

Bill W. and the Boomerang: An Imagined Psychotherapy¹

Scott Kellogg, PhD

In *As Bill Sees It* (Bill W., 1967), Bill W., the co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous, told a story about how he learned how to throw a boomerang. He was ten years old, and he had been feeling depressed for about a year. In terms of life stressors, his father had abandoned the family, his mother had left him in the care of his grandparents so that she could begin her medical studies, and his school life was not going well. One day his grandfather showed him a book about Australia and told him that the book said that only the Aboriginal people could make and throw a boomerang. This stimulated something in him. He wrote: “‘Here’s my chance,’ I thought. ‘I will be the first man in America to make and throw a boomerang.’” Set on fire by this goal, he made a boomerang and spent six months learning how to throw it. “But mine was a power drive that kept on for six months, till I made a boomerang that swung around the church yard in front of the house and almost hit my grandfather in the head when it came back.” His conclusion was: “Emotionally, I had begun the fashioning of another sort of boomerang, one that almost killed me later on” (185).

As both an Addiction Psychologist and as a father, this story disturbs me. I believe that this was a traumatic experience for Bill and, as is often the case with traumatic experiences, I believe he drew the wrong conclusions from this event. The decision to try to master the boomerang was an attempt to shore up his fluctuating self-esteem – but the story is more than that. It is also a story about drive and ambition, about choosing a goal and pursuing it with dedication and perseverance. These are character traits that most parents would be proud of. When his throwing of the boomerang goes wrong, Bill made a global and negative assessment of himself. I believe that his sense of ambition became tainted and intertwined with traumatic fear and guilt. What he really needed was some more practice and some fine-tuning of his technique (and, possibly, some parental supervision). “Let’s go into that big field over there and throw it in a place where it will be safer,” I wanted to say. Tragically, it seems that no one did that.

I recently wrote for an article for *The Fix* on Chairwork. Following up on that, I want to explore how I might have used Chairwork dialogues to treat Bill’s trauma, if I had been given that opportunity. In reality, it probably would have taken several sessions and a number of different Chairwork approaches; nonetheless, I believe that the example provided here would have been a central part of the healing project.

Dr. K.: Bill, I’ve been thinking about that boomerang story that you told me last week.

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Bill W.: Yes, it is quite a story.

Dr. K.: If it is okay with you, I would like to re-visit it and do some work with it.

Bill W.: Fine.

Dr. K.: To start, I would like us to have a Chairwork conversation with your Grandfather about what happened.

Bill W.: Hmmm... okay, I guess.

(I move to a place in the office where there are two identical chairs facing each other. They are about three or four feet apart.)

Dr. K.: *(Pointing at one of the chairs)* I would like you to sit here. *(He sits down. I bring over another chair and sit to his left. I am about two feet away and I am sitting at a diagonal so that I can see both Bill and his Grandfather.)*

Dr. K.: *(Pause)* I would like you to imagine your Grandfather sitting in that chair *(pointing to the chair opposite)*. Take a moment to settle in and then let me know when he comes into view.

Bill W.: *(He sits in silence for a minute or two – looking at the chair opposite.)* Okay. I can see him.

Dr. K.: Please describe what you see. What he's wearing. How old he is. What the expression on his face is and how you are feeling as you see him.

Bill W.: *(Pause)* He's in his early sixties. He's dressed the way he used to dress back then. He looks serious but I sense some warmth in him.

Dr. K.: How are you feeling as you see him?

Bill W.: I'm happy to see him. I haven't seen him in a long time.

Dr. K.: Good. *(Pause)* I'd like you to speak to him about the boomerang incident and how it has been bothering you.

Bill W.: *(Pause)* Grandpa. I've been thinking about that day with the boomerang. It has stayed with me for my whole life. Dr. Kellogg says it's a trauma. I don't know if that's true, but I do know that I've never forgotten it.

Dr. K.: Tell him what you remember.

Bill W.: I remember that I'd been practicing with the boomerang. I had been working on it for months. I was excited. I thought I was finally getting it. I was hoping that I could be the first American to throw a boomerang.

Dr. K.: What happened next? Tell him.

Bill W.: I remember throwing the boomerang toward the churchyard. I can still see it in my mind. It made this beautiful arc, and it was heading back toward me. *(Pause)*

Dr. K.: Then what?

Bill W.: And just then you came out of the house, and it went right toward you.

Dr. K.: What were you feeling? Tell him.

Bill W.: I was terrified. I couldn't move. I was afraid it was going to hit you.

Dr. K.: Say that again. I was terrified. I thought it was going to hit you.

Bill W.: I was terrified. I thought it was going to hit you.

Dr. K.: Good. What happened next?

Bill W.: At first it seemed like you didn't see it. Then I yelled. You saw it and you ducked.

Dr. K.: It missed him.

Bill W.: It just missed him. *(Pause)* I was so scared. I ran over to make sure you were okay.

Dr. K.: Was he angry? How did he react? Speak to him about this.

Bill W.: Grandpa, you looked upset. I remember you telling me to be more careful; that I could have killed someone.

Dr. K.: How did you feel?

Bill W.: I was so upset. I couldn't stand it.

Dr. K.: What did you do next?

Bill W.: I was so angry with myself that I broke the boomerang. I never threw a boomerang again.

Dr. K.: After all those months of work, you broke it and never tried again?

Bill W.: No. I was so upset that I wanted nothing to do with it.

Dr. K.: *(Pause)* How are you feeling as you say these things?

Bill W.: I am feeling agitated. It's still very disturbing to me.

Dr. K.: Did you love your Grandfather?

Bill W.: Yes.

Dr. K.: Did you want to hurt him?

Bill W.: Of course not.

Dr. K.: Was this an accident?

Bill W.: Yes. Although I blamed myself for a long time afterwards. I think I still blame myself.

Dr. K.: I would like you to look at your Grandfather and say this. Grandpa, I loved you and it was an accident.

Bill W.: Grandpa, I loved you and it was an accident.

Dr. K.: Again.

Bill W.: Grandpa, I loved you and it was an accident.

Dr. K.: Again.

Bill W.: I loved you, it was an accident, and I never meant to hurt you.

Dr. K.: I loved you and I never meant to hurt you.

Bill W.: I loved you and I never meant to hurt you.

Dr. K.: *(Pause)* How is that resonating inside of you?

Bill W.: It feels true... I wish that I had been able to say it to him when he was alive.

Dr. K.: He's sitting over there now. Do you think he heard you?

Bill W.: Yes. I have some sense that he did.

Dr. K.: I would like to do something. I would like you to move into that chair *(pointing at the chair opposite)* and I would like you to be your Grandfather. I would like you to channel his energy and speak from his perspective. Is that okay?

Bill W.: Okay. *(Bill switches chairs; I stay next to Bill's original chair.)*

Dr. K.: Grandpa, do you remember this experience with the boomerang?

Bill W. as Grandfather: Yes, I do.

Dr. K.: Would you speak about your memory of it?

Bill W. as Grandfather: Sure... well, Bill had just come to live with us.

Dr. K.: Would you speak to him and tell him directly? Use his name.

Bill W. as Grandfather: Sure. Bill, your father had already left the family and your mother had just entered medical school. I remember that you weren't very happy. You seemed to be having difficulties in the new school. It was tough for you. You were 10 and everything was a mess.

Dr. K.: Talk to him about the boomerang.

Bill W. as Grandfather: Yes. I showed you that book about Australia and you really got the bug for learning how to throw a boomerang. I remember that you were really excited about the idea that you could be the first American to do it.

Dr. K.: It sounds like this memory gives you some pleasure.

Bill W. as Grandfather: It does give me pleasure. I remember you making a boomerang in the shed and then going out after school and trying to get it to work. You worked on that for months.

Dr. K.: Talk about the day when you almost got hit?

Bill W. as Grandfather: Yes. I was coming out of the house, and I heard him yell....

Dr. K.: Tell him directly. Use his name.

Bill W. as Grandfather: Bill. I was coming out of the house, and I heard you yell and then it was right there. I ducked and it went right by my head.

Dr. K.: What happened next?

Bill W. as Grandfather: I was stern with him. He scared me because he took me off-guard. That boomerang was made out of a nice, hard piece of wood.

Dr. K.: Bill told me that he never threw the boomerang again after that.

Bill W. as Grandfather: That's right. I was sad to see that, actually. He had worked so hard at it and then he suddenly gave it up.

Dr. K.: It sounds like you wanted him to throw it, like you didn't want him to stop?

Bill W. as Grandfather: No. I didn't. He had worked so hard; I was sad to see him stop.

Dr. K.: Grandpa, tell him that directly. Tell him that you know it was an accident, that you wanted him to keep throwing the boomerang.

Bill W. as Grandfather: (*Looking at the chair opposite*) Bill, I know it was an accident. I know you weren't trying to hurt me. I wanted you to keep working with the boomerang. I was sad when you stopped.

Dr. K.: Grandpa, would you tell Bill that you love him, that he's important to you, and that you want him to be happy and successful.

Bill W. as Grandfather: Bill. You know that Grandma and I both love you. We felt bad about your parents leaving you and we were happy that you came to live with us. We were proud of you. I know that you had some pain later on in life, but I want you to be happy. I want you to be successful. We both do.

Dr. K.: I think that there's a part of Bill that feels like he is a very bad person for what happened. That he's dangerous. Would you speak to him about this?

Bill W. as Grandfather: Bill. Don't think that way; it was just an accident. You didn't do it on purpose. I know you didn't do it on purpose. I got angry at the moment because I was scared, but I knew it was an accident.

Dr. K.: So, you don't believe he's a killer?

Bill W. as Grandfather: Of course not; that's ridiculous.

Dr. K.: I think a part feels that he is. Please tell him

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Bill W. as Grandfather: Bill. I know you loved me and Grandma. I know you would never do anything to hurt us. It was just an accident. You were a kid. You were learning.

Dr. K.: Again. You were a kid, and you were learning.

Bill W. as Grandfather: You were a kid, and you were learning. You were only 10. It's okay. Nobody got hurt.

Dr. K.: I think Bill walked away from that experience with a sense that he should not act. That if he acts, bad things can happen. I think he wants to act but now he is afraid.

Bill W. as Grandfather: No, no. Of course, he should be a man who acts in the world.

Dr. K.: Tell him directly.

Bill W. as Grandfather: Bill. I know you are a good man. I want you to act in the world. I don't want you to live in fear, to hold yourself back. You need to be careful, but you need to act.

Dr. K.: I want you to act.

Bill W. as Grandfather: I want you to act.

Dr. K.: Say this if it feels right. I want you to be careful and I want you to throw the boomerang.

Bill W. as Grandfather: Yes. I want you to be careful and I want you to throw the boomerang.

Dr. K.: Tell him again, it's important that he hears this.

Bill W. as Grandfather: I want you to be careful and I want you to throw the boomerang.

Dr. K.: Be careful and throw the boomerang.

Bill W. as Grandfather: Be careful and throw the boomerang.

Dr. K.: Again.

Bill W. as Grandfather: Bill. Be careful and throw the boomerang.

Dr. K.: Bill, don't live in fear. Be safe. Be careful. And throw the boomerang.

Bill W. as Grandfather: Don't be afraid. Throw the boomerang. Be safe, be careful, and throw the boomerang.

Dr. K.: Throw the boomerang!

Bill W. as Grandfather: Throw the boomerang!

Dr. K.: (*Long pause*) Now I would like you to come back to this seat (points to the "Bill" seat). (Bill switches seats) (*Pause*) I would like you to sit there and just take a minute and see if you can let in what your Grandfather just said to you. (*Long pause*) What are you feeling?

Bill W.: That was powerful. I'm feeling shifted. I feel lighter, like a burden has been lifted. I've been carrying this for a very long time, and I feel like I put some of it down.

Dr. K.: That's great. What was it like to be Grandpa?

Bill W.: I really felt how much he cared for me. I also saw myself as a kid. I think that I have lost track of that. I have been really hard on myself.

Dr. K.: So, you feel his love?

Bill W.: Definitely. I feel shifted and I feel better.

Dr. K.: Before we end for today, is there one more thing that you would like to say to your Grandfather?

Bill W.: (*Looking at the Grandfather Chair*) Grandpa, thank you for that. Thank you for taking care of me. Thank you for telling me that I am not bad. Thank you for giving me permission to act in the world.

Dr. K.: That was good.

This is the kind of encounter that I strive to create when working with patients. Experiential encounters of this nature can be very catalytic, and patients can make a great deal of progress from this kind of dialogue work. Does Bill W. have more work to do? Most likely. I suspect that he would benefit from an inner encounter with the self-accusatory voices that are still likely to be there; nonetheless, this is a good start. It is my hope that, at some point in his life, he really did find ways to work through and resolve this trauma.

References

Bill W. (1967). *As Bill sees it: The A. A. way of life ...selected writings of the A. A.'s co-founder*. New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Service Inc.

