

Breaking Down the AA Preamble

Notes from a Cooperation with the
Professional Community Workshop

Area 83

Eastern Ontario International

Spring Assembly

30 March 2019

Kingston Ontario

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The following are notes which were assembled from a variety of sources in preparation for a Cooperation with the Professional Community Workshop that was held on 30 March 2019 at the Area 83 Spring Assembly, held in Kingston, Ontario. The goal of this part of the Workshop was to stimulate discussion among the participants about the Preamble.

A Preamble is defined as:

1. an introductory statement
especially: the introductory part of a constitution or statute that usually states the reasons for and intent of the law (or the AA Fellowship in our case)
2. an introductory fact or circumstance
especially: one indicating what is to follow (the Twelve Steps in our case)

Every meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous begins with a moment of silence, followed by the Serenity Prayer. After this is concluded, most meetings will begin a series of readings, the first of which is the AA Preamble. To those who are not familiar with the Preamble, it is as follows:

Alcoholics Anonymous is a fellowship of men and women who share their experience, strength and hope with each other that they may solve their common problem and help others to recover from alcoholism.

The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking. There are no dues or fees for A.A. membership; we are self-

supporting through our own contributions. A.A. is not allied with any sect, denomination, politics, organization or institution; does not wish to engage in any controversy, neither endorses nor opposes any causes. Our primary purpose is to stay sober and help other alcoholics to achieve sobriety.

The Preamble sounds relatively straightforward, providing AA members with a basic description of AA while also reminding us why we are at a meeting and why we are members of AA. I know that I sometimes do not pay enough attention to the Preamble – which was given to us by Tom Y in 1947 and updated in 1958. It was first published in the Grapevine. When we have been to enough meetings, it can be easy to sit there and zone out while the Preamble is being read. Hopefully, a more thorough examination of its text will inspire some to listen more fully and take every word to heart.

The Preamble is essentially a mission statement, something that helps to guide us to stay on track in our recovery so that we do not forget the principles which we are supposed to follow. But while it may be relatively straightforward, its text can still be broken down into three basic sections that might help some of us learn to embrace its message more fully.

Part One of the AA Preamble

The first part of the AA Preamble is the top paragraph:

Alcoholics Anonymous is a fellowship of men and women who share their experience, strength and hope with each other that they may solve their common problem and help others to recover from alcoholism.

While this passage mentions helping others, note that it says we should do so through telling our own experiences. The story, our story, of how we found strength and hope in recovery is the single greatest tool we have for helping others who have struggled with alcoholism. Such people may be in denial or may have many reservations or even fears about getting sober. As Bill W learned early on, the suffering alcoholic will not be inclined to listen to lectures from strangers, no matter how heartfelt these lectures may be. But by sharing only our own stories, we may help to open their eyes to a life made possible by recovery. It is not simply enough to tell people that this life is possible — we must become living demonstrations of the principles we have learned through the AA program.

Newcomers listening to these stories can often gain a first insight into their story. Depending upon the sobriety date of the individual who is sharing at the time, there are often one or more of three messages that emerge;

- If the person sharing has been sober for years or even decades, we can learn that there is a solution that can work long-term.

- If the person sharing has entered recovery only recently, we can learn just how much they can get out of the program if they are willing to work at it.
- And when members of the Fellowship of either camp share their experiences, we all learn that we are not alone.

The newcomer will quickly come to realize that they are not the first to take Step One, nor will they be the last. Many will hear parallels to their own lives in these stories, and as such they will learn to hold up a mirror and see just how powerless alcohol has made them. Hopefully, this will serve to inspire a change.

Part Two of the AA Preamble

The second part of the AA Preamble we wish to examine takes up most of the second paragraph:

The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking. There are no dues or fees for A.A. membership; we are self-supporting through our own contributions. A.A. is not allied with any sect, denomination, politics, organization or institution; does not wish to engage in any controversy, neither endorses nor opposes any causes.

This part of the Preamble contains three of AA's Twelve Traditions:

- **Tradition Three**

The Third Tradition states that membership is open to anyone who wishes for sobriety – anyone who has a desire to stop drinking.

- **Tradition Seven**

The Seventh Tradition states that AA cannot accept outside contributions.

- **Tradition Ten**

The Tenth Tradition states that AA maintains no opinion on outside issues, thus allies itself with no outside institutions.

Anybody who may be nervous about joining AA because they feel they can't afford it or feels that they can't fit in can lay these worries to rest. A desire to stop drinking is the only requirement. For those who have been in the AA program and who have truly embraced the Twelve Traditions, especially those in the AA Preamble, should be understanding of each individual member's unique predicament. We may be anonymous, but AA is not a place where we should ever have to hide who we are or be ashamed of our drinking.

Part Three of the AA Preamble

The last part of the AA Preamble is but a single sentence:

Our primary purpose is to stay sober and help other alcoholics to achieve sobriety.

Not only does the last line of the AA Preamble mirror the last line of the first part that we examined, but it also recalls yet another one of the Twelve Traditions. It is stated in **Tradition Five – that the primary purpose of every AA group is to carry their message to those who are still suffering.** This message of selflessly giving away what has been freely given can also be seen in **Tradition Twelve – Having had a spiritual awakening as a result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics and practice these principles in all of our affairs.**

Someone who is new to the AA program need not worry about carrying the message just yet, but they should still take these words to heart. For those who are carrying the message, we try not to act out of selfishness.

The program of Alcoholics Anonymous is a place where we learn to change from our old way of life in order to become more generous and caring through our service work. Perhaps newcomers aren't ready to sponsor another alcoholic, but they can still tap into their more charitable side by performing service duties such as brewing coffee before the meeting. A first step in Self Support and Service work.

If you are serious about what this program has to offer, ask your sponsor to help you find a regular service commitment. Place emphasis on the word "commitment," for generosity is about more than the occasional good deed. The program teaches us responsibility through honouring our commitments. It

is a way of life, inside and outside the program of AA, and it is one that every alcoholic who truly wishes to recover should begin embracing immediately.

Summarizing What We've Learned

When you put each part of the AA Preamble together, what you have is a WE program – a group of recovering alcoholics that stand for recovery first and foremost. We should not be judgemental, provided the person is willing to become sober. And we should never deny a caring hand to those in need with a desire to quit drinking. All are welcome. All who want this program have a right to it. The AA Preamble makes it clear that our role is to help them by sharing our experience, strength and hope.

On the flip side, we must also be open to the help that we are being offered. We have the freedom to interpret others' stories however we wish. The AA Preamble may seem like a simple text, but every sentence is loaded with meaning.

If the above stimulated some thinking and discussion for yourself and your friends, know that the AA Preamble has done its job, for it has inspired you to truly think about the program and everything it represents. And if you are able to get something out of it, then may the message you have understood grow to represent the AA program in your own unique way.