Thus belief in God does not guarantee the humility which is necessary for the start of an epiphany of powerlessness. We find that while Whyte did not claim control over his circumstances as Bill did, he certainly accepted responsibility for his victories and therefore claimed much control over his destiny. But Whyte was about to have an important insight regarding the true scope of his will which would lead him to the same shore reached by Wilson.

The catalyst for his coming epiphany was an experience he had as a tour guide in the Galapagos Islands. He recounts in the section “The Blowhole” how he was accustomed to stand near the edge of a blowhole where the waves of the Pacific Ocean would burst through and shower

him while a crowd of tourists looked on amused by his somewhat dangerous display of confidence in the face of such great natural force (Whyte 101). He recalls how once he and a fellow tour guide performed this stunt and were caught together in the “exhilaration of being showered by the scattered tons of water falling on us” (Whyte 101). Here we should note that both Whyte and Bill Wilson used the term “exhilarating” to describe their reckless behavior, for Bill his drinking and for Whyte his adventuring, prior to having their epiphanies. While I do not wish to discuss this in detail it is more evidence of the connection between these two very different men.

But Whyte's story, like Bill's, takes a dramatic and sudden turn when his exhilaration is cut short by the very real threat of death. Whyte proceeds to describe in detail how “two freak waves” struck the rocks which contained the blow hole the two men were standing near. Whyte then gives a vivid account of how he and his friend miraculously survived the onslaught of the waves in spite of being twice pulled out to sea and flung back onto the rocks. After the experience Whyte recounts: “What is left in my memory is the sheer quivering power of the ocean that day. Its power was even more unsettling because as soon as the second wave had gone, the sea returned to its regular rhythm and the blowhole to its original contained fury” (Whyte 103). I would suggest that this reflection on the awesome and unpredictable power of the ocean is the beginning of Whyte's epiphany of powerlessness. His memory was burned with the impression of his helplessness, not just at the “sheer quivering power” of the waves, but also with his reflection that after that maelstrom “the sea returned to its regular rhythm.” The fact that this made the experience all the more “unsettling” for Whyte signifies the mental as well as physical powerlessness which we humans suffer from. As a guide Whyte had stood at the edge of the blowhole many times and had grown accustomed to being in control of the situation, yet the powers of this world often betray the human sense of security, and Whyte's conviction that he knew what to expect from the forces of the earth was forever shattered that day.

Whyte's reflection on his powerlessness on that rocky Ecuadorian cliff, which I would argue

amounts to an insight, could not consummate an epiphany of powerlessness. For a real epiphany to occur it appears that a more spiritual, mysterious, and truly revelatory element would be needed.

In the section titled “Plucked from the Waves” we find Whyte back in England visiting his mother three years later (Whyte 104). As they have a late night discussion over whiskey she suddenly brings up a very compelling dream she had in which she recalls: “You [Whyte] were standing on the cliff edge next to the strange fountain when a big wave came to the top and swept you away” (Whyte 105). Whyte is obviously shocked at this telling by his mother since he had not told any family members about what had happened that day. His mother continues, “In the dream I leaned down from above and took hold of you by the back of the neck. I lifted you out and put you safely back on the cliff” (Whyte 105). Whyte recalls that after this telling the hair stood up on the back of his neck and his spine shivered (Whyte 105).

What happens next is truly remarkable for this discussion in its striking resemblance to the account of Bill Wilson. Whyte records that he “felt a level of absurdity about . . . the sense I had of my own powers” (Whyte 106). In the story of Wilson we find the stockbroker recounting, “I, who had thought so well of myself and my abilities, of my capacity to surmount obstacles, was cornered at last” (AA 8). For Whyte this recognition signifies the final blow to his ego as he recognizes the “absurdity” of living with a belief in one's own powers. He seems finally to fully concede that without the aid of benevolent forces like those of his mother he would have been killed long ago. What makes this insight revelatory is that it defies logic and the more stark ideas of science. I would suggest that were the force behind epiphanies of powerlessness not at work in this moment Whyte could easily have reasoned that his mother's dream, being a dream, was not real and just some kind of coincidence. But something beyond reason is *revealed* to Whyte and he is subsequently catapulted into a conscious relationship with a power greater than himself. In Whyte's case, this will not be a personal god, but his family and ancestors.

Whyte recalls thinking, “*There are powers in the world about which you know very little.*”

Like, for instance, this little woman sitting in front of you” (Whyte 106). Here Whyte recognizes that he knows “very little” about the true powers in the universe. And his reference to his mother reveals what he now feels is the true “higher power” in his life. Earlier in the chapter Whyte prepared us for this revelation by including a section titled “The Boundaries of Personal Power” (Whyte 94). In this section Whyte discusses the limitations of the will and states, “as we grow older, we grow wiser as to the extent of those powers [our own powers]; there is another profounder way, in which we are dependent. . . literally and physically on what we have been given by those who have gone before us” (Whyte 94). Notice an intricacy in the crafting of this statement. He begins by speaking of how young people gradually come to know their limitations by testing their luck and personal power, he then uses a semi-colon and states “there is another profounder way,.” The structure of the phrase, placed between a semi-colon and a comma, indicates that Whyte means to say “There is another profounder way” as a self contained idea.

The fact that Whyte speaks of a “way” seems to be a reference to a way of life or spiritual path. He finishes his statement by saying that this “way” involves living with the consciousness of our dependence on the people who came before us. I would suggest that living with this consciousness is a form of worship in which the individual abandons his own power and ability to reason for a way of living and thinking that is fundamentally more “profound” in that it leads to dependence on powers outside our control, in this case Whyte’s family and influences. The recognition of this “dependence” on outside power and the potential for profundity held in their worship is another hugely important aspect of epiphanies of powerlessness. If the epiphanies are to have their full effect, the newly recognized dearth of personal power must be replaced by a higher power worthy of some kind of worship or faith.

As it turns out Whyte's recognition and his new “profounder way” do produce some very potent results. He writes: “something else had happened inside me while the conversation proceeded that night. I stopped trying to do it all myself. . .I didn't need to have absolute control

over my destiny. I couldn't have it anyway. . .It was alright if I lived in a world in which my mother had saved me in the end” (Whyte 107). This reminds us of the famous aphorism of *Alcoholics Anonymous* “First of all, we had to quit playing God ” (AA 62). It appears that the insight of the epiphany has given Whyte a greater peace in his life by giving him the realization that he cannot do it all alone. But more significantly the revelation of the epiphany, that is the spiritual aspect signified by his mother's mysterious dream, has led him to the belief that if he relies on a higher power, in his case his mother and other contributors to his life things will be all right in the end. The fact that he takes the time to write about this subject in a book meant to help people find their way in this world shows that his epiphany has had a great effect on him and the way he lives his life. Judging from its similarities to the experience of Bill Wilson and his positive, humble tone in this chapter of his book, it is clear that the effects have been positive, enriching, and profound.

Even modern scientific research seems to support the idea of the “Paradox of Powerlessness.” This comes from Jennifer Matheson and Eric McCollum and their paper “Using Metaphors To Explore The Experiences Of Powerlessness Among Women in 12-Step Recovery.” We find it written there that during an examination of responses by 13 women interviewed as part of a study of the efficacy of the powerlessness principle of Alcoholics and Narcotics Anonymous that: “women who accept powerlessness can feel empowered to recover from substance abuse” (Matheson & McCollum 1033). Thus the paradox of powerlessness seems well grounded in research and history, but far more important than the paradox itself is its implications. On its own the paradox is certainly intriguing, but what is more interesting is that when this paradox operates within an epiphany, an experience which I have argued is both rational and spiritual, it produces effects most profound and beautiful in the lives of men and women.

My main purpose in writing this essay has been to make a case for the existence of epiphanies which truly live up to the definition ascribed to them. I have, granted, pushed the definition by calling for the “or” between insight and revelation to be thrown out and replaced with

the word “and.” This, I feel, is necessary to give the true potential within epiphanies justice. I am also not suggesting in my argument for the existence of “epiphanies of powerlessness” that there is only one kind of epiphany, or that they always involve a recognition of powerlessness. I am simply making a case for the existence of this one type within a possible broad spectrum of epiphanies, and using what I see as bountiful evidence for the existence of this one type to stifle those who may argue against the possibility of any true epiphany.

The fact that in our modern world people have attempted to strip from the concept of epiphany its spiritual origins is a reflection of the cynicism which many modern people feel for spirituality and religion. Yet the continued importance of the idea reflects also the hope inherent in all people that there exists a possibility for sudden and dramatic emotional and spiritual rearrangement. Nevertheless moderns have attempted to reduce the term to a definition of a great realization reached through reason and experience.

Still the potential for real, spiritual epiphanies exists in the modern era, as shown in the stories of Whyte and Wilson. And when we introduce the very complex and subtle concept of powerlessness into the discussion we can see that by attempting to subvert the importance of the spiritual and glorify the importance of reason in epiphanies the moderns only enrich the beautifully paradoxical tapestry of a human life fulfilled through epiphany.

I have personally experienced the force of an epiphany of powerlessness in all its beauty and paradox in my own life. In the interest of not seeming sentimental and unacademic I have saved a brief discussion of my own story for my conclusion. In spite of my reservations I feel a responsibility to this information to inform the reader of my great experiential bias.

Like Wilson and Whyte, I myself felt for most of my life that I was in control of my situation, even as, at the tender age of thirteen, I began my own spiral into addiction and near madness. Drawing me close to the experience of Whyte, my father acted as savior to me, not in a conventional sense but by providing me with an example of the perils of a life lived on self will.

When my father passed away in 2011 from cardiac arrest due to an overdose of narcotic drugs, I realized that I stood on the edge of my own blowhole, betting everyday that I could outsmart nature and escape disaster. Even after my father's death and my subsequent recognition of the peril I faced as a fellow alcoholic and addict I continued to make bets, just like Whyte. It was not until I received my revelation, through the medium of *Alcoholics Anonymous* and the spiritual way of life it outlined, that I watched my life transform miraculously and beautifully. I gained peace and serenity like Wilson. I used my powerlessness like a deposit placed unreservedly with a power greater than myself and watched a new and better power flow into me.

Thus I would suggest that epiphanies are very real, and they require for their consummation both an insight and a revelation, a conscious effort and an experience of grace. My firm belief and I hope convincing argument in favor of the existence of epiphanies may indicate many other important truths about the nature of human life. If it is true that epiphanies require an experience of grace, and if many people have had such epiphanies, then it is difficult to deny even from the most highly academic heights the existence or at least plausibility of a power greater than us, be it God, the power of love, or a personalized abstraction of nature.

The rich tapestry of life requires awe to enjoy. The source of beauty is awe, awe with the great and wonderful powers which have formed our world as it is and continue to ensure its existence in spite of our own wills. This awe comes from humility and surrender, two of the important outcomes of epiphanies of powerlessness, and the more we are filled with this awe the more we can experience the unfathomable beauty, mystery, and uncompromising reality of the world in which we live, and the more we may enjoy peace, serenity, and the power that comes after powerlessness.

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