

THE TWELVE. TRADITIONS

(The Long Form)

From the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous, page 565

Our A.A. experience has taught us that:

1. - Each member of Alcoholics Anonymous is but a small part of a great whole. A.A. must continue to live or most of us will surely die. Hence our common welfare comes first. But individual welfare follows close afterward.
2. - For our group purpose there is but one ultimate authority-a loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience.
3. - Our membership ought to include all who suffer from alcoholism. Hence we may refuse none who wish to recover. Nor ought A.A. membership ever depend upon money or conformity. Any two or three alcoholics gathered together for sobriety may call themselves an A.A. group, provided that, as a group, they have no other affiliation.
4. - With respect to its own affairs, each A.A. group should be responsible to no other authority than its own conscience. But when its plans concern the welfare of neighboring groups also, those groups ought to be consulted. And no group, regional committee, or individual should ever take any action that might greatly affect A.A. as a whole without conferring with the trustees of the General Service Board. On such issues our common welfare is paramount.
5. - Each Alcoholics Anonymous group ought to be a spiritual entity having but one primary purpose-that of carrying its message to the alcoholic who still suffers.
6. - Problems of money, property, and authority may easily divert us from our primary spiritual aim. We think, therefore, that any considerable property of genuine use to AA should be separately incorporated and managed, thus dividing the material from the spiritual. An A.A. group, as such, should never go into business. Secondary aids to A.A., such as clubs or hospitals which require much property or administration, ought to be incorporated and so set apart that, if necessary, they can be freely discarded by the groups. Hence such facilities ought not to use the A.A. name. Their management about be the sole responsibility of those people who financially support them. For clubs, A.A. managers are usually preferred. But hospitals, as well as other places of recuperation, ought to be well outside A.A. -- medically supervised. While an A.A. group may cooperate with anyone, such cooperation ought never go so far as affiliation or endorsement, actual or implied. An A.A. group can bind itself to no one.
7. - The A.A. groups themselves ought to be fully supported by the voluntary contributions of their own members. We think that each group should soon achieve this ideal; that any public solicitation of funds using the name of Alcoholics Anonymous is highly dangerous, whether by groups, clubs, hospitals, or other outside agencies; that acceptance of large gifts from any source, or of contributions carrying any obligation whatever, is unwise. Then too, we view with much concern those A.A. treasuries which continue, beyond prudent reserves, to accumulate funds for no stated A.A. purpose. Experience has often warned us that nothing can so surely destroy our spiritual heritage as futile disputes over property, money, and authority.
8. - Alcoholics Anonymous should remain forever non-professional. We define professionalism as the occupation of counseling alcoholics for fees or hire. But we may employ alcoholics where they are going to perform those services for which we might otherwise have to engage nonalcoholics. Such special services may be well recompensed. But our usual A.A. "12th Step" work is never to be paid for.¹⁴

9. - Each A.A. group needs the least possible organization. Rotating leadership is the best. The small group may elect its secretary, the large group its rotating committee, and the groups of large metropolitan area their central or intergroup committee, which often employs a full-time secretary. The trustees of the General Service Board are, in effect, our A.A. General Service Committee. They are the custodians of our A.A. Tradition and the receivers of voluntary A.A. contributions by which we maintain our A.A. General Service Office at New York. They are authorized by the groups to handle our overall public relations and they guarantee the integrity of our principle newspaper, the A.A. Grapevine. All such representatives are to be guided in the spirit of service, for true leaders in A.A. are but trusted and experienced servants of the whole. They derive no real authority from their titles; they do not govern. Universal respect is the key to their usefulness.

10. - No A.A. group or member should ever, in such a way as to implicate A.A., express any opinion on outside controversial issues -- particularly those of politics, alcohol reform, or sectarian religion. The Alcoholics Anonymous groups oppose no one. Concerning such matters they can express no views whatever.

11. - Our relations with the general public should be characterized by personal anonymity. We think A.A. ought to avoid sensational advertising. Our names and pictures as A.A. members ought not be broadcast, filmed, or publicly printed. Our public relations should be guided by the principle of attraction rather than promotion. There is never need to praise ourselves. We feel it better to let our friends recommend us.

12. - And finally, we of Alcoholics Anonymous believe that the principle of anonymity has an immense spiritual significance. It reminds us that we are to place principles before personalities; that we are actually to practice genuine humility. This to the end that our great blessings may never spoil us; that we shall forever live in thankful contemplation of Him who presides over us all.

The A.A. CREDO

I AM RESPONSIBLE.....

when anyone, anywhere reaches out for help, I want the hand of A.A. always to be there. And for that, I am responsible.

On Tradition One

"Our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends upon A.A. unity."

Editorial by Bill W.

A.A. Grapevine, December, 1947

"Each member of Alcoholics Anonymous is but a small part of a great whole. A.A. must continue to live or most of us will surely die. Hence our common welfare comes first. But individual welfare follows close afterward."

Our whole A.A. program is securely founded on the principle of humility--that is to say, perspective. Which implies, among other things, that we relate ourselves rightly to God and to our fellows; that we each see ourselves as we really are--"a small part of a great whole." Seeing our fellows thus, we shall enjoy group harmony. That is why A.A. Tradition can confidently state, "Our common welfare comes first."

"Does this mean," some will ask, "that in A.A. the individual doesn't count too much? Is he to be swallowed up, dominated by the group?"

No, it doesn't seem to work out that way. Perhaps there is no society on earth more solicitous of personal welfare, more careful to grant the individual the greatest possible liberty of belief and action. Alcoholics Anonymous has no "musts." Few A.A. groups impose penalties on anyone for non-conformity. We do suggest, but we don't discipline. Instead, compliance or non-compliance with any principle of A.A. is a matter for the conscience of the individual; he is the judge of his own conduct. Those words of old time, "Judge not," we observe most literally.

"But," some will argue, "if A.A. has no authority to govern its individual members or groups, how shall it ever be sure that the common welfare does come first? How is it possible to be governed without a government? If everyone can do as he pleases, how can you have aught but anarchy?"

The answer seems to be that we A.A.s cannot really do as we please, though there is no constituted human authority to restrain us. Actually, our common welfare is protected by powerful safeguards. The moment any action seriously threatens the common welfare, group opinion mobilizes to remind us; our conscience begins to complain. If one persists, he may become so disturbed as to get drunk; alcohol gives him a beating. Group opinion shows him that he is off the beam, his own conscience tells him that he is dead wrong, and, if he goes too far, Barleycorn brings him real conviction.

So it is we learn that in matters deeply affecting the group as a whole, "our common welfare comes first." Rebellion ceases and cooperation begins because it must; we have disciplined ourselves.

Eventually, of course, we cooperate because we really wish to; we see that without substantial unity there can be no A.A., and that without A.A. there can be little lasting recovery for anyone. We gladly set aside personal ambitions whenever these might harm A.A. We humbly confess that we are but "a small part of a great whole."

Bill W.

The A.A. Grapevine, December, 1947



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First Tradition Checklist

[November 1969](#)

Vol. 26 No. 6

The author says: "AA's Twelve Traditions have, in my experience, often proved vital in keeping me sober, and helpful otherwise in all my affairs." This is the first of a series of articles sharing that experience.

Our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends on AA unity.

MY AA HISTORY consists of two extended slips during an otherwise sober quarter-century. I have not taken or wanted a drink since May 1952, but I have learned much about alcohol and AA, and a little about myself. For instance, I no longer have quick, simple answers for staying sober, although at times I sound as if I had. For example, I have said I had sobriety of the head, not sobriety of the heart, in my first year, and I've been so proud of this eloquence that I was deaf to the vanity revealed: the implication that my own superior ability at rational thinking kept me from drinking.

More honest thinking suggests that what kept me sober those first days was not any of my doing at all. Obviously, it was not rules or laws, either, since we have none. In fact, our Twelve Traditions had not even been written yet, the first year I spent dry, sitting around in New York City's old 41st Street clubhouse, glum and stiff in one of the musty pews of that barnlike old church building where meetings were held.

I made a few mechanical gestures that year, doing my turn at desk or telephone duty, reading the AA publications (very few then), and speaking at meetings. I even typed copy for the early, tabloid-size Grapevine. But none of this was based on any real desire to change myself.

When I came to AA, I had not wanted sobriety so much as I wanted to stay out of the trouble that came with my drinking. I had been terrorized by blackouts and a searing fear that I was really losing my mind. I had been sick with shame at the way I had treated my family and friends, even if I did think they often deserved it for some of the things they did to poor me. I had been unemployable, hopelessly in debt, and sure that jail or an insane asylum was deserved and inevitable, unless a suicide attempt worked out some time.

The vanity which so often had propped me up had given way to self-loathing. I was a dirty, gaunt, unshaven, quaking wreck. I was no good. The world would be better off without me.

The state of AA dryness I found in that old clubhouse in 1945 was highly desirable, every precious 24 hours of it. It did not promise any rosy future, but it was beginning to exorcise the past.

I kept going through the AA motions, relieved enormously by the knowledge that I had a disease, that it was not my fault, and that others like me, or worse, were recovering. (Didn't I see hope sitting row on row at every meeting?) I was memorizing AA statements and not drinking, more because AA seemed to expect it (and my family approved) than because I really wanted the AA way of life.

It is, of course, a miracle that I stayed sober at all. Those wonderful AA people, when I first came for help, certainly had far more to do with keeping me sober than my own reluctant efforts. I believe now that those sober members acted out twelve specific ideas of AA behavior, and I want to celebrate in Grapevine ink those twelve ways, because they saved my life and still do, over and over.

Chronologically, one of the first things AA members ever did, which eventually made my own recovery possible, was simply *sticking together*.

The first AAs fast got the notion that we need each other if we are to survive. As has been said well and often, we may not all like each other, but we have to love each other. Communicate or die! When put into action, the power of that one idea alone can keep a guy sober, to his own surprise, a very long time. It did that for me, I know.

Then someone got the idea that AAs ought to put down in writing just how it was they were staying sober. Many agreed; others were fearful. The real crunch was agreeing on what to put into the book. What a miracle that those early members, despite misgivings, disagreements, distrust, and fierce devotion to high principles that were poles apart, could agree, not only on the Twelve Steps, but on enough material to fill a whole book! If the early AAs had not stuck together at that point, if they had broken up in hopeless disagreements, there would be no book, no Twelve Steps, no AA, and no me.

Ancient history? Not for me. I turned myself in to AA on a bitterly cold January day during World War II. AA members had already decided to have a publicly listed telephone number. The simple act of getting in touch with AA that first time washed out in an instant the dark loneliness that had encompassed my life. When I fearfully crept into that old building that first day, I was greeted with a gentle invitation: "Come on in. Let's talk it over." And everyone assured me I was not alone and *need never be alone again*.

All the suggestions I heard then were based on our sticking together. "Come to meetings" meant that I would be with other AAs, fulfilling the purpose for which meetings had been started in the first place. "Don't get lonely; telephone before you take a drink; talk to another member and get your troubles off your chest." All these powerful tools of sobriety assured me that *together* we could get well and stay well.

Less than a year later, there were so many meetings in the New York area that those of us who answered the telephone had difficulty remembering which groups met which nights and where. So we typed up a list we could refer to. Where would I be now without my meeting list and the central office that publishes it? These two things are absolutely necessary if we AAs in New York or in any large city want to stick together. To remove the last traces of loneliness, there is the *World Directory*, assuring me that we are now a worldwide fellowship with the shared strength of hundreds of thousands. And now the General Service Conference, many GSO bulletins, and the treasured Grapevine, of course, make it easier for all of us to keep in touch.

About five years after my last drink, I found myself pretty sick one day with an illness not related to alcohol. At home alone, scared, I needed help. The natural thing was to call an AA friend, right? Who else would come to help? To whom else could I unashamedly admit I was afraid? Who else knew the inside of fear?

But the only nearby AA member I could reach on the telephone at that time of day was a fellow I did not like. Never had, and the feeling was mutual; he had no use for me, either. Yet he came at once and helped me through the day with incredible, tactful kindness.

That is not an unusual AA story, I know. Almost always, when the chips are down, we forget our differences and observe our First Tradition. We may not quote its words very often, but apparently each AA realizes, deep down, that if it were not for the "we" of AA, there would be no "I."

The Tradition has also made a difference in the quality of my AA life beyond sobriety. One sleepless night some years ago, I was again feeling lonely and isolated, although I had been as regular as ever in going to meetings and participating in other AA actions. I felt surrounded by AA, but insulated against it. Somehow, I was wrapped in a cool cocoon that kept the warm AA spirit from getting to me.

Again, it took the experience of begging another AA member for help to melt away the chilly walls. This time I reached a dear AA friend, and the help I got was anything but tactful. I was told bluntly where the trouble was. It was self-importance again! It seemed that I had subtly and unconsciously come to think of myself as somewhat of an example, if not a font, of AA wisdom. My AA talks pointed out, not only how stupid I had been, but also--and mostly--how much smarter I was now. In discussion

meetings I never asked questions; I just answered them. I overflowed with AA know-how, and insidiously it put me out of touch. Secretly, I did not mind at all when someone once referred to me as an oracle.

True, I was sharing my experience, and what I revealed was honest. But it was not the whole truth. I kept hidden from others the yet-unsolved problems, the shameful secrets of today, admitting them fully to no one.

I was furious at the old AA friend who punctured the vanity balloon, but she was right. I had been so busy giving fellowship that I had forgotten to accept any. And she finally goaded me into doing something about it. I began to spill it all out, at last sharing the other parts of my total experience, including the bad and the embarrassing. Believe me, it was a liberating experience, and the help was enormously strengthening.

I no longer feel like an insulated wire set apart from all around me by the protective, concealing, non-conducting sheath of plastic egotism which can keep me out of touch. As an early Grapevine correspondent once wrote, "AAs, unlike some other people, do not reach down to help us; they reach out."

I still marvel that our Loners and Internationalists, who hardly ever get to meetings, stay beautifully sober. But I also remember that originally the Grapevine began as a message from the AAs back home to the AAs overseas in World War II. And I recall a letter from a private, who wrote from Normandy, "Even thousands of miles away, I know I am not alone, since all of you are always with me in spirit."

Maybe those isolated members--perhaps because they have to dig so deep into our literature--sense better than some meeting-goers like me the meanings and values of fellowship. They are constantly reminded that the Twelve Steps say we admitted, we came to believe, we made a decision, and we tried to carry the message.

This beautiful we, this sticking together in our brotherhood of love--which can heal my individual sick soul, as well as cementing together our Fellowship--is set forth for all of us in the words "Our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends upon AA unity."

First Tradition Checklist

My sobriety depends on unity with you.

What am I doing to help build that unity?

Here are some questions I ask myself when I take my First Tradition inventory:

1. Am I in my group a healing, mending, integrating person, or am I divisive? What about gossip and taking other members' inventories?
2. Am I a peacemaker? Or do I, with pious preludes such as "just for the sake of discussion," plunge into arguments?
3. Am I gentle with alcoholics who rub me the wrong way, or am I abrasive?
4. Do I make competitive AA remarks, such as comparing one group with another or contrasting AA in one place with AA in another?
5. Do I put down some AA activities as if I were superior for not participating in this or that aspect of AA?
6. Am I informed about AA as a whole? Do I support, in every way I can, AA as a whole or just the parts I understand and approve of?
7. Am I as considerate of AA members as I want them to be of me?
8. Do I spout platitudes about love while indulging in and secretly justifying behavior that bristles with hostility?
9. Do I go to enough AA meetings or read enough AA literature to really keep in touch?
10. Do I share with AA all of me, the bad and the good, accepting as well as giving the help of fellowship?

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On Tradition Two

"For our group purpose there is but one ultimate authority - A loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience."

Editorial by Bill W.

A.A. Grapevine, January 1948

Sooner or later, every AA comes to depend upon a Power greater than himself. He finds that the God of his understanding is not only a source of strength, but also a source of positive direction. Realizing that some fraction of that infinite resource is now available, his life takes on an entirely different complexion. He experiences a new inner security together with such a sense of destiny and purpose as he has never known before. As each day passes, our AA reviews his mistakes and vicissitudes. He learns from daily experience what his remaining character defects are and becomes ever more willing that they be removed. In this fashion he improves his conscious contact with God.

Every AA group follows this same cycle of development. We are coming to realize that each group, as well as each individual, is a special entity, not quite like any other. Though AA groups are basically the same, each group does have its own special atmosphere, its own peculiar state of development. We believe that every AA group has a conscience. It is the collective conscience of its own membership. Daily experience informs and instructs his conscience. The group begins to recognize its own defects of character and, one by one, these are removed or lessened. As this process continues, the group becomes better able to receive right direction for its own affairs. Trial and error produces group experience and out of corrected experience comes custom. When a customary way of doing things is definitely proved to be best, then that custom forms into AA Tradition. The Greater Power is then working through a clear group conscience.

We humbly hope and believe that our growing AA Tradition will prove to be the will of God for us.

Many people are coming to think that Alcoholics Anonymous is, to some extent, a new form of human society. In our discussion of the First Tradition, it was emphasized that we have, in AA, no coercive human authority. Because each AA, of necessity, has a sensitive and responsive conscience, and because alcohol will discipline him severely if he back slides, we are finding we have little need for manmade rules or regulations. Despite the fact that we do veer off at times on tangents, we are becoming more able to depend absolutely on the long-term stability of the AA group itself. With respect to its own affairs, the collective conscience of the group will, given time, almost surely demonstrate its perfect dependability. The group conscience will, in the end, prove a far more infallible guide for group affairs than the decision of any individual member, however good or wise he may be. This is a striking and almost unbelievable fact about Alcoholics Anonymous. Hence we can safely dispense with those exhortations and punishments seemingly so necessary to other societies. And we need not depend overmuch on inspired leaders. Because our active leadership of service can be truly rotating, we enjoy a kind of democracy rarely possible elsewhere. In this respect, we may be, to a large degree, unique.

Therefore we of Alcoholics Anonymous are certain that there is but one ultimate authority, **"a loving God as he may express himself in our group conscience."**

Bill W.

The A.A. Grapevine, January, 1948

12 Steps & 12 Traditions

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Tradition Two

For our group purpose there is but one ultimate authority — a loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience. Our leaders are but trusted servants; they do not govern.

[December 1969](#)

Vol. 26 No. 7

Second Tradition Checklist

AA's Twelve Traditions have, in my experience, often proved vital in keeping me sober, and helpful otherwise in all my affairs." - This is the second of a series of articles sharing that experience

For our group purpose there is but one ultimate authority. . .a loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience. Our leaders are but trusted servants. . .they do not govern.

SHORTLY after I returned to the office from lunch, the phone on my desk rang. It was a late autumn day during my first sober AA year.

"Did you know J-----B ----- got drunk?" asked the AA acquaintance on the line.

Such momentous news overwhelmed me. J ----- was the chairman of our group. I had considered him Mr. AA himself. Now I felt that the whole movement would soon totter under this disastrous blow, unless someone rushed to the rescue. A brilliant new leader would have to be found, quickly.

Well, how about me? I had been a club president a couple of times in school. Surely, my ability would be a great boon to the Fellowship.

"But he's so young!" I could hear someone exclaim. (I was chronologically twenty-seven, emotionally minus one.)

"Yes, but he's really brilliant," a wiser voice would reply.

By this time, I had tidied up my desk, made some excuse to the boss, grabbed my briefcase, hat, and coat, dashed to the subway, and ridden halfway to the old church building we used as a clubhouse for AAs in Manhattan in 1945. I carried with me about as much sense as a flea plotting to run a kennel.

Surprisingly, everything seemed calm when I arrived. No doubt some committee somewhere was already, privately, trying to find someone who could save AA. How could I let them know I was willing? Even if it was a tough job, with low salary, I'd make the sacrifice out of gratitude and love for AA. I could already hear my inaugural address after the swearing-in ceremony: plenty of laughs, plus enough heart stuff to bring tears to the eyes of the old folks (everybody over thirty); then a ringing peroration of rededication that would bring 'em to their feet roaring, as I turned modestly from the rostrum to take my seat of honor. (Just as in drunken days, I could still out-Mitty James Thurber's Walter M.)

At the clubhouse, though, all I could do was smile graciously at everyone around, cheerily reassure some new wretch from my lofty eminence of ten sober months, and chin a bit with other seedy statesmen. I even, for the first time, sprang for several cups of coffee.

Throughout the afternoon and evening, however, no one mentioned the vacant chairmanship. So, finally, I brought it up over coffee after the meeting. "Isn't it too bad about J ---- ?" I brightly blurted.

Only one old-timer paid attention. His look seemed to probe uncomfortably close to my deepest secrets, but his voice was kind as he said, "Well, just because J ---- got drunk doesn't mean *you* have to drink."

The idea was so breathtaking, I just shut up.

But my mentor continued, "You see, we'll get somebody else to do J ---- 's job. We rotate chores around here, you know. There's really no honor connected with AA offices or titles, just work. And it's often dirty work at that."

Although our Twelve Traditions had not yet been put into words, the truth, the spirit, and the sense of our Traditions was guiding those who helped me.

The shattering of my fantasy of eminence in AA was one lesson in what was to become our Second Tradition: that AA has no bosses. And that fact, only slowly learned, even more reluctantly accepted, but finally embraced, is greatly responsible for my sobriety. To stay sober, I had to learn that I could not be a boss in AA, no matter how much I wanted to or tried to.

There had been an earlier lesson on the obverse of that truth: that no one in AA could boss *me*, either. Upon discovering, my very first day in AA, that there was no place to sign up, no formal rite to initiate or mark me as a "member," I had asked with puzzlement, "But how will you know if I stay sober?"

"We won't," I was told. "But you will."

My first AA conversation had been an ever-increasing series of shocks, but this was almost too much. No one would check up on whether I had a drink or not! I felt relief, coupled with mild twinges of panic (Was it possible for me not to get drunk unless something or someone forcibly prevented it?) and wry anger (Dammit, this was a dirty trick! Why wouldn't "they" give me some magic thing to keep me safe?).

"No one in AA tells us what to do, or scolds us for not doing it," my first AA friend had explained.

Now, twenty-five years later, I am convinced that, as much as anything, that truth about AA heated up my determination to belong to the Fellowship.

But appreciation of the truth did not spring forth full-grown. To whittle down an egotism like mine takes years (It still sprouts unexpectedly, sneakily) and many experiences similar to my short-lived dream of the AA "presidency." If I never became a power and a glory in AA, it wasn't for lack of trying.

Just a few months later, I actually did become chairman of a new, small group. I summoned "my" other officers to a meeting and informed them of the new organization and the new rules that I was setting up. And in a few days I got drunk.

In fact, I remember the preparation of written bylaws for four separate

groups in New York City in the 1940's. We just did not trust each other or our successors. Each of those "business" sessions for framing such documents, as you no doubt suspect, was a comedy that could have been titled *Full Moon Over the Madhouse*. The records of our labors have long since disappeared, but the groups did survive and now flourish beautifully without such appurtenances. Also surviving is a lesson that can be drawn from this experience: Those who did not get their way in the squabbles over laws frequently got drunk, and some of them did not survive.

I truly believe that our Second Tradition, like all the others, is important for my individual survival, as well as for that of every AA group and our Fellowship as a whole.

At still another time in my life, I was again chosen to be chairman of a group, after serving some apprenticeships. On the night of the election (No one else wanted the job), despite my previous experience as a chairman, I was enormously moved. I felt very happy and even proud to receive from my group something that felt like an honor.

Big deal! At the very next meeting, the entire group turned on me. It was not personal, you understand. It was just that the coffee was too weak that night and the meeting had run overtime.

In every single AA job, I have received gripes and criticism; yet it has been rewarding to learn to listen to criticism, to evaluate it, to use it or reject it, and then to go on doing the job the best I could. In all honesty, I can say there were some pats on the back, too. But I did learn that, no matter what AA title I might briefly hold, I had absolutely no authority over any AA member. And, of course, no AA member, group, committee, office, or board has any authority whatsoever over me or any other member. (It has to be love, not government, that keeps AA stuck together.) This has the effect of keeping us all on one level in AA, and makes brotherhood easier than it would be if some of us were higher, others lower. I have at last come to like the fact that for AA purposes the final authority is a loving God (whatever concept of a benign Greater Power that word may represent to each of us) as expressed in the consensus of us all.

Suppose it were otherwise. Suppose we had layer upon hierarchical layer of drunks scrambling for higher and higher rungs of AA power and fame. Suppose we had to elect representatives to sit in some *governing* body (instead of the strictly *advisory* councils which our Intergroup committees and the General Service Conference are). Or what if we had to choose a national president!

Can't you just hear the nominating speeches and electioneering slogans? Can't you just hear the debates? Can't you just hear sobriety groaning under the strain, then the ice in the glasses, the cans and corks popping, and the sound of mass dt's that would surely result?

Fortunately, AA never puts us under such stress, thanks to our Second Tradition. Two things about the group conscience, however, still bother me. One is the fact that the Tradition does not say an *informed* group conscience. Once, we discussed all evening just what kind of quarters our central office should move into. Not one of us had ever searched out or tried to lease office space. Another time, we went on and on about procedures for electing regional members of AA's General Service Board, but only two people in the room had ever read *The Third Legacy Manual* (now revised and titled *The AA Service Manual*). If we had been better informed, our group decisions would probably have been wiser.

The other thing about group conscience that has given me trouble is the discovery that it does not always agree with me. After quite a few such ego-wounding differences, I had to admit that the group conscience could

manage without me, but that I needed it--just as we say about AA.

Finally, one more thing about this Tradition troubles me, and that is the word "trusted." I cannot do all the Twelfth Step jobs that I'd like to do and that need doing in my town and around the globe. But surely I can support, with loving trust, those at Intergroup and GSO who do help to make AA's reach citywide and worldwide. The committees that arrange conventions or banquets, meeting programs, or group anniversaries also deserve confidence. If I am not doing any of the work, the least I can contribute is trust in those who are.

Vice versa, if any AA job is entrusted to me, especially a Twelfth Step call, I will do the best I can, especially if the person is a sick newcomer who has just come to us. For in this way I maintain my own recovery. If we cannot trust each other as our Second Tradition suggests, who on earth can we trust?

Second Tradition Checklist

- Do I criticize or do I trust and support my group officers, AA committees, and office workers? Newcomers? Old-timers?
- Am I absolutely trustworthy, even in secret, with any AA Twelfth Step job or other AA responsibility?
- Do I look for credit in my AA jobs? Praise for my AA ideas?
- 4. Do I have to save face in group discussions, or can I yield in good spirit to the group consensus and work cheerfully along with it?
- Although I have been sober a few years, am I still willing to serve my turn at AA chores?
- In group discussions, do I sound off about matters on which I have no experience and little knowledge?

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On Tradition Three

"The only requirement for A.A. membership is a desire to stop drinking."

Editorial by Bill W.

A.A. Grapevine, February, 1948

"Our membership ought to include all who suffer alcoholism. Hence we may refuse none who wish to recover. Nor ought A.A. membership ever depend upon money or conformity. Any two or three alcoholics gathered together for sobriety may call themselves an A.A. group, provided that, as a group, they have no other affiliation."

This is a sweeping statement indeed; it takes in a lot of territory. Some people might think it too idealistic to be practical. It tells every alcoholic in the world that he may become, and remain, a member of Alcoholics Anonymous *so long as he says so*. In short, Alcoholics Anonymous has no membership rule.

Why is this so? Our answer is simple and practical. Even in self protection, we do not wish to erect the slightest barrier between ourselves and the brother alcoholic who still suffers. We know that society has been demanding that he conform to its laws and conventions. But the essence of his alcoholic malady is the fact that he has been unable or unwilling to conform either to the laws of man or God. If he is anything, the sick alcoholic is a rebellious nonconformist. How well we understand that; every member of Alcoholics Anonymous was once a rebel himself. Hence we cannot offer to meet him at any half-way mark. We must enter the dark cave where he is and show him that we understand. We realize that he is altogether too weak and confused to jump hurdles. If we raise obstacles, he might stay away and perish. He might be denied his priceless opportunity.

So when he asks, "Are there any conditions?" we joyfully reply, "No, not a one." When skeptically he comes back saying, "But certainly there must be things that I have to do and believe," we quickly answer, "In Alcoholics Anonymous there are no *musts*." Cynically, perhaps, he then inquires, "What is this all going to cost me?" We are able to laugh and say,

"Nothing at all, there are no fees and dues." Thus, in a brief hour, is our friend disarmed of his suspicion and rebellion. His eyes begin to open on a new world of friendship and understanding. Bankrupt idealist that he has been, his ideal is no longer a dream. After years of lonely search it now stands revealed. The reality of Alcoholics Anonymous bursts upon him. For Alcoholics Anonymous is saying, "We have something priceless to give, if only you will receive." That is all. But to our new friend, it is everything. Without more ado, he becomes one of us.

Our membership tradition does contain, however, one vitally important qualification. That qualification relates to the use of our name, Alcoholics Anonymous. We believe that any two or three alcoholics gathered together for sobriety may call themselves an A.A. group provided that, as a group, they have no other affiliation. Here our purpose is clear and unequivocal. For obvious reasons we wish the name Alcoholics Anonymous to be used only in connection with straight A.A. activities. One can think of no A.A. member who would like, for example, to see the formation of "dry" A.A. groups, "wet" A.A. groups, Republican A.A. groups, Communist A.A. groups. Few, if any, would wish our groups to be designated by religious denominations. We cannot lend the A.A. name, even indirectly to other activities, however worthy. If we do so we shall become hopelessly compromised and divided. We think that A.A. should offer its experience to the whole world for whatever use can be made of it. But not its name. Nothing could be more certain.

Let us of A.A. therefore resolve that we shall always be inclusive, and never exclusive, offering all we have to all men save our title. May all barriers be thus leveled, may our unity thus be preserved. And may God grant us a long life --and a useful one!

Bill W.

The A.A. Grapevine, February, 1948



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Third Tradition Checklist

[February 1970](#)

Vol. 26 No. 9

The only requirement for AA membership is a desire to stop drinking.

"AA's Twelve Traditions have, in my experience, often proved vital in keeping me sober, and helpful otherwise in all my affairs."

WHO CAN measure what is in the heart of another? No one presumed to measure the sincerity or quality of my motivation to get well when I first approached AA. Our Third Tradition is based on group experience, and its wisdom has truly been proved to me in personal experience. It is a powerful weapon for safeguarding my own recovery.

When I first offered myself to AA, some twenty-five years ago, I met almost no requirements for joining any decent gathering. The preceding months had been nothing but drunkenness, accompanied by a sickness at heart which few but alcoholics can fathom. I could have completed no questionnaire or application blank. I had no address, no telephone, no references. My last few employers would have warned anyone not to let me inside the door. My estranged family would have agreed. I had no religion, no job, no clothes except those I was wearing. I could not have paid a penny for entertainment in a penny arcade. From my past behavior, I could not prove that I deserved any kindness or help. I was dirty, and I stank. I had only a highly undesirable sickness to offer AA, and that was all AA asked of me.

I was so chilled inside, so bleak and numb that, although I had no overcoat, I did not notice the bitter wintry weather on the January day when I first walked, zombielike, up the steps into the old AA clubhouse on New York's West 41st Street. What shakes I could not control, I pretended were deliberate, if weird, gestures. My mouth was cottony; I had not had a drink for about thirty-six hours. I knew from gloomy past experiences that I must just hold on for one more minute, make my legs take one more step, try to think of some great happy moment in the past (or invent one), steel my will just one more time, and sooner or later I could get a drink, after I had investigated this Alcoholics Anonymous business. Or, mercifully, I would suddenly die. I had no strength to ask for help. I was taking this dangerous risk--getting near strangers who, I was told, did not ask for names and had been pretty bad drinkers themselves--just to see whether I could observe while being unobserved.

I was prepared--with lies. . .

Although I did not know what to expect, I was prepared--with lies, naturally. I had to be. If anyone asked me how much I drank, I always lied; the quantity was irrelevant to how drunk I got or what happened to me. If I was asked what I would do to get a drink, I would have to lie, because if I admitted the truth, I would surely be punished. If I was asked how I behaved when drunk, I would lie, partly to cover up the blackouts, partly to hide the bits of shameful truth that I did recall.

Since this was in 1945, before our Third Tradition was written, the AA woman who spoke to me first had no formal printed guidance for deciding whom to admit to AA for help. But she had compassion. She did not begin with a blunt "Are you an alcoholic?" If she had, I would have said, "Certainly not," with my usual nasty aloofness. Nor did she ask, "Do you want to stop drinking?" In my state, the question would have seemed absurd, if not insane. The one thing in the world I needed and wanted that minute was a stiff drink. But I was afraid to take one. That fact glued my feet just inside the door of the old building, where I pretended to be reading a handy bulletin board.

But she spied me lurking about, and, in a kind but not over-gooey voice, she said, "Are you having

trouble with your drinking?" I was thunderstruck. It was the one query I had not prepared a lie for. Before I knew what was happening, I told the truth. I nodded yes.

"Well, I'm a drunk myself," she said. "Come on in and we'll talk it over."

She spoke easily, with no emotionalism. I had thought I was beyond surprise, but I could only stare in disbelief. She seemed so serene, so content, so clean, so respectable. How could she say she was a drunk?

We sat down, and my education began. *She asked no questions*, so I did not have to be cautiously alert; I could just listen with full, intense attention. I heard about her disease, alcoholism, and her recovery in AA. It was more comforting, more nourishing, and more enduring than any drink had ever been. Probably my face remained frozen, but my heart thawed, and I had to keep blinking rapidly and blowing my nose. Finally, warm inside, I began to feel the cold I had come in out of.

Dreading the answer, I was afraid to ask what was in my heart: "Will you, *please*, let *me* join?" I knew I did not deserve it, so, with a disdain often practiced, I tried to sound casual while managing to murmur, as if only impersonally interested, "How does one join?"

She said that my simply coming there meant I wanted help, and if I just wanted to be a member of AA, then I already was.

I hope I never forget the floods of relief those words brought. I particularly need to remember them when I am disturbed or inconvenienced by "improper personages" who sometimes intrude on nice, clean, sober, orderly AA meetings these days. A group near my home has "banned" two alcoholics from its premises. Impossible types, I heard. Most uncooperative, very undesirable.

I was not in on these exclusions, but during my early AA days I sometimes led the pack in verbally stoning an alcoholic out of the one place where he could have found help at that time. We had many rules of membership then. They were a nuisance, because we had to keep changing them almost weekly to keep the "wrong" people out and let the "right" people in. Sometimes, one week's sergeant-at-arms was himself excluded the next week, because he was drunk. Me.

Perhaps today's would-be rule-makers for AA membership, or guardians of the premises, are those whose drinking lives had such virtue as to earn for them the "privilege" of AA assistance. But no member I know claims such deserts, and I know I do not. As you see, I am now as intolerant of rule-makers as they are of the sick alcoholics they find undesirable.

Honestly now, if, in order to get into AA, we had had to meet any standards more rigid than the one given in the Third Tradition, who of us would be alive? Think of all the wonderful people, including the nonconformists, eccentrics, and kooks who make such valuable additions to our number, who would have been kept out of AA if we had any requirement for membership other than a desire to get well.

Although I know it is impossible to judge what is in anyone else's heart, and arrogant even to try, I still find myself trying at times. I have heard myself on the telephone at Intergroup screening would-be members, as if judging whether or not they were worthy of our help, whether or not they merited our love.

I have even asked a drunk such an awful question as "Do you really want to stop drinking forever?" Or "Have you had any AA contact before?"--as if prior membership were a requirement, or perhaps grounds for disqualification. Or "What kind of pills do you take?" I have been impatient with a slipper, too, forgetting that this binge could be his last, as one of my own finally was (so far).

In fact, just today I found myself deciding that I do not care for so-and-so's brusque and hypocritical brand of AA; nor do I like what that fanatic such-and-such says so rudely about spiritual matters; and I can't stand the phony-sounding piety of still another fellow AA.

I fear that in my heart I am ruling out of my AA anybody who does not meet my own high and mighty requirements for membership. It is as if, each time I disdain an alcoholic for whatever reason, I add

another brick to a wall supposedly safeguarding my recovery, or at least keeping it cozy and comfortable for me. And if I keep on adding rejection bricks or exclusion bricks to my wall of safety, you know where I'll wind up: isolated behind the wall I have built; right back where I was before AA; *alone*.

One of my own first AA contacts did suggest that, later on, I could earn my AA membership if I wanted to. And I wanted to desperately, because I was already feeling smothered by the enormous debt of gratitude that I felt I owed to AA. I do not think I could have survived the burden of owing so much if AA had let me go on thinking it was all being done only for unworthy me. But I was assured that AA people kept *themselves* sober by trying to benefit me. It was also a great relief to be told that I could, in a sense, pay off my debt simply by talking to someone else, some day, as I had been talked to. It was *not* suggested that I help only the clean, the proper, and the unpilled, the nonbrusque and unhyponcritical, the nonfanatics, the pious, or the impious.

Apparently, for me, the price of our AA brotherhood (First Tradition) and of our fearless trust of each other (Second Tradition), if I want them, is learning unstinting acceptance of others--a love which can be claimed by anyone who wants it. He may not say he wants it, or act as if he does, but if the desire is in his heart, even unknown to himself, that is enough.

Third Tradition Checklist

1. In my mind, do I prejudge some new AA members as losers?
2. Is there some kind of alcoholic whom I privately do not want in my AA group?
3. Do I set myself up as a judge of whether a newcomer is sincere or phony?
4. Do I let language, religion (or lack of it), race, education, age, or other such things interfere with my carrying the message?
5. Am I overimpressed by a celebrity? By a doctor, a clergyman, an ex-convict? Or can I just treat this new member simply and naturally as one more sick human, like the rest of us?
6. When someone turns up at AA needing information or help (even if he can't ask for it aloud), does it really matter to me what he does for a living? Where he lives? What his domestic arrangements are? Whether he has been to AA before? What his other problems are?

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On Tradition Four

"Each group should be autonomous except in matters affecting other groups or A.A. as a whole."

Editorial by Bill W.
Grapevine, March, 1948

"With respect to its own affairs, each A.A. group should be responsible to no other authority than its own conscience. But when its plans concern the welfare of neighboring groups also, those groups ought to be consulted. And no group, regional committee, or individual should ever take any action that might greatly affect A.A. as a whole without conferring with the trustees of The Alcoholic Foundation. On such issues our common welfare is paramount."

This Tradition, Number 4, is a specific application of general principles already outlined in Traditions 1 and 2.

Tradition 1 states, *"Each member of Alcoholics Anonymous is but a small part of a great whole. A.A. must continue to live or most of us will surely die. Hence our common welfare comes first. But individual welfare follows close afterward."*

Tradition 2 states, *"For our group purpose there is but one ultimate authority--a loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience."*

With these concepts in mind, let us look more closely at Tradition 4. The first sentence of Tradition 4 guarantees each A.A. group local autonomy. With respect to its own affairs, the group may make any decisions, adopt any attitudes that it likes. No over-all or intergroup authority should challenge this primary privilege. We feel this ought to be so, even though the group might sometimes act with complete indifference to our tradition. For example, an A.A. group could, if it wished, hire a paid preacher and support him out of the proceeds of a group night club. Though such an absurd procedure would be miles outside our tradition,

the group's "right to be wrong" would be held inviolate. We are sure that each group can be granted, and safely granted, these most extreme privileges. We know that our familiar process of trial and error would summarily eliminate both the preacher and the night club. Those severe growing pains which invariably follow any radical departure from A.A. tradition can be absolutely relied upon to bring an erring group back into line. An A.A. group need not be coerced by any human government over and above its own members. Their own experience, plus A.A. opinion in surrounding groups, plus God's prompting in their group conscience would be sufficient. Much travail has already taught us this. Hence we may confidently say to each group, "You should be responsible to no other authority than your own conscience."

Yet please note one important qualification. It will be seen that such extreme liberty of thought and action applies only *to the group's own affairs*. Rightly enough, this Tradition goes on to say, "*But when its plans concern the welfare of neighboring groups also, these groups ought to be consulted.*" Obviously, if any individual, group or regional committee could take an action which might seriously affect the welfare of Alcoholics Anonymous as a whole, or seriously disturb surrounding groups, that would not be liberty at all. It would be sheer license; it would be anarchy, not democracy.

Therefore, we A.A.s have universally adopted the principle of consultation. This means that if a single A.A. group wishes to take any action which might affect surrounding groups, it consults them. Or, if there be one, it confers with the intergroup committee for the area. Likewise, if a group or regional committee wishes to take any action that might affect A.A. as a whole, it consults the trustees of The Alcoholic Foundation, who are, in effect, our over-all General Service Committee. For instance, no group or intergroup could feel free to initiate, without consultation, any publicity that might affect A.A. as a whole. Nor could it assume to represent the whole of Alcoholics Anonymous by printing and distributing anything purporting to be A.A. standard literature. This same

principle would naturally apply to all similar situations. Though there is no formal compulsion to do so, all undertakings of this general character are customarily checked with our A.A. General Headquarters.

This idea is clearly summarized in the last sentence of Tradition 4, which observes, "*On such issues our common welfare is paramount.*"

Bill W.

The A.A. Grapevine, March, 1948



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Fourth Tradition Checklist

Each group should be autonomous except in matters affecting other groups or AA as a whole.

[April 1970](#)
Vol. 26 No. 11

The author says: *"AA's Twelve Traditions have, in my experience, often proved vital in keeping me sober, and helpful otherwise in all my affairs."*

This is the fourth of a series of articles sharing that experience.

DURING my first sober year in AA, I heard that a group in the next state was awarding poker chips to members who stayed sober for various lengths of time. They even gave a party at the end of a newcomer's first year, with a candle on a cake, and everybody singing "Happy Birthday."

I was horrified. Scandalized! I declared that such childish behavior led people to stay sober only for rewards, rather than for their own lives' sake. Besides, it violated the 24-hour plan of trying to stay sober one day at a time, not for a month or a year. I shook my head and muttered, "Something ought to be done."

Soon after that, a speaker at our meeting told some off-color stories. (Like many "reformed drunkards," I had become quite a puritanical prig.) He also revealed that he had been drinking the day before. This was too outrageous to be ignored, of course. So I went to an older member, who had patiently listened to me before, and I complained again, "Something ought to be done!"

"Well, do it, then," he declared, grinning, and walked away. (No Traditions had been written down yet. It was 1945.)

Shortly thereafter, through the Grapevine, I began to learn shocking facts: In Chicago, Minneapolis, St. Louis, and Miami, lots of groups did things "wrong"--which meant, of course, not the way we did them in my group.

And yet those faraway, seemingly benighted AAs seemed to stay sober just as well as we did. Besides, with their anniversary parties and sobriety tokens, they seemed to have a lot of fun that my group missed out on. And those exasperating old-timers I talked to didn't seem to mind one bit. They just kept on serenely staying sober. Apparently, it bothered them not at all that other groups and other members were going their own independent ways. I didn't know then what the old-timers realized: that getting distressed about other members and groups was dangerous, not to those others, but to the AA who got upset about them.

There was the rub: If I was unwilling to grant autonomy to others, the one likely to get drunk was *me*. So finally I had to learn, once more, that there are no bosses in AA (as our Second Tradition says) and that nobody in the outfit would take orders, anyway.

In my opinion, there is additional, specific guidance on this in the now-written words of our Fourth Tradition: *Each group should be autonomous except in matters affecting other groups or AA as a whole*. And I don't think I am distorting the spirit of those words when I say to myself that not only each group, but also each member deserves autonomy. Besides, respect for the independence of others is to my own advantage.

If there were no Fourth Tradition (first in the old-timers' experience, then in written words), what would

my own AA story be?

If, during my first AA months, *one* way of doing things had been forced on all groups, I might not have stayed around to get well. If the poker chips and anniversary parties had been mandatory in my group, all of us who shrank from such sociability could easily have found AA not for us, and gone away to drink again and to die.

On the other hand, if some AA laws had absolutely forbidden such practices (as I had wanted to do), many AAs who have found sobriety tokens or key chains, birthday cakes and anniversary parties helpful in their recovery would have been deprived of these aids in staying sober.

I think the autonomy Tradition means that *any* help--whether it is a poker chip, a piece of jewelry, a book, a prayer, a cake and candle, a Slogan, a clinic, one particular kind of meeting, a psychiatrist, a sponsor, or any other means of staying sober--is wonderful.

If each of us is expected to arrive at his own understanding of a Greater Power, I cannot believe that any other member--or a committee of us--is meant to decide how he shall do it. But I have found that grudging tolerance of others' ways is not enough. Learning to respect the positive values of these different ways has contributed much more to my recovery.

As AA now grows into its thirty-fifth year, I feel that our Fourth Tradition has grown in value. Because of it, we are helped to avoid a rigidity which might destroy the usefulness of AA and hinder its ability to take in more and more of the various kinds of sick alcoholics.

Early in my own AA life, I was fortunate enough to encounter members who wanted to try daring AA experiments. They started types of meetings that no one in AA had heard of before: closed discussions, open discussions, and Step meetings, among others. Some even persuaded a general hospital to open a ward for alcoholic patients, run in close cooperation with our AA Central Office, and to allow meetings on the premises.

You can guess what a ruckus these innovations kicked up. "Heresy!" one faction cried. Because a certain approach had never been used before, they said, it would not work. It might even ruin AA!

Of course, thousands of us now know that different kinds of meetings give us the different kinds of help we need at various stages of our sobriety. Thousands of us have had our lives saved by such hospital arrangements. (Mine was, twice.) Who says the Fourth Tradition does not apply to sobriety for an individual?

So I am glad that group autonomy gives us the right to experiment if we wish. Otherwise, all meetings would be alike, all held at the same time, and every one of us who has ever benefited from a daytime discussion or a midnight Eleventh Step meeting would just be out of luck.

Quite recently, I found myself back on a group Steering Committee. I had been chairman of the group many years before, but no one else on the committee knew that. I sat in quiet horror as the Young Turks discussed what kind of sandwiches seemed to go best at the beginners meeting. *Sandwiches?*

I smirked inwardly. They couldn't get anybody to make them, I was sure. Besides, the group treasury would be depleted by such fancy food, and our rent would go unpaid until our church landlord was heard from.

At our beginners meetings, we now have the biggest crowds ever, happily munching away, sober. Instead of barely scraping up the rent, we now have a treasury full enough to pay it and then make generous monthly gifts to our local Intergroup and the AA General Service Office as well. Thanks to that Fourth Tradition, my group could be independent of me and my rigidity. And who knows what wonderful new ideas are yet to come if members like me will be flexible enough to accept them and use them?

The closing words of our Tradition do suggest, however, that the autonomy is not unqualified. My group has the right to run itself any way it pleases, but only so long as it does not mess things up for other

groups, or hurt our beloved Fellowship as a whole.

Each time I recognize the value of my group's autonomy, I am reminded of my personal responsibility. For example, when those all-important newcomers arrive at a meeting where I am present, whatever I do or fail to do may indeed affect other groups. If I am not friendly, if I am overzealous, if I am hypocritical, if I am dogmatic, if I am frivolous, if I am humorless, any one of these may be the quality which a newcomer ascribes to *all* AA. He may go away saying, "Those AAs are clannish" or "fanatical" or "dreary," and he may never come back to that group--nor try any other.

What can I do about it? Well, whenever I lead or speak at an open meeting or participate in a discussion meeting, it is probably important for me to say clearly that no one member speaks for AA as a whole or for any AA group, that each speaker expresses his own opinion only. In AA, we seek diversity of opinion, not uniformity, because in that way we can help more and more people. (I especially need to remember this, of course, when opinions I do not like are voiced.)

But I am not sure that such announcements are totally effective. In fact, as an AA member, I can do very little that does not reflect on my group or on AA as a whole, whether I like it or not. To the non-AA world, we individuals *are* AA. It is an awesome responsibility. Once I spoke sharply to a fellow worker, not in AA, and he responded acidly, "All you AAs are so damn rigid!" Since I was the only AA he knew, I represented to him our entire Fellowship.

My AA freedom to do or say as I please does indeed need to be watched.

On the group level, the widespread autonomy so fiercely practiced and cherished sometimes brings with it a severe handicap to our Fellowship over-all--or at least a disadvantage which we have to work hard and ingeniously to overcome. I mean that autonomy sometimes can make free communication and free exchange of experience somewhat difficult.

If we had the kind of chain of command most organizations have, helpful information might travel better or more quickly. If we had echelons of authority, ideas could be forcefully passed down to all units. News of a new pamphlet would automatically be disseminated by governing units to those being governed. Results of new kinds of meetings could be instantly transmitted to all groups and members.

As it is now, thousands of AA members are deprived of knowledge which they would happily use. For example, fewer than half the AA groups in the world take the Grapevine. And, because each group is autonomous, no one can force on them the knowledge that this wonderful (in my opinion) magazine exists. I am continually being surprised, as I visit various groups, to learn that many members have never heard of Bill's new book, *The AA Way of Life*; some have no idea what is coming up in Miami Beach July 3--5 this year; some, to be sure, have not been told about any of the Traditions, only about the Steps; and at a meeting I attended last night, I met one young man who had been around AA over three years before anyone suggested to him, "Have you tried the Steps? They were helpful to me."

This seems a heavy, if not a dangerous, price for AA to pay for group autonomy. Is it worth such a risk?

The answer is yes, I believe, since the alternative would be rigid, doctrinal uniformity imposed on all groups and members. That alternative would threaten my sobriety, dangerously.

Instead, I am free to continue learning and growing at my own rate (or to stand still). That Fourth Tradition offers true independence to me, the individual, as well as to every AA group, so long as we accept some responsibility along with it. But I don't mind. Who ever said that freedom was for free?

Fourth Tradition Checklist

1. Do I insist that there are only a few *right* ways of doing things in AA?
2. Does my group always consider the welfare of the rest of AA? Of nearby groups? Of Loners in Alaska? Of Internationalists miles from port? Of a group in Rome or El Salvador?
3. Do I put down other members' behavior when it is different from mine, or do I learn from it?

4. Do I always bear in mind that, to those outsiders who know I am in AA, I may to some extent represent our entire beloved Fellowship?
5. Am I willing to help a newcomer go to any lengths--his lengths, not mine--to stay sober?
6. Do I share my knowledge of AA tools with other members who may not have heard of them?

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On Tradition Five

"Each group has but one primary purpose -- to carry its message to the alcoholic who still suffers."

Editorial by Bill W.

A.A. Grapevine, April, 1948

"Each Alcoholics Anonymous group ought to be a spiritual entity having but one primary purpose -- that of carrying its message to the alcoholic who still suffers."

Says the old proverb, "Shoemaker, stick to thy last." Trite, yes. But very true for us of A.A. How well we need to heed the principle that it is better to do one thing supremely well than many things badly.

Because it has now become plain enough that only a recovered alcoholic can do much for a sick alcoholic, a tremendous responsibility has descended upon us all, an obligation so great that it amounts to a sacred trust. For to our kind, those who suffer alcoholism, recovery is a matter of life or death. So the society of Alcoholics Anonymous cannot, it dare not ever be diverted from its primary purpose.

Temptation to do otherwise will come aplenty. Seeing fine works afoot in the field of alcohol, we shall be sorely tempted to loan out the name and credit of Alcoholics Anonymous to them; as a movement we shall be beset to finance and endorse other causes. Should our present success continue, people will commence to assert that A.A. is a brand new way of life, maybe a new religion, capable of saving the world. We shall be told it is our bounden duty to show modern society how it ought to live.

Oh, how very attractive these projects and ideas can be! How flattering to imagine that we might be chosen to demonstrate that olden mystic promise: "The first shall be last and the last shall be first." Fantastic, you say. Yet some of our well-wishers have begun to say such things.

Fortunately most of us are convinced that these are perilous speculations, alluring ingredients of that new heady wine we are now being offered, each bottle marked "Success"!

Of this subtle vintage may we never drink too deeply. May we never forget that we live by the Grace of God -- on borrowed time; that anonymity is better than acclaim; that for us as a movement poverty is better than wealth.

And may we reflect with ever deepening conviction, that we shall never be at our best except when we hew only to the primary spiritual aim of A.A. -
- *"That of carrying its message to the alcoholic who still suffers alcoholism."*

Bill W.

The A.A. Grapevine, April, 1948



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Fifth Tradition Checklist

Each group has but one primary purpose. . .to carry its message to the alcoholic who still suffers.

[June 1970](#)
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ON MY FOURTH sober AA day, I was sitting alone in one of our musty old meeting rooms, very sad and very broke. All the AAs had seemed very kind in their desire to help, but none of them had mentioned money. And, like thousands of other new members, I believed my biggest problems were financial. Yet not one person had offered a loan.

Then, suddenly, one of those big, handsome, gray-templed, well-dressed old-timers strode in with a friendly smile widening his face. He stuck out his hand and squeezed mine. "If I can help you any way at all, just say so, and I'll do it!" he declared heartily.

Trying to sound as if I were merely asking for a match, I said, "I hope so. You see, I need to borrow two thousand dollars."

His silence was total.

But finally he spoke. "You're in the wrong place," he said firmly. "We don't lend money here, my friend. That's not what this place is for."

I froze, but he went on and on. "We won't help you with a money problem. We won't help you with a family problem or a job or clothes or a medical problem or food or a place to spend the night. All we will do in AA is help you stay sober," he explained. "Then you can take care of these other problems yourself. You *can* take care of yourself, can't you, if you're sober?"

I hated that word "sober." But what could I say? "Certainly," I snapped, humiliated that, in my ignorance of AA "folkways, I had been caught in a *faux pas*, as if someone had found me eating peas with my fingers.

What the man had said made perfectly good sense. I *had* been sober a few days and *could* take care of things. So I put my gradually clearing mind to it, remembered a cousin I had not tapped for months, sent a wire, and got some dough.

To my astonishment and sorrow, I almost instantly found myself drunk.

Within a few hours, my new AA benefactor had given me in very blunt words a sharp summary of Traditions Five, Six, and Seven. And, by getting drunk, I had illustrated perfectly the special sense behind Five. What I needed most was not money, obviously. After getting it, I still had the *drinking* problem that had made me think of approaching AA in the first place.

This happened in January 1945, and the first hint of the Twelve Traditions was not to appear anywhere in AA until the July 1945 issue of the Grapevine, when Bill W. wrote, "I would like to discuss in coming issues such topics as anonymity, leadership, public relations, the use of money in AA, and the like."

Therefore, what I encountered in AA during my first few months, before the Traditions were formalized, were customs of AA behavior followed by members who had learned that some AA ways would work, and others would not.

That is the authority of the Traditions in my personal life. I honor them, not solely because of their

authorship or their having the mystical number twelve or their being adopted by the Fellowship at the First International Convention in Cleveland in 1950. I cherish them because they work. They enable me and my fellow AAs to stay sober, together, and to carry our message to other alcoholics.

But I did not like the Traditions at first, especially when they conflicted with what I wanted. I was a suspicious character, often turning phony operator to get what I wanted. During those first weeks, I kept wondering what "those AAs" were really up to or after, and what I could get out of them.

The real miracle is that most of them acted with extraordinary kindness. No matter what I tried to maneuver out of them, they tried just to give me the message.

In subsequent years, I tried to misuse AA in two ways; that is, I tried to get more out of it than the sobriety message. Once, I wangled a part-time job from a fellow member, then took advantage of him. Coming in late, I would excuse myself by thinking, "After all, we're both alcoholics; he ought to excuse my little weaknesses." He exploited me, too, expecting long hours of unpaid work simply because I was a fellow AA. We began to concentrate on what we were owed, not on what we as AAs owed each other. Neither of us got drunk, but our friendship did not survive.

Another time, I tried to use AA for romance, and really did find balm for a lonely heart with an AA partner. We found romance, all right, but we lost our sobriety.

Years have gone by since I had AA infancy as an excuse for my gimme tendencies. Today, I try to look at the Fifth Tradition as a giver, not as a taker. But the picture is not pretty enough to brag about. It isn't always easy, even now, to keep my personal wants out of the way when I try to carry the message. I want applause as an AA speaker, compliments as a Grapevine writer. I want to be a "success" as a sponsor--that is, I want to be the one who sobered somebody up!

I have found I prefer to carry the message to pleasant, attractive, grateful alcoholics who do what I say and give me full credit for their sobriety. Sometimes I wish I did not even have to *carry* the message at all; I wish I could just wait where I am for people to come and pick it up.

On the other hand, I rejoice that I can now participate in so many good ways of fulfilling our primary purpose. I can help put on public meetings and other public-information activities to carry the message to the alcoholics who are still out there drinking, sick, scared, completely unaware that we want them, and completely wrong in their notion of what our sober life is like. I can be on our hospital- and jail-visiting committees. I can serve on my group's hospitality committee, to welcome the ill-at-ease new man. I can attend or lead beginners meetings. I can help support our local Intergroup office and the AA General Service Office, which reach drunks in places I cannot get to. I can have coffee with the new man after the meeting, instead of running off to chin and gossip with my old friends.

Yes, my group (made up of individual AAs, including me) has improved a lot in its respect for our Fifth Tradition--in its ways of carrying the message. My own AA history has lengthened considerably since I first caught glimpses of the sobriety-preserving wisdom in the AA ways of doing things, summed up in our Traditions. But I have recently discovered something else quite wonderful about the Fifth: It does *not* say that AAs should help only newcomers.

I do not agree that the newcomer is *the* most important member at any meeting. In my opinion, equally important are those old-timers who showed me the way, and any middle-timer who may today be suffering. If newcomers are indeed the lifeblood of AA, old- and middle-timers are its skin and backbone. What a bewildered mess we would be in without them!

So in your next meeting, when that Tradition about carrying the message "to the alcoholic who still suffers" is mentioned, please give a thought, not only to newcomers, but also to the alcoholics older in AA who are sitting there. One of them might be me. I still suffer, sometimes. I still need to hear the message, always.

Fifth Tradition Checklist

1. Do I ever cop out by saying, "I'm not a group, so this or that Tradition doesn't apply to me"?
2. Am I willing to explain firmly to a newcomer the *limitations* of AA help, even if he gets mad at me for not giving him a loan?
3. Have I today imposed on any AA member for a special favor or consideration simply because I am a fellow alcoholic?
4. Am I willing to twelfth-step the next newcomer without regard to who he is or what is in it for me?
5. Do I help my group in every way I can to fulfill our primary purpose? Does my group *carry* the message, or do we expect people to come get it?
6. Do I remember that AA old-timers, too, can be alcoholics who still suffer? Do I try both to help them and to learn from them?

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On Tradition Six

"An A.A. group ought never endorse, finance or lend the A.A. name to any related facility or outside enterprise, lest problems of money, property and prestige divert us from our primary purpose."

Editorial by Bill W.

A.A. Grapevine, May 1948

The sixth of our 12 Points of A.A. Tradition is deemed so important that it states at length the relation of the A.A. movement to money and property.

Too detailed to print here, this Tradition declares in substance that the accumulation of money, property and the unwanted personal authority so often generated by material wealth comprise a cluster of serious hazards against which an A.A. group must ever be on guard.

Tradition 6 also enjoins the group never to go into business nor ever to lend the A.A. name or money credit to any "outside" enterprise, no matter how good. Strongly expressed is the opinion that even clubs should not bear the A.A. name; that they ought to be separately incorporated and managed by those individual A.A.s who need or want clubs enough to financially support them.

We would thus divide the spiritual from the material, confine the A.A. movement to its sole aim and insure (however wealthy as individuals we may become) that A.A. itself shall always remain poor. We dare not risk the distractions of corporate wealth. Years of experience have proven these principles beyond doubt. They have become certainties, absolute verities for us.

Thank God, we A.A.s have never yet been caught in the kind of religious or political disputes which embroil the world of today. But we ought to face the fact that we have often quarreled violently about money, property and the administration thereof. Money, in quantity, has always been a baleful influence in group life. Let a well meaning donor present an A.A.

group with a sizeable sum and we break loose. Nor does trouble abate until that group, as such, somehow disposes of its bank roll. This experience is practically universal. "But," say our friends, "isn't this a confession of weakness? Other organizations do a lot of good with money. Why not A.A.?"

Of course, we of A.A. would be the first to say that many a fine enterprise does a lot of good with a lot of money. To these efforts, money is usually primary; it is their life blood. But money is *not* the life blood of A.A. With us, it is very secondary. Even in small quantities, it is scarcely more than a necessary nuisance, something we wish we could do without entirely. Why is that so?

We explain this easily enough; we don't need money. The core of our A.A. procedure is "one alcoholic talking to another," whether that be sitting on a curbstone, in a home, or at a meeting. It's the message, not the place; it's the talk, not the alms. That does our work. Just places to meet and talk, that's about all A.A. needs. Beyond these, a few small offices, a few secretaries at their desks, a few dollars a piece a year, easily met by voluntary contributions. Trivial indeed, *our* expenses!

Nowadays, the A.A. group answers its well wishers saying, "Our expenses are trifling. As good earners, we can easily pay them. As we neither need nor want money, why risk its hazards? We'd rather stay poor. Thanks just the same!"

Bill W.

The A.A. Grapevine, May, 1948



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6th Tradition

[August 1970](#)

Vol. 27 No. 3

An AA group ought never endorse, finance or lend the AA name to any related facility or outside enterprise, lest problems of money, property and prestige divert us from our primary purpose.

BEFORE I understood even dimly what AA was, I was sure I could improve it. Looking back, I realize now that my pure gall was appalling, since it was rooted so firmly in ignorance. I knew almost nothing about the externals of the Fellowship and much less about its spiritual principles. Since I was too proud to admit that there was anything I did not know, I almost never asked questions.

Practically nothing in the very skimpy AA literature we had then (in 1945) explained how AA or its component units functioned, so my knowledge was based on what I heard and saw in one group. Then as now, we AA members (like other human beings everywhere, I suppose) talked a bewildering melange of facts, guesswork, inspired wisdom, gossip, and nonsense. Yet I assumed that what I heard was the whole AA truth, and, armed only with my small collection of quick impressions and misinformation about AA, I wanted to change it.

Surely, for example, AA should be informing the medical profession about the facts of our disease as we understood them. (The Yale--now Rutgers--School of Alcohol Studies and the National Council on Alcoholism had barely got started, and this was nine years before the American Medical Association established its alcoholism committee.)

The government, I was sure, should change laws relating to alcoholics. (The North American Association of Alcoholism Programs and the National Center for Control and Prevention of Alcoholism were then impossible dreams.)

Detoxification centers, vocational rehabilitation, and other services, improved understanding by social workers, school kids, psychologists, and cops--all these and more were badly needed. Why, I carped, was AA not getting busy?

Just suppose for a minute that our Fellowship had indeed been misguided right smack into all those activities. What a tangled web we could have woven! How many drunks would have been ignored, left to die, as we mounted our political and fund-raising campaigns! How many enemies AA would have made for itself if it had tried to dictate to the medical, clerical, and legal professions!

If my AA group had had prestige, money, and power at stake, I fear my own sobriety would have found little support at our meetings. There would have been no room for it on the agenda. Many of us would have left, I fear--*sic transit* glorious sobriety, and maybe AA itself.

I am certain now that if any AA-run governmental programs on alcoholism had been set up and had gone bust, my resentments would have burst through my tender, new sobriety. Suppose we had started an official AA club and it had been raided because of gambling, or AA-run retreats for alcoholics had become subjects of gossip. What then? I would have gotten either emotionally embattled or, more probably, alcoholically embottled.

As always, AA as a whole proved much wiser than I as an individual, and my group just plugged along, trying to do its own thing. Even without such complications, we had trouble enough just trying to figure out *what* our own thing really was. The Traditions had not been written yet.

At first, we felt we had to do at least three things: (1) provide a place where members could play cards, eat, and have coffee any time; (2) maintain an office with telephones as a central clearinghouse for Twelfth Step work and information about meetings; (3) keep our own AA meetings and Twelfth Step work going.

The first two involved us in legal corporations, finances, real-estate management, building maintenance, cafeteria operation, a paid secretary, and, naturally, rules and officers. As a result, newcomers who just needed the message often got shortchanged because we were too busy with serious problems like a drunken chef, typewriter repairs, club dues, revising bylaws, a temperamental janitor, and deciding who could and could not use the phone or which brand of coffee to buy.

We made it almost impossible for newcomers to tell the difference between joining a club and simply becoming a sober AA. I know. I was one of those newcomers.

People who did not get elected to boards or did get demoted from jobs proceeded to get drunk. Criticism of the cafeteria cashier's report became resentments of "AA's financial structure," yet! Two fellows I liked were displeased by the cafeteria food, blamed AA, and left. (No wonder! They had heard little else except the food discussed at their first three meetings. They were dead within a year, of alcoholism.)

The solution my group finally found, nearly a quarter-century ago, was quite simple. We decided that, no matter how exciting and how needed such business enterprises were, an AA group ought to stay out of them, because discussions of money, property, and prestige kept us wildly distracted from the Twelve Steps.

As an AA group, we decided to carry the message, period. So we dropped the food business and real-estate management. Some individuals formed separate nonprofit corporations, outside AA, to run clubs or day centers for AAs who wanted such amenities. As for the local central office (or intergroup), it was eventually operated and supported by *all* the groups nearby.

This arrangement has worked beautifully ever since, both in New York and elsewhere. And now, of course, other services seriously needed by alcoholics are at last beginning to get under way--but *not* under the auspices of AA. Food, clothing, shelter, and medical assistance are often necessary for the alcoholic's recovery. But other organizations, efficiently operated and professionally experienced in these matters, can handle them better than an AA group.

Nevertheless, let's not overlook a fact seldom recognized, in conversation or in print: Many of the great improvements in the treatment of alcoholics during the last thirty-five years have been brought about quietly, behind the scenes, by anonymous AA members, acting as private citizens interested in a public-health problem. The Sixth Tradition leaves every AA member the freedom to do that, if he cares to, so long as his actions do not constitute AA endorsement (or criticism) of any enterprises, nor "lend the AA name" to them.

(There's another side to this coin, too. Once upon a time, a non-AA alcoholism program tried to create the impression, falsely, that it was endorsed by AA. But the attempt backfired. The professionals at whom the program was aimed thought it was just an extension of AA and would not come near it! I know. I was the guilty one.)

Adherence to our primary purpose makes AA unique--and also gives us a special responsibility, it seems to me. We are the only people who have our own personal experience to share. And we are the only people who try to do nothing except help the individual alcoholic because we have to, to stay sober ourselves. We help him, not for the sake of society or of science, but for the sake of our own sobriety.

As a result, other programs in the alcoholism field have come to depend heavily on AA's continuing integrity. At every single professional meeting, it is a conspicuous fact that nonalcoholics count absolutely on the aid of sober, conscientious AAs who remember *When anyone, anywhere, reaches out for help, I want the hand of AA always to be there. And for that: I am responsible.*

Sixth Tradition Checklist

- 1. Should my fellow group members and I raise money to endow several AA beds in our local hospital?
- 2. Is it good for a group to lease a small building?
- 3. Are all the officers and members of our local club for AAs familiar with "Guidelines on Clubs" (which is available free from GSO)?
- 4. Should the secretary of our group serve on the mayor's advisory committee on alcoholism?
- 5. Some alcoholics will stay around AA only if we have a TV and card room. If this is what is required to carry the message to them, shouldn't we have these facilities?

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On the 7th Tradition

"Every A.A. group ought to be fully self-supporting, declining outside contributions."

Editorial by Bill W.
A.A. Grapevine, June, 1948

"The A.A. Groups themselves ought to be fully supported by the voluntary contribution of their own members. We think that each group should soon achieve its ideal: that any public solicitation of funds using the name of Alcoholics Anonymous is highly dangerous, whether by groups, clubs, hospitals or other outside agencies; that acceptance of large gifts from any source, or of contributions carrying any obligation whatever, is unwise. Then too, we view with much concern those A.A. treasuries which continue, beyond prudent reserves, to accumulate funds for no stated A.A. purpose. Experience has often warned us that nothing can so surely destroy our spiritual heritage as futile disputes over property, money, and authority."

Our growth continuing, the combined income of Alcoholics Anonymous members will soon reach the astounding total of \$250,000,000, a quarter of billion dollars yearly. This is the direct result of A.A. membership. Sober we now have it, drunk we would not.

By contrast, our overall A.A. expenses are trifling.

For instance, the A.A. General Office now costs us \$1.50 per member a year. As a fact, the New York office asks the groups for this sum twice a year because not all of them contribute. Even so, the sum per member is exceedingly small. If an A.A. happens to live in a large metropolitan center where an intergroup office is absolutely essential to handle heavy inquiries and hospital arrangements he contributes (or probably should contribute) about \$5.00 annually. To pay the rent of his own group meeting place, and maybe coffee and doughnuts, he might drop \$25.00 a year in the hat. Or, if he belongs to a club it could be \$50.00. In case he takes *The A.A. Grapevine* he squanders an extra \$2.50!

So, the A.A. member who really meets his group responsibilities finds himself liable for about \$5.00 a month on the average. Yet his own personal income may be anywhere between \$200. and \$2,000. a month -- the direct result of *not* drinking.

"But", some will contend, "our friends want to give us money to furnish that new club house. We are a new small group. Most of us are still pretty broke. What then"?

I am sure that myriads of the A.A. voices would now answer the new group saying, "Yes, we know just how you feel. We once solicited money ourselves. We even solicited publicly. We thought we could do a lot of good with other peoples' money. But we found that kind of money too hot to handle. It aroused unbelievable controversy. It simply wasn't worth it. Besides, it set a precedent which has tempted many people to use the valuable name of Alcoholics Anonymous for other than A.A. purposes. While there may be little harm in a small friendly loan which your group really means to repay, we really beg you to think hard before you ask the most willing friend to make a large donation. You can, and you soon will, pay your own way. For each of you these overhead expenses will never amount to more than the price of one bottle of good whiskey a month. You will be everlastingly thankful if you pay this small obligation yourselves.

When reflecting on these things, why should not each of us tell himself, "Yes, we A.A.s were once a burden on everybody. We were 'takers.' Now that we are sober, and by the Grace of God have become responsible citizens of the world, why shouldn't we now about face and become 'thankful givers'! Yes, it is high time we did!"

Bill W.

The AA Grapevine, June, 1948



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Seventh Tradition Checklist

[October 1970](#)

Vol. 27 No. 5

Every AA group ought to be self-supporting, declining outside contributions.

The author says: *"AA's Twelve Traditions have, in my experience, often proved vital in keeping me sober, and helpful otherwise in all my affairs."*

ON MY FIRST approach to AA, the movement was just ten years old. The Traditions had not yet been written, but already AA had effectively declared itself independent of all handouts, thank you. It was managing, somehow, to pay its own way, and I was very glad to learn that.

If it had turned out to be a government-financed project or a charitable branch of some church, my feelings about it could not have been so instantly warm and comfortable. The fact that it was just us drunks, paying our own way, lessened my shame at having to ask for help.

I did, though, feel embarrassed the first few times the collection hat came my way. I was so ashamed to have not even a dime for it that I might have stayed away if the leader had not made a little speech one night. He said it was perfectly all right for those of us with no dough at present to let the hat pass by, since everyone there understood being broke. Visitors were asked not to contribute, also, because AA wanted to be self-supporting, he said, and we needed only a little money for our purposes.

Later, as treasurer of a group, I understood more clearly those purposes: paying rent for the meeting room, providing AA literature to carry the message outside the meeting room, and putting coffee into the pot. In addition, we sent a certain percentage monthly to our local central office (intergroup) and another portion to keep the big world central office (the General Service Office) going.

Interlocking with Tradition Seven, Five and Six do suggest that we have no other enterprises to finance, don't they? The conclusion seems so simple that since then it has always taken me by surprise when financial disagreements hit the fan in AA groups. Yet I have joined my most mature, serene AA friends time after time in acting positively demented over the clubhouse cost of a cup of coffee.

In fact, years ago here in New York, almost all groups had an unspoken rule: Finances were too inflammatory to be mentioned at a regular meeting. I suppose we were afraid we were too immature to stay sober if we took the dangerous risk of mixing talk about, say, the moral inventory with that dirty word m--y.

Instead, before the regular meeting time each group had a separate business meeting, usually monthly (when the moon was full, I guess). Then we could madly and happily screech at each other about bills and cash with no mention of "prayer and meditation" or being "restored to sanity" to mix us up.

It was as if we were supposed to be safe, protected somehow from getting drunk over financial pettiness, from 7:30 to 8:30 on one Tuesday each month, but never after 8:30 and never on Sunday or Monday. (Sometimes I think the Grapevine reflects this attitude, too. Not for years have I seen in its pages, along with the good recovery stories and the discussions of our Steps, a frank discussion of the use of and need for money in AA.)

At stake in those long-ago verbal battles were usually such paltry sums that a visitor would have thought us truly beyond help, even from a Greater Power. Maybe we thought so, too; prayers were often absent from business meetings, as I recall.

The results were not all bad, however. Instead of disagreeing with each other about the truly important business of helping each other not take the first drink today, we worked off our tempers by arguing over trivial bookkeeping details, and little harm was done.

Indeed, one hung-over fellow attended his very first AA meeting, by mistake, on the night we were stomping all over a new little baby budget for the group, shyly proposed by a new treasurer. We started at 7:30, waxed wackier and wrother than usual, and by 10:30 never had gotten around to mentioning alcoholism at all, much less recovery. As soon as the meeting was over, however, this new prospect rushed up to the somewhat wrung-out, harassed chairman and pumped his hand joyously. "I want to join!" he exclaimed. "I can tell you're my kind of people, all right!" And he never took another drink.

I have sat in on many such group Donnybrooks which were, or could have been, halted by judicious study and prayerful application of the wisdom of our Seventh Tradition. Such as:

Members had to sit on boxes and a bench at meetings of a small group I used to attend near skid row. So the state's tax-supported alcoholism clinic offered them some fancy chairs. (They declined gracefully, and proudly salvaged some secondhand ones for themselves.)

In another group, the meeting place badly needed a coat of paint, and a rich woman member, who had never stayed sober, insisted on footing the whole bill. (Instead of giving in, they waited until the treasury could buy the paint, and all pitched in to do the work. She helped--and started staying sober.)

A church told a big group which met there that AA's money was not needed, so the group collections just piled up for several years. (Free use of the space was, of course, really the acceptance of an outside contribution. Subsidized by the church, the group was not autonomous; the church treated it as if it were just another church activity, canceling its meetings during Christmas and other holidays, moving it from attic to basement, and so on. When the group treasury reached \$700, quarreling broke out, and the group died.)

In one small town, local AA life centers around a club, known locally as "the AA club." Its officers wanted to pay off the club mortgage with raffles and benefit dances--selling tickets to the public. (As any Traditions Lawyer can explain, technically a club is not a group and is therefore free to do such things. But is that the *spirit* of AA? What impression would this give the townsfolk--and prospective members?)

Another group I used to visit meets in a charitable institution which docs not allow a collection at *any* meeting on its premises. One year, the institution wanted to send, *from its own funds*, a donation to GSO, to be credited to the AA group concerned. (That year, I was General Service Committeeman for the district in which that group meets, so the group's GS Representative and I had many discussions about this!)

In the last case, I do not know what the final decision was. But I learned that there is far more to this Tradition than I had seen at first reading.

The lessons kept coming. One small group in the district I served had a GSR who made sure everyone in the group understood the nature of the message-carrying done at GSO, and the fact that there was (as there still is) no one but us to foot the bills. That group sent in a whopping donation to GSO each year, plus paying all its other obligations, while much bigger groups sent in only one-fifth as much. That bugged me. Somebody wasn't paying his fair share, pulling his own weight. On my Podium of Self-Importance, as the Righteous Committeeman, I prepared to speechify about it.

Fortunately, I looked at my own record first.

Thanks to AA, I was earning enough of a steady salary to throw a buck into the hat twice a week. That was my share, wasn't it? But wait a minute. Some newcomers were not able to afford giving anything yet. When I was new, obviously someone had, without my knowing it, put in enough to make up my share, as well as his own. And before that, how much had I spent annually on booze?

For the first time, I took a serious look at my group treasurer's report and at the GSO financial statements printed in the annual Conference Report, to see where I myself fitted in. I looked at my group's total contribution to our intergroup office and to GSO. I discovered there was a limit (then \$100, now \$200) set on the amount any one individual could give to such offices in one year. Apparently, some people had been privately making direct gifts for years to help keep those places going.

To say I began doing the same is not immodest, because it had taken me so long to get around to it. And guess what! That year, for the very first time in my life, I found a faint glimmering of what self-respect means.

Of course, from the realization of my financial responsibility for seeing that the AA message got carried, it was only a short step to a sharp look at my other behavior with money. Technically, since sobering up in AA, I had been almost completely self-supporting, declining outside contributions. But I often acted as if I somehow deserved special financial consideration.

For example, when I first got sober, I had rather promptly paid off most debts, and it felt wonderful being able to hold up my head, debt-free for a change. Except. . .loans a brother and a cousin had made to me remained unpaid a long time. I let them wait until last (and paid no interest), vaguely feeling that they didn't need the money as much as I did. They never asked me for it, so I was buying new suits and other things I enjoyed (telling myself that I owed these to myself), long before I got around to paying these two legitimate debts. Hardly mature, responsible behavior!

My analyst and I tussled with this problem for many dreary months, ending in a draw. I am still at it, with only occasional, thin patches of success. I still find it too easy to rationalize postponing payments of my American Express bill this month if there is something else I'd rather do with the money.

That's what I meant when I said that AA principles are hard for me to practice in all my affairs. But our Seventh Tradition has shed light and pointed a direction for me to follow, when I will and can.

Our Traditions have always made it possible for me to stay sober, as I have tried to explain in each of these articles. But they also teach me lessons for the other parts of my life. In this particular instance, an AA path of service (being GS Committeeman) led me right into the inside core of me, where broad roads of self-improvement had never been traveled. When I then began to try to behave responsibly in financial matters, to act as if I really were self-supporting, my new feeling about myself was quite different from any I had ever known before.

At last I was starting to grow up, I felt. I was forty years old at the time.

Seventh Tradition Checklist

1. Honestly now, do I do all I can to help AA (my group, my central office, my GSO) remain self-supporting? Could I put a little more into the basket on behalf of the new guy who can't afford it yet? How generous was I when tanked in a barroom?
2. Should the Grapevine sell advertising space to book publishers and drug companies, so it could make a big profit and become a bigger magazine, in full color, at a cheaper price per copy?
3. If GSO runs short of funds some year, wouldn't it be okay to let the government subsidize AA groups in hospitals and prisons?
4. Is it more important to get a big AA collection from a few people, or a smaller collection in which more members participate?
5. Is a group treasurer's report unimportant AA business? How does the treasurer feel about it?
6. How important in my recovery is the feeling of self-respect, rather than the feeling of being always under obligation for charity received?

B. L.
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On Tradition Eight

"Alcoholics Anonymous should remain forever nonprofessional, but our service centers may employ special workers."

Editorial by Bill W.

A.A. Grapevine, July, 1948

"Alcoholics Anonymous should remain forever non-professional. We define professionalism as the occupation of counseling alcoholics for fees or hire. But we may employ alcoholics where they are going to perform those services for which we might otherwise have to engage non-alcoholics. Such special services may be well recompensed. But our usual A.A. "12th Step" work is never to be paid for."

Throughout the world A.A.s are "12th stepping" with thousands of new prospects a month. Between one and two thousand of these stick on our first presentation; past experience shows that most of the remainder will come back to us later on. Almost entirely unorganized, and completely non-professional, this mighty spiritual current is now flowing from alcoholics who are well to those who are sick. One alcoholic talking to another; that's all.

Could this vast and vital face-to-face effort ever be professionalized or even organized? Most emphatically, it could not. The few efforts to professionalize straight "12th Step" work have always failed quickly. Today, no A.A. will tolerate the idea of paid "A.A. Therapists" or "organizers". Nor does any A.A. like to be told just how he must handle that new prospect of his. No, this great life-giving stream can never be dammed up by paid do-gooders or professionals. Alcoholics Anonymous is never going to cut its own life lines. To a man, we are sure of that.

But what about those who serve us full time in other capacities -- are cooks, caretakers and paid Intergroup secretaries "A.A. professionals"?

Because our thinking about these people is still unclear, we often feel and act as though they were such. The impression of professionalism subtly

attaches to them, so we frequently hear they are "making money out of A.A.", or that they are "professionalizing" A.A. Seemingly, if they do take our A.A. dollars they don't quite belong with us A.A.s any more. We sometimes go further; we underpay them on the theory they ought to be glad to "cook" for A.A. cheap.

Now isn't this carrying our fears of professionalism rather far? If these fears ever got too strong, none but a saint or an incompetent could work for Alcoholics Anonymous. Our supply of saints being quite small, we would certainly wind up with less competent workers than we need.

We are beginning to see that our few paid workers are performing only those service tasks that our volunteers cannot consistently handle. Primarily these folks are not doing 12th Step work. They are just making more and better 12th Step work possible. Secretaries at their desks are valuable points of contact, information and public relations. That is what they are paid for, and nothing else. They help carry the good news of A.A. to the outside world and bring our prospects face to face with us. That's not "A.A. therapy"; it's just a lot of very necessary but often thankless work.

So, where needed, let's revise our attitude toward those who labor at our special services. Let us treat them as A.A. associates, and not as hired help; let's recompense them fairly and, above all, let's absolve them from the label of professionalism.

Let us also distinguish clearly between "organizing the A.A. movement" and setting up, in a reasonably business-like manner, its few essential services of contact and propagation. Once we do that, all will be well. The million or so brother alcoholics who are still sick will then continue to get the break we 60,000 A.A.s have already had.

Let's give our "service desks" the hand they so well deserve.

Bill W.

The A.A. Grapevine, July, 1948



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Eighth Tradition Checklist

[December 1970](#)

Vol. 27 No. 7

Alcoholics Anonymous should remain forever non-professional, but our service centers may employ special workers.

The author says: *"AA's Twelve Traditions have, in my experience, often proved vital, in keeping me sober, and helpful otherwise in all my affairs."*

ONE OF my fingers, all by itself, has only scant strength and skill; but when it is used with all the others, it feels pretty powerful and seems to know what it is doing.

I've also noticed that if I cut a finger and bandage it, then try not to use it for a few days, the whole hand suddenly gets clumsy and inefficient. If one finger is out of whack, they all are.

Just so, it seems to me, with AA's Traditions. They work best as a complete system, with each one supporting all the others. Besides, I understand them better as a hooked-together whole. In fact, I cannot always tell where one leaves off and the next begins.

The Eighth is a good example. When I start ruminating about it, about nonprofessionalism, I find my thoughts wandering off into the Second (our leaders), the Sixth (non-AA enterprises), the Seventh (financial independence), and the Ninth (style of organization).

It helps me to think of the Traditions as different facets of the same crystal. They are, perhaps, even better understood as varied aspects of an integrated, unified style of life which we call "the AA way." Or as twelve different perspectives on the spiritual (i.e., "of the spirit--not material") experience which is at the core of survival for each of us as individuals, as well as survival of the Fellowship itself.

It is largely our Traditions which make AA unique, in my opinion. They are characteristics possessed by no other body of people I know of. They could not have been planned in advance, because when AA got started no one could then foresee in just what shapes it would develop, or which problems would come up. So the Traditions, like the Steps, got written down and adopted *after* the problems had come up and had been solved. The Traditions are an agreed-upon distillation of much past experience, twelve descriptions of ideal AA behavior.

Fortunately for me, I was in AA while some of that experience was being experienced. I suffered through some of the mistakes which the Traditions can now help any member avoid. I often received the nourishing fruit of a Tradition, under some other name, when my sobriety was languishing and spindly.

To illustrate: The last winter of my pre-AA alcoholism (December 1944) was miserably bleak, dark, and cold. Walking into that old Manhattan AA office on West 41st Street was like suddenly finding, around the corner from the bitter winds, an unexpected, warm spring day. Like first crocuses, illogical hopes unbelievably popped up to be wondered at. The woman behind the desk was the first AA to twelfth-step me, and she said, among many other cherished words, that she was *not* paid to help me and that I need not cringe in shame and ignorance before any imagined, awesome expertise of older members (nor need I phony up my case history to hold their interest). AAs were not professionals, not experts, but just former drunkards who helped each other stay sober, she pointed out.

That meant I could fit in, as they did, if I wanted to! And suddenly a long-frozen longing to belong thawed inside me--a sharp, lovely, barely remembered yearning from childhood. I could acknowledge it

now because, for once, I dared hope for relief.

Real recovery, the summertime fullness of my own sobriety, was still some years away, but even from the fringes of AA, where I was to huddle fearfully most of my first two years, I could feel in my bones that what my first twelfth-stepper and the other "real" members said made good sense.

Nonalcoholics had often reached *down* to try to help me. AA members, being just drunks like me, simply reached *out* to help.

My alcoholic experiences with professional experts, such as clergymen, physicians, policemen, and others paid to help, had not filled me with love or trust. But the folks in this AA thing were not finger-waggers, reminding me that they were morally superior. These AAs were my own kind, barroom kin, and I believe that is one of the big reasons I lingered on in the AA neighborhood.

In retrospect, I am now certain that the characteristic of AA described in this Eighth Tradition is responsible in large measure for my being alive and sober today. I was, when I first came to AA, so childishly resentful of authority, so jealous of anyone who might know more than I, that I fear I would not have loitered around AA if it had consisted of "experts" paid to help me.

Eavesdropping avidly on the "grown-ups" (then my private name for sober members), I began to grasp some of the things they were talking about. For example, it finally became apparent even to me, back in 1945, that New York AA had to have someone who would be responsible full-time for making sure that our telephones got answered; that calls for help were referred quickly to some dependable, sober member near the caller; that new prospects who wandered in were twelfth-stepped; that information on times and locations of all the Greater New York meetings was kept up to date; that mail asking for help was answered; that the rent and telephone bills were paid; and that the place was cleaned up occasionally.

Unless we made one person responsible full-time for all these chores, all of us would suffer--especially newcomers. We wanted prospects to get instant and careful help, not to be forgotten about. We needed a central storehouse of accurate information, easily available, about where a Tuesday-night meeting might be found near the Flatbush section of Brooklyn, or somewhere in Queens or Staten Island.

So we agreed that we had to have a full-time secretary who would provide these services for all members of all groups in the vicinity. And we decided it had to be someone who could be fired if she did not do the job properly. That would make her responsible to those she served. (Oops! Slipping over into the Ninth and Second Traditions, see?)

It never occurred to anyone, I believe, that we ought to hire a non-member in order to keep AA non-professional. It seemed perfectly obvious that the only sort of person equipped for this job would be a member of some experience both in sobriety and in local AA. No non-member could possibly understand all that had to be done, and how to do it in the traditional AA ways. Of course, our secretary would also have to be someone with office skills--able to write letters, handle her own typing and filing, keep some primitive records, write checks, etc.

Our hunt for such a person brought us smack up against the pay question. Practically everybody around who was qualified, in both AA knowledge and office skills, had to have a job-with-pay in order to eat. We certainly could not ask or expect any alcoholic trying to stay sober in AA to give up a good-paying office job and starve to death in order to work for AA for nothing. We wanted to pay our own way, to depend on no one's charity (Seventh Tradition, right?); we wanted to pay for the best, and get it, whether it was coffee or secretarial skill we bought.

In later years, I have spoken often, and with embarrassing loudness, to the effect that AA salaries, whether at GSO, the Grapevine, or local central offices, ought always to be at least as good as, if not better than, those in profit-making commercial enterprises, if we expect to get and keep the best-qualified workers.

In 1945, the dilemma was solved when we decided to hire a certain AA woman and pay her for her

office skills used in the service of AA, just as she would have been paid for her office skills if used in the service of some other agency or employer.

Perhaps that is why, when I was asked, many years later, whether I would do a writing job for pay for our AA General Service Board, I could say "Yes" with a clear conscience. Since I earned my living by writing, I was simply selling that skill to AA exactly as I often sold it to various other clients. The Board paid me for my professional service. But notice: AA has never paid me (nor has it ever paid anyone) to admit I was powerless over alcohol, to go to meetings, to take my personal inventory and discuss it with someone, to make amends to those I have harmed, to admit it when I am wrong, to use prayer and meditation, and to show responsible concern for newcomers. In short, I have never known any of the workers hired in our offices and service centers to get paid for staying sober!

Sometimes, the term "professional AA" is used in another way by Traditions Lawyers I have known--to put down any AA member who happens to earn a living using occupational skills (as a doctor, typist, psychologist, educator, public-relations man, fund raiser, or whatever) in some non-AA agency concerned with alcoholism.

The term, as an opprobrious or belittling epithet, is undeserved, I think, unless the person is being paid for staying sober the AA way.

As far as I can see, in the Fellowship today no sober AAs are professional AAs, no matter what jobs they do. In AA concerns, we are all just amateurs together. And an amateur, of course, can be defined as "one who does something for love, not for pay." That's how each of us works the AA program, isn't it?

To reinforce and further clarify this concept, we have the AA style of organization (or *disorganization!*). But here I am beginning to slip over into the next Tradition, right? That's for the February issue.

Eighth Tradition Checklist

- Is my own AA behavior accurately described by the Traditions? If not, what needs changing?
- Do I know who wrote down each one of my Traditions, and why? What would AA be like without them?
- When I chafe about any particular Tradition, do I realize how it affects the others?
- Do I sometimes try to get *some* reward--even if not money--for my personal AA efforts?
- Do I try to sound in AA like an expert on alcoholism? On recovery? On medicine? On sociology? On AA itself? On psychology? On spiritual matters? Or, heaven help me, even on *humility*?
- Do I make an effort to understand what AA employees do? What workers in other alcoholism agencies do? Can I distinguish clearly among them?
- In my own AA life, have I any experiences which illustrate the wisdom of this Tradition?
- Have I paid enough attention to the book *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*? To the pamphlet *AA Tradition--How It Developed*?

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On Tradition Nine

"A.A., as such, ought never be organized; but we may create service boards or committees directly responsible to those they serve."

Editorial by Bill W.

A.A. Grapevine, August 1948

"Each A.A. Group needs the least possible organization. Rotating leadership is the best. The small group may elect its secretary, the large group its rotating committee, and the groups of a large Metropolitan area their central or intergroup committee, which often employs a full-time secretary. The Trustees of The Alcoholic Foundation are, in effect, our A.A. General Service Committee. They are the custodians of our A.A. Tradition and the receivers of voluntary A.A. contributions by which we maintain our A.A. General Service Office in New York. They are authorized by the groups to handle our over-all public relations and they guarantee the integrity of our principal newspaper, "The A.A. Grapevine." All such representatives are to be guided in the spirit of service, for true leaders in A.A. are but trusted and experienced servants of the whole. They derive no real authority from their titles; they do not govern. Universal respect is the key to their usefulness."

The least possible organization, that's our universal ideal. No fees, no dues, no rules imposed on anybody, one alcoholic bringing recovery to the next; that's the substance of what we most desire, isn't it?

But how shall this simple ideal best be realized? Often a question, that.

We have, for example, the kind of A.A. who is for simplicity. Terrified of anything organized, he tells us that A.A. is getting too complicated. He thinks money only makes trouble, committees only make dissension, elections only make politics, paid workers only make professionals and that clubs only coddle slipees. Says he, let's get back to coffee and cakes by cozy firesides. If any alcoholics stray our way, let's look after them. But that's enough. Simplicity is our answer.

Quite opposed to such halcyon simplicity is the A.A. promotor. Left to himself he would "bang the cannon and twang the lyre" at every crossroad of the world. Millions for drunks, great A.A. hospitals, batteries of paid organizers and publicity experts wielding all the latest paraphernalia of sound and script; such would be our promoters dream. "Yes sir," he would bark "My two year plan calls for one million A.A. members by 1950!"

For one, I'm glad we have both conservatives and enthusiasts. They teach us much. The conservative will surely see to it that the A.A. movement never gets over organized. But the promoter will continue to remind us of our terrific obligation to the newcomer and to those hundreds of thousands of alcoholics still waiting all over the world to hear of A.A.

We shall, naturally, take the firm and safe middle course. A.A. has always violently resisted the idea of any general organization. Yet, paradoxically, we have ever stoutly insisted upon organizing certain *special services*; mostly those absolutely necessary to effective and plentiful 12th Step work.

If, for instance, an A.A. group elects a secretary or rotating committee, if an area forms an intergroup committee, if we set up a Foundation, a General Office or a *Grapevine*, then we are organized for service. The A.A. book and pamphlets, our meeting places and clubs, our dinners and regional assemblies -- these are services too. Nor can we secure good hospital connections, properly sponsor new prospects and obtain good public relations just by chance. People have to be appointed to look after these things, sometimes paid people. Special services are performed.

But by none of these special services, has our spiritual or social activity, the great current of A.A. ever been really organized or professionalized. Yet our recovery program has been enormously aided. While important, these service activities, are very small by contrast with our main effort.

As such facts and distinctions become clear, we shall easily lay aside our fears of blighting organization or hazardous wealth. As a movement, we shall remain comfortably poor; for our service expenses are trifling.

With such assurances, we shall without doubt, continue to improve and extend our vital lifelines of special service; to better carry out our A.A. message to others; to make for ourselves a finer greater society, and, God willing, to assure Alcoholics Anonymous a long life and perfect unity.

Bill W.

The A.A. Grapevine, August, 1948



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Ninth Tradition Checklist

[February 1971](#)

Vol. 27 No. 9

AA, as such, ought never be organized; but we may create service boards or committees directly responsible to those they serve.

The author says: *"AA's Twelve Traditions have, in my experience, often proved vital in keeping me sober, and helpful otherwise in all my affairs."*

TWO FLAKED-OUT fellows were shown in a popular William Steig cartoon a few years ago. The caption was something like "One of these days we've got to get organized around here."

I remember expressing the same sentiment while drinking. I not only said it, I did it. To me, getting organized meant getting things arranged in a highly systematic manner, in preparation for getting them done. (You don't necessarily pay your bills, but you do make a neat list of creditors.) During self-enforced droughts, I would zealously over-organize everything in sight in round-the-clock spurts--only to blow it all, later, in a flood of ethanol.

And so I welcomed the idea of an "organization"--which I supposed AA was--for getting something done about the trouble I was having with my drinking.

I approached AA in Manhattan twenty-six years ago in total darkness as to how it did things. (How often is it approached any other way?) I guess I expected to find a written constitution, bylaws, dues, and paid sergeants of some kind trained to discipline the backsliders. After all, there was a telephone listing, and I had been invited to come to an office. That sounded pretty organized to me.

But the first members I met unwittingly sowed confusion by using familiar terms in an unfamiliar context. Such words as "member, join, meeting, officer, committee," etc. do not mean the same in AA as outside it, but how was I to know that?

My confusion grew as I heard and saw AA people behaving differently from each other, saying wildly disparate things, sometimes contradicting each other. Some even drank!

I asked about the president of AA, and they said there wasn't any; yet they had a chairman, a secretary, and elections. There was no ritual for joining, they said; yet the secretary usually announced, "If you want to join this group, see me after the meeting."

They said there were no musts, but that to do certain jobs one must have been sober at least three months. They insisted they were alcoholics, not ex-alcoholics; yet most never touched a drop.

Obviously, I was seeing only the lowest-grade members of this outfit, I became pretty sure. I kept nosing around to find the generals, so I could get the real score. I never found any top brass.

But, despite the vast ignorance of the noncom troops, AA *got things done*. The telephone got answered; meetings were held, with prearranged programs; coffee got served; a book and pamphlets were distributed. So AA must be systematized in *some* way, I had to conclude. But how? Was there a secret hierarchy of authorities who enforced the statutes by *making* members do things?

Such were the expectations--shaped, of course, by the experiences of my non-AA lifetime--with which I arrived at the door of the Fellowship. With growing delight, and often chagrin, I have learned how mistaken I was.

Now I am convinced that one sure way to destroy AA would be for us to set up a rigid organization patterned after the non-AA societies we all know. Yet we cannot be a laissez-faire body, willing always to "Let George do it." Instead, each of us is expected, it seems to me, to assume enough personal responsibility on his own for the Fellowship to get its major function (Tradition Five) accomplished.

What giant problems our first members faced! They had to find ways to net things done without slipping into either the bedlam of autonomy unlimited or the trap of overorganizing and underaccomplishing. The dilemma could easily have overwhelmed them, in my opinion. Organizing can itself be addictive, my personal experience indicates. It's easy to get so fascinated with the process of organizing that I can lose all sight of what I am organizing for. I marvel that any of the first ten years' members stayed sober at all.

Tradition Nine describes the masterful solution worked out during the first ten years of AA experience. Since so many alcoholics rebel against authority in human form, we just dispense with it altogether. The first seven words of Tradition Nine say that we have no bosses--echoing Tradition Two.

But the last fourteen words describe the system and orderliness necessary for our outfit to *get things done*.

My personal AA life illustrates both the problem and its solution. Like a tantrum-throwing four-year-old, I figuratively stamped my foot and refused to pay attention to the Twelve Steps. I mistakenly believed them to be rules for staying sober, instead of a simple description of how our first members actually did recover. After enough slips, however, I saw that in AA I had the freedom to try out, on my own, the Steps suggested as a program of recovery. But I had to make myself do them, because no one in AA could force me to.

I tried to be bossy in AA, and I got drunk. I learned to empty ashtrays for the group, and I began staying sober.

A few years back, we floundering fathers of a certain Greenwich Village group found ourselves about to be replaced. To make life easier for our successors than it had been for us, we wrote out what each steering-committee member (trusted servant) had done, exactly how, when, and where. (This was before the General Service Office published its excellent pamphlet "The AA Group.") We bound these information sheets in a notebook for our new secretary-treasurer.

About three months later, we learned that the group was behind in "gifts" to our landlord (a church) and had not paid its intergroup pledges nor several GSO bills for literature.

Swift to find a scapegoat, we turned on Ernie, the new secretary-treasurer, and demanded, "Why didn't you pay those things?"

Indignantly, he told us, "Because I didn't know I was supposed to, and I don't know where to pay them, anyhow."

In my most tolerant bleeding-deacon voice, I chirped, "But Ernie, exactly what is to be paid, and when, and to whom, is all spelled out for you in that book."

"What book?" he asked.

"That black notebook we gave you."

"Oh, that!" Ernie replied with disgust. "I've never opened it," he announced proudly. "Nobody in AA is going to tell *me* what to do!"

Several chronic beginners tipsily applauded.

That nutty contretemps puts the AA organization problem into a beautiful nutshell, it seems to me. How, on the one hand, do we avoid offending each other with government--which inevitably means giving some members authority over others--and still, on the other hand, escape chaos? As the late

Bernard Smith so eloquently put it at our 1970 International Convention in Miami Beach, the answer is in the way our Ninth Tradition insures AA against anarchy while at the same time insulating us against any form of AA government. Ernie, working with the other new officers of the group, later came upon that answer himself.

My fellow founders and I had had our feelings hurt when somebody had first suggested there might be a better arrangement than our paternalistic one, and the new officers took over. We finally realized, though, that the AA custom of rotation in office can be a healing experience for those who can take it and understand the spirit behind it. Rotation is not spelled out in any Step or Tradition. (Neither are many other good AA ideas, such as the 24-hour plan, going to meetings, significance of the first drink, etc.) But it mercifully helps solve the seniority problem we older members can inflict on newer ones, and I think it is within the spirit of Traditions Two and Nine, if not in their wording. It is explained well on page 22 of "The AA Group."

The genius embodied in the Tradition Nine phrase "responsible to those they serve" escaped my detection for a long time, because it sounded too noble and elegant to be more than a truism. When I worked on some AA committees, however, it came to life for me, and I now consider it an astonishing and challenging notion.

What if those of us who professionally serve others outside AA--whether we are doctors, taxi drivers, professors, or Playboy bunnies--had to report, not to some boss or professional association with punishment powers, but instead to our *clients*? In effect, that *is* the case with AA officers and committees, isn't it?

Once, an AA committee I belonged to heard of a member who was representing himself as an AA official and collecting money thereby. We instantly launched into a discussion of what to do to him. Think about that. . . .

It took us an hour or so to realize that we had only the right to pray for him, not the authority to punish him. It was an exciting realization, and I continue to stand in awe of this principle: No matter how much you or I may misbehave, no matter how bad a member one of us may be, there is no one in AA with formal authority to fine us, censure us, or kick us out of the Fellowship. That seems to me a clear implication of both Traditions Nine and Three (requirement for membership).

I've learned, too, that I can misuse this Tradition as I have several others, to excuse my own failings. When I foul up, I can shrug my shoulders and say, "After all, we're not supposed to be well organized." But that's just a cop-out, I fear; Number Nine does *not* say we ought to be inefficient, lazy, dishonest, or irresponsible.

Of course, the lack of authority in AA can exasperate high-pressure types. I think of one of our most popular AA pamphlets, "What Happened to Joe." The actual writing and production of it took less than four months. But before that, discussions of it had lasted *fourteen years*! Interminably, committees worried about whether to do it at all, then about how to do it, what it should say and not say, and on and on.

The process would have been much more efficient if some boss had made the decisions and given the orders. But that is not the AA way. In order to be responsible to those they serve, AA servants work carefully, coolly, prayerfully. An AA pamphlet *should* be based on such preparation, it seems to me, if it is to represent responsibly the entire Fellowship, as all those published by AA World Services, Inc., do.

If AA were organized the way other outfits are, we could move faster, but would the result be more beneficial to *all* of us, both present members and those yet to come? For our simple stated purpose, our exasperatingly patient committees and boards are ideal, in my opinion. If we took on additional functions--such as managing buildings, providing shelter or medical services, running cafés--an entirely different kind of organizational system would, of course, be needed. Many AA operators of clubhouses and rest farms have unhappily found that out.

If we tried to organize in the conventional, orthodox ways, we could well become totally *disorganized*.

If we had to thresh out complete agreement on such issues as rules and authority and power and money, we'd split apart. Instead, we let each man hold his own ideas, discipline himself, and march to his own drumbeat. And in our joint determination to do this, we stay truly united after all.

It has been said that, if we want personal recovery, we owe this to AA's future: "to place our *common* welfare first; to keep our Fellowship united. For on AA unity depend our lives and the lives of those to come."

Ninth Tradition Checklist

1. Do I still try to boss things in AA?
2. Do I resist formal aspects of AA because I fear them as authoritative?
3. Am I mature enough to understand and use all elements of the AA program--even if no one makes me do so--with a sense of personal responsibility?
4. Do I try to exercise patience and humility in any AA job I take?
5. Am I aware of all those to whom I am responsible in any AA job?
6. Why doesn't every AA group need a constitution and bylaws?
7. Have I learned to step out of an AA job gracefully--and profit thereby--when the time comes?
8. What has rotation to do with anonymity? With humility?

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On Tradition Ten

"Alcoholics Anonymous has no opinion on outside issues; hence the A.A. name ought never be drawn into public controversy."

Editorial by Bill W.

A.A. Grapevine, September 1948

No A.A. Group or member should ever, in such a way as to implicate A.A., express any opinion on outside controversial issues -- particularly those of politics, alcohol reform, or sectarian religion. The Alcoholics Anonymous Groups oppose no one. Concerning such matters they can express no views whatever.

To most of us, Alcoholics Anonymous has become as solid as the Rock of Gibraltar. We like to believe that it will soon be as well known and just as enduring as that historic landmark. We enjoy this pleasant conviction because nothing has yet occurred to disturb it; we reason that we must hang together or die. Hence we take for granted our continued unity as a movement.

But should we? Though God has bestowed upon us great favors, and though we are bound by stronger ties of love and necessity than most societies, is it prudent to suppose that automatically these great gifts and attributes shall be ours forever. If we are worthy, we shall probably continue to enjoy them. So the real question is, how shall we always be worthy of our present blessings?

Seen from this point of view, our A.A. Traditions are those attitudes and practices by which we may deserve, as a movement, a long life and a useful one. To this end, none could be more vital than our 10th Tradition, for it deals with the subject of controversy -- serious controversy.

On the other side of the world, millions have not long since died in religious dissension. Other millions have died in political controversy. The end is not yet. Nearly everybody in the world has turned reformer. Each group, society and nation is saying to the other, "You must do as we say,

or else". Political controversy and reform by compulsion has reached an all-time high. And eternal, seemingly, are the flames of religious dissension.

Being like other men and women, how can we expect to remain forever immune from these perils? Probably we shall not. At length, we must meet them all. We cannot flee from them, nor ought we try. If these challenges do come, we shall, I am sure, go out to meet them gladly and unafraid. That will be the acid test of our worth.

Our best defense? This surely lies in the formation of a Tradition respecting serious controversy so powerful that neither the weakness of persons nor the strain and strife of our troubled times can harm Alcoholics Anonymous. We know that A.A. must continue to live, or else many of us and many of our brother alcoholics throughout the world will surely resume the hopeless journey to oblivion. That must never be.

As though by some deep and compelling instinct we have thus far avoided serious controversies. Save minor and healthy growing pains, we are at peace among ourselves. And because we have thus far adhered to our sole aim, the whole world regards us favorably.

May God grant us the wisdom and fortitude ever to sustain an unbreakable unity.

Bill W.

The A.A. Grapevine, September, 1948



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Tenth Tradition Checklist

Alcoholics Anonymous has no opinion on outside issues; hence the AA name ought never be drawn into public controversy.

[May 1971](#)
Vol. 27 No. 12

The author says: *"AA's Twelve Traditions have, in my experience, often proved vital in keeping me sober, and helpful otherwise in all my affairs."*

I COULD hear them down the street, before seeing them. Outside our AA meeting room, John and Jane were having at each other again, as they often did, in a political argument--good-natured, but earnest and loud. It was the year of a national election, long past, before I had ever heard of our Traditions. When I got to the door, I saw that one combatant wore a donkey pin; the other, an elephant. Both also wore exasperated looks on their red faces, and neither would listen to a word the other said.

Seeing me, they quit yelling and went into the meeting room with me, apparently leaving their strong differences outside. Just inside the door, they removed their political buttons.

"Why do that?" I asked. "Isn't it just as important to express your convictions in AA as anywhere else?"

John said, "National politics has no place in AA."

"What if I spoke to a new member I wanted to help, and she saw my political affiliation was different from hers?" Jane explained. "It might stand in the way of her listening to the AA message. What matters in AA is that we all have one thing in common--our drinking problem. Our various disagreements outside AA don't count here."

Being fresher from the barrooms than they were, I remembered a sign I had seen in one: "Politics, religion, and ladies are not appropriate topics of conversation in a saloon." The peace-ensuring wisdom of that had impressed me even when drunk. These AAs were smart, too, I thought; their practice of leaving arguments outside not only prevented their accidentally keeping some alcoholics out, it also helped hold together those already in the Fellowship by cutting down reasons for quarrels.

In retrospect, nearly a quarter-century later, that incident is now recognizable as my first brush with our Tenth Tradition, although it happened some time before the Traditions were written. In 1948, such experience-rooted, wise behavior was just called "the AA way."

Somehow, by instinct or the grace of God, the earliest AAs apparently arrived at this intelligent custom by coping with actual dilemmas. For instance, though surrounded by arguments following the repeal of prohibition, they knew enough to avoid the appearance of lining AA up with either the wets or the dries of the 1930's, long before such wisdom was codified as our Tradition Ten. Not only would such alignment have split the then-tiny, struggling band of nameless drunks into bitterly fractious factions, but taking sides in such a struggle would also have brought the Fellowship the enmity of everyone outside AA who differed with whatever the AA party line might have been.

Wet alcoholics like me (believing liquor should be legal) would have stayed away in droves from our movement if it had been dry (demanding national or local prohibition), and vice versa. So I suggest that, in a very real sense, "the AA way" later described in this Tradition saved my life. It made possible my belonging to AA, even though I was soon to learn that I disagreed with many AA members on various other topics as well.

If AA had tied itself up with one particular Christian denomination, with humanism, with Islam, or with one particular school of psychology-psychiatry in the big wars beginning to brew in the 1930's, look how many of us would have had additional strong reasons for refusing to go to AA!

Among the most controversial matters of the 1970's are: a war, race, some young people's behavior, poverty, and pot. It is notable that AA has not divided itself into camps on these issues. I would not dream of dragging any one of them into an AA relationship, nor of trying to find out who in AA agrees with me on those topics and who does not. It is much more important to me to keep uppermost in my mind that our common endeavor--recovery from alcoholism--is the most important part of my relationship with other AAs.

But outside AA, as a private citizen not identified as an AA member, I am, of course, free to act as I choose on those subjects, just as any other concerned person is. Instead of limiting my freedom, this Tradition gives me complete liberty outside the Fellowship, and frees me to concentrate on recovery alone while I am in AA circles.

Only when I began preparing this series of articles did I discover how beautifully many other Traditions support this one. Number One (common welfare) reminds me that our common bond is more important than our various differences outside AA. Two (group conscience) tells me that leaders are only servants in AA, not governors with the power to take us into public controversies. Three (membership requirement) reminds me that alcoholics who want our help need not agree with us on *any* issues. Four (group autonomy) declares that each group can run its own affairs--as long as it does not drag the rest of us into a public battle.

Number Five (primary purpose) emphasizes to me the fact that my chief AA business is carrying the message to alcoholics, not trying to make the rest of the Fellowship see how right I am in my various convictions (prejudices?). Six (neither endorsing nor opposing) specifically warns me of the dangers of any AA involvement in the world's quarrels. The words "neither endorsing nor opposing," you have probably noticed, are from the Grapevine-originated AA Preamble, of course, not from the Tradition itself. But have you ever noticed how well the Preamble summarizes many of the Traditions--and how closely it parallels the wording of the fifth paragraph in the Big Book's original foreword (pp. xiii-xiv in the Second Edition)? Obviously, the sense of the Traditions was being expressed in AA actions back in 1938-39, years before they were formally drawn up and adopted.

Tradition Seven (self-support) suggests that the acceptance of any outside contributions could subtly link my AA group to non-AA causes. The caution in Number Eight against turning AA membership into a profession helps keep us out of competition, and therefore out of controversy, with the medical, legal, religious, and other professions.

Number Nine's advice about avoiding a monolithic AA organization also makes it simpler for us to observe Ten--we would have to be much more organized than we are in order to move the entire Fellowship into any partisan posture. The anonymity suggested by Eleven and Twelve helps safeguard us against being carried into publicized debates by some nationally known AA figure.

As of now, I'm convinced I have hardly skimmed the top off the deep riches of our Traditions. Writing these articles is gradually teaching me how very far I have to go to incorporate them into my own AA thinking, let alone my personal life outside AA.

If our Traditions were simply organizational policies, or public-relations procedures applicable only to groups or to the Fellowship as a whole, it seems to me they would be highly changeable from culture to culture, time to time. But I suspect they will outlast many other aspects of AA, because they increasingly seem in my view to suggest immutable spiritual principles for this one individual's life.

The Tenth is an excellent illustration. Its sense would enormously benefit my relationships with people in or out of AA--if I used it. How great it would be if I could always keep irrelevant, controversial matters out of some of my personal friendships, work relationships, and even family ties, and concentrate instead on our areas of agreement, the important bonds between us.

In childhood, I felt that people with any affiliations different from mine were somehow against me. No matter how much I might like you, if you were anything other than an individual of one certain color, of one particular denomination (especially one regional branch), of one specific political persuasion, and of one limited socioeconomic class, I was sure you were an enemy even if you did not act like one.

A lot of that garbage is now cast aside, thanks to our Steps, but I have not yet learned to live comfortably with some people whose opinions are different from mine, even when those opinions are not an integral or necessary element of our relationship. I still let such differences stand between me and some beloved members of my own family, instead of concentrating on the things we have in common, the ways in which we do agree and are alike, the things most truly important in maintaining a loving relationship, as I think a good AA should.

Oh, if only the whole world valued its common good as loudly as it pursues its individual controversies! That is the essence of Tradition Ten, as I understand it--and we all know whose inventory we take in AA, right?

Tenth Tradition Checklist

1. Do I ever give the impression that there really is an "AA opinion" on Antabuse? Tranquilizers? Doctors? Psychiatrists? Churches? Hospitals? Freudianism? Catholicism? Judaism? Agnosticism? Jails? Alcohol? Drinking? Psychiatrists? Other alcoholism agencies? Jungianism? Protestantism? Or. . .
2. The Federal or state government? Alcohol education? Legalizing marijuana? Vitamins? Theories of alcoholism? Detoxification centers? Missions? Research into alcohol problems? Paraldehyde? Teen-age drinking? Tax-supported alcoholism programs? Al-Anon? Alateen? The alcoholic beverage industry? Nonalcoholics?
3. Can I honestly share my own personal experience concerning any of those without giving the impression I am stating the "AA opinion"? How?
4. What in AA history gave rise to our Tenth Tradition?
5. Have I had a similar experience in my own AA life?
6. What would AA be like if this Tradition were not in effect? Where would I be?
7. Do I breach this or any of its supporting Traditions in subtle, perhaps unconscious, ways?
8. How can I manifest the spirit of this Tradition in my personal life outside AA? Inside AA?

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On Tradition Eleven

"Our public relations policy is based on attraction rather than promotion; we need always maintain personal anonymity at the level of press, radio and films."

Editorial by Bill W.

A.A. Grapevine, October, 1948

"Our relations with the general public should be characterized by personal anonymity. We think A.A. ought to avoid sensational advertising. Our names and pictures as A.A. members ought not be broadcast, filmed, or publicly printed. Our public relations should be guided by the principle of attraction rather than promotion. There is never need to praise ourselves. We feel it better to let our friends recommend us."

Providence has been looking after the public relations of Alcoholics Anonymous. It can scarcely have been otherwise. Though more than a dozen years old, hardly a syllable of criticism or ridicule has ever been spoken of A.A. Somehow we have been spared all the pains of medical or religious controversy and we have good friends both wet and dry, right and left. Like most societies, we are sometimes scandalous -- but never yet in public. From all over the world, naught comes but keen sympathy and downright admiration. Our friends of the press and radio have outdone themselves. Anyone can see that we are in a fair way to be spoiled. Our reputation is already so much better than our actual character!

Surely these phenomenal blessings must have a deep purpose. Who doubts that this purpose wishes to let every alcoholic in the world know that A.A. is truly for him, can he only want his liberation enough. Hence, our messages through public channels have never been seriously discolored, nor has the searing breath of prejudice ever issued from anywhere.

Good public relations are A.A. lifelines reaching out to the brother alcoholic who still does not know us. For years to come, our growth is sure to depend upon the strength and number of these lifelines. One serious

public relations calamity could always turn thousands away from us to perish -- a matter of life and death indeed!

The future poses no greater problem or challenge to A.A. than how best to preserve a friendly and vital relation to all the world about us. Success will heavily rest upon right principles, a wise vigilance and the deepest personal responsibility on the part of every man jack of us. Nothing less will do. Else our brother may again turn his face to the wall because we did not care enough.

So, the 11th Tradition stands sentinel over the lifelines, announcing that there is no need for self-praise, that it is better to let our friends recommend us, and that our whole public relations policy, contrary to usual customs, should be based upon the principle of *attraction* rather than promotion. Shot in the arm methods are not for us -- no press agents, no promotional devices, no big names. The hazards are too great. Immediate results will always be illusive because easy shortcuts to notoriety can generate permanent and smothering liabilities.

More and more, therefore, are we emphasizing the principle of personal anonymity as it applies to our public relations. We ask of each other the highest degree of personal responsibility in this respect. As a movement, we have been, before now, tempted to exploit the names of our well known public characters. We have rationalized that other societies, even the best, do the same. As individuals, we have sometimes believed that the public use of our names could demonstrate our personal courage in the face of stigma; so lending power and conviction to news stories and magazine articles.

But these are not the allures they once were. Vividly, we are becoming aware that no member ought to describe himself in full view of the general public as an A.A., even for the most worthy purpose, lest a perilous precedent be set which would tempt others to do likewise for purposes not so worthy.

We see that on breaking anonymity by press, radio or pictures, anyone of us could easily transfer the valuable name of Alcoholics Anonymous over onto any enterprise or into the midst of any controversy.

So, it is becoming our code that there are things that no A.A. ever does, lest he divert A.A. from its sole purpose and injure our public relations. And thereby the chances of those sick ones yet to come.

To the million alcoholics who have not yet heard our A.A. story we should ever say, "Greetings and welcome. Be assured that we shall never weaken the lifelines which we float out to you. In our public relations, we shall, God willing, keep the faith."

Bill W.

The A.A. Grapevine, October, 1948



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11th Tradition

Our public relations policy is based on attraction rather than promotion; we need always maintain anonymity at the level of press, radio and films.

[July 1971](#)

Vol. 28 No. 2

The author says: *"AA's Twelve Traditions have, in my experience, often proved vital in keeping me sober, and helpful otherwise in all my affairs."*

THE NAMES of Joe DiMaggio, Henry Ford, Fiorello La Guardia, Mrs. Thomas A. Edison, Admiral Richard E. Byrd, Senator Harry S. Truman, the Duke of Windsor, Earl Baldwin, and Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek may not seem to fit together. But they were all listed in New York newspapers as joint "sponsors" of the Oxford Group, an evangelical religious movement very popular in the 1930's. *You can read the wonderful story of AA's great debt of gratitude to the Oxford Group in the book AA Comes of Age.* (Actually, it had no ties with the renowned English university; but people thought it did, so the name was used because such an image had obvious prestige value.

When Bill W., who codified AA customs into our Twelve Traditions, first sat down to write them out (for the Grapevine), in 1946, he had very much in mind this Oxford Group practice of exploiting celebrity names to promote its cause. And that, he told me once, was one reason he proposed "attraction" rather than such "promotion" as the basis of AA's relations with the public.

In fact, AA had already pretty much adopted the nonpromotion policy as the young Fellowship's way of doing things. Ex-drunks knew from their own experience that the hard sell generally does not persuade a rumpot (or anyone else) to give up his pot. Tradition Eleven just put this idea into capsule form.

But none of this was known to me, or of any use or interest whatsoever, one hot summer day in 1942. I stood in a seedy old joint on lower Main Street in Fort Worth, Tex., trying to get a glass of cold beer down before my shakes made me spill the damn thing.

Three thousand years and two bottles later, I had begun to get it all together, and I realized, to my mild surprise, that it must be afternoon. The evening-paper boys were delivering their wares.

I bought a paper and turned to my favorite gossip columnist. He had a funny piece that day about a bunch of folks in town who called themselves Alcoholics Anonymous. They sounded like awful fools, or some kind of fanatic reformers, just like the fellows who ran that rundown, shabby old mission next door to the tavern I was in. They had gone all sanctimonious, I figured, and had given up drinking and almost everything else I liked to do, which the mission preachers called "sinful ways."

Despite my scorn for both the mission and this AA business, I did tear out the AA story and slip it into my wallet. I explained to the bartender that I wanted to show it to some drinking buddies of mine, for a laugh.

I wonder now whether that story really was funny, intentionally or unintentionally. Anyhow, I lost it and never thought of it again--consciously--through the next two and a half years of fierce alcoholic drinking. During that time, I took a geographical cure, seriously believing that, if I moved to New York from Fort Worth, my drinking would somehow get straightened out. It was a severe and scary setback to find myself drinking even worse around Times Square than I ever had back in the old corrals of Cowntown.

One morning, sweatily trying to decide which shoelace to tackle first, desperately trying to remember what horrors I had perpetrated the night (or nights) before, I found myself crying and saying, "I've got to get out of this hell, some way." Then I suddenly remembered that old Fort Worth newspaper clipping about Alcoholics Anonymous.

Two general ideas from that gossip column had apparently lodged themselves in the collection of throbbing cavities I called my head. One was that AA had something to do with people known to be

very heavy drinkers. The other impression was that AA didn't ask for more than your first name, so they could never tell anyone that you had joined their club.

That promise of privacy, that pledge--implied in the name Alcoholics *Anonymous*--to keep my shameful record absolutely confidential made it possible for me to show up at the local AA office a few days later. The Traditions were still unwritten, but the spirit of trustworthiness and anonymity which pervaded our Fellowship enabled me to sneak through the door on a clear, cold January day of 1945 and find at long last, not only that I was at home, that I was wanted, but that no one would tell on me.

Already, I was the beneficiary of both halves of Tradition Eleven. Fort Worth members had cooperated with that Texas columnist back in 1942, so he could carry the message of AA in his newspaper. They had given him *information* about AA--not boastful promotion material. By that action, they had acknowledged that AA *itself* could not be anonymous; it could not be a secret society if it wanted to carry the message. And in their message that problem drinkers could recover, they also conveyed the AA promise of privacy, or confidentiality.

Because their behavior saved my life, I have ever since been glad to see our public information committees helping to get more and more publicity for AA in newspapers, on television, in magazines, books, and movies. It may not always be the kind of publicity I like; but, when I am tempted to criticize, I just remember that all it has to do is to plant the twin seeds of (1) hope for the problem drinker and (2) anonymity--the conviction that he can trust us never to betray him. I'm sure such publicity has saved many other lives, and I hope we get cleverer and cleverer at figuring out ways to keep AA constantly being mentioned in the public media.

Once I had joined AA, I found there was something I could do, personally and privately, to help spread the message. Rather soon after starting to sober up, I told my friends and family about this wonderful new thing I had learned: that alcoholism is a disease, not a moral failing. It wasn't my fault that I had been such a bad drunkard for so long; it was the disease's fault. But I quickly added that now I was going to be all right, it wouldn't happen again, because I had joined this marvelous organization called Alcoholics Anonymous.

I also told my doctor and employers, when it seemed appropriate for them to know. My friends in AA did, too. Whenever we told of our own membership, we knew that it might help chip away at the cruel stigma which still kills too many alcoholics. Sometimes, of course, the message was carried to other alcoholics, indirectly, through these doctors and employers.

Since we also told of our AA membership when we made amends, when we spoke at open meetings, and when we did Twelfth Step work, the notion of keeping our membership secret, or being furtive about it, just never occurred to most of us, I guess. After all, why should we be ashamed of recovering from a disease?

We did not tell any outsiders the names of other members, of course. That promise of confidentiality in our name was precious to me, and still is; I certainly would not break it.

But I have always loved to gossip, and it wasn't easy to keep from telling last names and other identifying facts about members to other AAs. I have learned my lesson on that one, I hope, the hard way--through embarrassment. It happened to me twice. Having told one member about another member, I learned that the two were old acquaintances and each wanted particularly to keep the other from knowing he was in AA! Clearly, I had violated confidences. It was unforgivable, and I am still ashamed when I think of it.

Now, I consider my knowledge of people in AA to be very much like the privileged information confided to a doctor, lawyer, or priest. I have absolutely no right whatever to disclose anything about a member to anyone else, in AA or out, without that member's explicit permission. Respect of this privileged information is not a matter of professional ethics, specifically sanctioned by law, but I think the AA promise of confidentiality is a sacred one, and I must do my part to keep it.

Within the Fellowship, I prefer to speak of another member--and be spoken of--only by the first name. I like this practice simply because it is extra insurance against letting slip things told me privately, and because it is an effective symbol, making the point--particularly to outsiders and newcomers--that we mean it when we say we're anonymous, we're trustworthy, we don't tell.

Few of us in AA, I guess, have much occasion to worry about that part of the Tradition cautioning against the use of our names or faces in mass communications media. Not long after sobering up, I

discovered that neither Winchell, *Life*, the New York *Times*, nor anyone else was standing outside the meeting doors every night to announce to a breathless world that I was just leaving an AA meeting, sober. As far as I know, David, Walter, and Harry and their TV cameras have let practically all the rest of us alone, too. By and large, the record is remarkably good on that part of Tradition Eleven. Even if as many as seventy-five "anonymity breaks" accidentally occur in, say, one year, that's only about .00015 percent of our membership.

One particular set of AA members does run into that problem, however, and I especially admire the way they handle it. I refer to the many good AAs who work professionally in the field of alcoholism and are always being interviewed by newspapers and on television and radio. They just say they are "recovered alcoholics," without saying that they are AA members. It seems to me that this device is honest, adheres perfectly to the Tradition, and at the same time may carry a message of hope. Certainly, the old stigma fades when good-looking, smart-sounding, respectable folks like that are not ashamed to say in public that they are recovered alcoholics, and when they say it as casually as they would state any other fact about themselves.

In my opinion, anonymity in the mass media is still very important, to all AA members and to all potential members. It signals to sick alcoholics: Come on in--we won't tell. And it guards us against the temptation to start bragging about ourselves. . .but I'm ahead of myself again. That's Tradition Twelve.

And I still have a long way to go in getting Number Eleven under my belt. Doesn't "attraction rather than promotion" have a personal meaning for me? Yes, I am supposed to make AA life look so attractive that drunks will want the kind of sobriety they see in me more than they want to go on drinking. Rather than promote AA with the hard sell or with bribes (a cup of coffee, a flop, a job, or other favors), it's up to me to make AA seem very attractive.

The members I met in 1945 did just that for me. I don't find it so easy.

Eleventh Tradition Checklist

1. Do I sometimes promote AA so fanatically that I make it seem *unattractive*?
2. Am I always careful to keep the confidences reposed in me as an AA member?
3. Am I careful about throwing AA names around--even within the Fellowship?
4. Am I ashamed of being a recovered, or recovering, alcoholic?
5. What would AA be like if we were not guided by the ideas in Tradition Eleven? Where would I be?
6. Is my AA sobriety attractive enough that a sick drunk would want such a quality for himself?

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On Tradition Twelve

"Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our traditions, ever reminding us to place principles before personalities."

Editorial by Bill W.

A.A. Grapevine, November 1948

"We of Alcoholics Anonymous believe that the principle of Anonymity has an immense spiritual significance. It reminds us that we are to place principles before personalities; that we are actually to practice a genuine humility. This to the end that our great blessings may never spoil us; that we shall forever live in thankful contemplation of Him Who presides over us all."

ONE may say that anonymity is the spiritual base, the sure key to all the rest of our Traditions. It has come to stand for prudence and, most importantly, for self-effacement. True consideration for the newcomer if he desires to be nameless; vital protection against misuse of the name Alcoholics Anonymous at the public level; and to each of us a constant reminder that principles come before personal interest -- such is the wide scope of this all embracing principle. In it we see the cornerstone of our security as a movement; at a deeper spiritual level it points us to still greater self-renunciation.

A GLANCE at the 12 Traditions will instantly assure anyone that "giving up" is the essential idea of them all. In each Tradition, the individual or the group is asked to give up something for our general welfare.

Tradition One asks us to place the common good ahead of personal desire.

Tradition Two asks us to listen to God as He may speak in the Group Conscience.

Tradition Three requires that we exclude *no* alcoholic from A.A. membership.

Tradition Four implies that we abandon all idea of centralized human authority or government. But each group is enjoined to consult widely in matters affecting us all.

Tradition Five restricts the A.A. group to a single purpose, i.e. carrying our message to other alcoholics.

Tradition Six points at the corroding influence of money, property and personal authority; it begs that we keep these influences at a minimum by separate incorporation and management of our special services. It also warns against the natural temptation to make alliances or give endorsements.

Tradition Seven states that we had best pay our own bills; that large contributions or those carrying obligations ought not be received; that public solicitation using the name Alcoholics Anonymous is positively dangerous.

Tradition Eight forswears professionalizing our Twelfth Step work but it does guarantee our few paid service workers an unquestioned amateur status.

Tradition Nine asks that we give up all idea of expensive organization; enough is needed to permit effective work by our special services--and no more. This Tradition breathes democracy; our leadership is one of service and it is rotating; our few titles never clothe their holders with arbitrary personal authority; they hold authorizations *to serve, never to govern*.

Tradition Ten is an emphatic restraint of serious controversy; it implores each of us to take care against committing A.A. to the fires of reform, political or religious dissension.

Tradition Eleven asks, in our public relations, that we be alert against sensationalism and it declares there is never need to praise ourselves. Personal anonymity at the level of press, radio and film is urgently

required, thus avoiding the pitfall of vanity, and the temptation through broken anonymity to link A.A. to other causes.

Tradition Twelve, in its mood of humble anonymity, plainly enough comprehends the preceding eleven. The "Twelve Points of Tradition" are little else than a specific application of the spirit of the "Twelve Steps of Recovery" to our group life and to our relations with society in general. The Recovery Steps would make each individual A.A. whole and one with God; the Twelve Points of Tradition would make us one with each other and whole with the world about us. Unity is our aim.

Our A.A. Traditions are, we trust, securely anchored in those wise precepts: charity, gratitude and humility. Nor have we forgotten *prudence*. May these virtues ever stand clear before us in our meditations; may Alcoholics Anonymous serve God in happy unison for so long as He may need us.

Bill W.

The A.A. Grapevine, November, 1948



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Twelfth Tradition Checklist

[September 1971](#)

Vol. 28 No. 4

Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our Traditions, ever reminding us to place principles before personalities.

The author says: *"AA's Twelve Traditions have, in my experience, often proved vital in keeping me sober, and helpful otherwise in all my affairs."*

EVERY SO OFTEN, I must ask myself, "Who do you think you are, anyway?" That question ties me to the guidepost which is our Twelfth Tradition, much as a rope tethers a grazing mule. When hooked to it, I am restrained from roaming into dangerous territories of vanity and self-pity. They always seem to be beckoning, trying to entice my hungry ego with their greener-looking fodder, and overindulgence in either could lead me back to drunkenness.

Circling this Tradition, trying to get inside its meaning by logic or some other route, time after time I have felt pulled up short by the discovery that here, in this context, "anonymity" has one simple meaning, personally applicable to me.

Newspapers, magazines, TV, movies, and radio only rarely find any particular one of us important enough for the public to care whether we are sober or not. When they do, the Eleventh Tradition amply covers that situation, in my opinion. (It never was intended to keep us from revealing our AA membership privately, however.)

But here in the Twelfth, the term "anonymity" strongly suggests to me something more than that, something at the core of nearly all AA teachings. As of today, to the best of my understanding, that something more is *humility*.

The word is one I have both fought and cherished in AA. At first, back in 1945, it made me think of the cringing, sniveling, creepy, phony "umbleness" of Dickens's Uriah Heep. *That* was not what AA meant, I felt certain.

Then the word suggested to me the sensation of being humiliated. I found it hard to understand why and how that would help me stay sober. Humiliation had been one of the most painful parts of my drunkenness; did AA want me to endure more of it, sober?

It was therefore a great relief, that first year, to hear humility discussed for hours and hours over nickel coffees in an all-night Grand Central Station cafeteria. Humility, I was told, did not mean being a doormat, never standing up for oneself; instead, it meant just being open-minded, no longer sure that *I* knew all the answers.

Later, investigating religious ideas with the guidance of AA friends, I found enormous help in Emmet Fox's explanation that being humble did not mean being poor-spirited and spineless. Instead, it meant being *teachable*.

After a 1946 slip, I think I took one step nearer understanding humility, when I decided to try to learn about unselfishness. For me, that meant practicing it, going through the motions many times, as if it were an exercise--necessary for one who had been lost in greedy, sick self-concern, I had to find tiny things I could do for someone else's benefit. Then I had to keep quiet about these deeds, instead of trying to collect any credit for them.

That was not always easy, because I felt pretty sure that the deeds should not be too easy. They should cost me at least a little, even if it was nothing more than my time, in order to give me the spiritual progress I sought. For my purpose, I found menial tasks best--such as washing my group's ashtrays on the sly. The point was, I felt, that for my own survival I had to learn to place the welfare of others before my own, and learn to do so without the reward of praise.

(Such exercises are still useful to me when I find myself wishing for credit I do not get--both inside and outside AA. And I have another bad habit to combat. Each time I go through the lesson, I have to remind myself to be more generous about giving others credit when credit is their due. I am sometimes more prodigal with gripes than with praise, alas.)

I thought I was beginning to catch on to the meaning of humility in action. Then, late one morning, just before lunch, my boss strode into my office. "Verifax these for me," Tom said, handing me some loose pages. And he walked out.

Rage paralyzed me. I could not have felt more affronted if he had ordered me to sweep out his office. Who did he think I was? Why me, instead of a secretary? Why me, instead of a *junior* writer? I was so angry, I could not think at all--I just felt.

Finally, I went to the duplicating machine, making sure Tom saw me. I also made sure he heard me say loudly to someone, "I can't go to lunch--have to do this." Poor ole me!

Running the pages through--a two-minute operation--I tried to back off and look at myself, a trick my good psychotherapist had encouraged me to practice whenever my face felt scarlet. What I saw was a preposterously pompous forty-year-old man pouting like a four-year-old. I looked so ludicrous I began to giggle at myself, and to breathe again. Not too many years before, I had been a drunk, an unemployable bum. Now I had turned into a big shot who thought he was too good for a mere mechanical task. Indeed, who did I think I was?

No longer so blinded by my own injured vanity, I remembered something else I had temporarily forgotten. Old Tom was a drunk. I mean a miserable, grouchy, guilty, scared, sweaty, nipping-all-day-but-trying-to-hide-it drunk. People laughed at the Sen Sen breath, the razor-nicked jowls, the vulgar jokes, the mug of "cold tea for my cough" stashed behind some books, the long lunch after which he always reached his daily peak of agreeableness and calm, cured of those morning shakes.

I had told him enough about my own past drunks for him to realize we were buddies beneath the skin. (I was trying to maneuver him into asking how I stayed sober.) So when I suddenly thought of those pitiful trembling hands, I was deeply ashamed of myself. Obviously, just before lunch he could no more put pages neatly into a copying machine than he could accurately guide a pencil. He had simply needed a favor from a friend he could trust, and he thought I was it. But I had been so conceited about myself and my position in the company that I had forgotten all about him and his problems.

I was hardly placing "principles before personalities." In my deep involvement with the most fascinating personality in the world--my own, of course--I had for a moment overlooked a prime AA principle, concern for the fellow alcoholic. I felt like such a heel that I took him to lunch in his favorite, dreary, hidden-away bar--four or five double martinis for him, pretzels and ginger ale for me.

For several weeks, I wallowed in a mud puddle of guilt about that, sure I was the worst of all AA members. I practically began to proclaim with pride my preeminence in rottenness and failure. Then a dear AA friend observed one night over coffee, "Some of us will do anything for distinction, won't we?"

Shocked, I began to chuckle. Something relaxed inside. Shortly afterward, I was able to ridicule myself out of that pit of despair, as I had previously laughed myself off the peak of self-importance.

Ever since the alternate self-exaltation and humiliation of those days, almost fifteen years ago, I have been searching for a happy medium between the two extremes. I know it exists--genuine humility, with false pride absent but self-respect present--because it is demonstrated by so many of the AA personalities through whom I learn AA principles.

I think I have also caught glimpses of it in writing about our other Traditions (as the checklist following this illustrates, I hope).

If anybody who reads the Grapevine wants to share a different understanding of our Traditions, I, for one will be glad to read it. After all, understanding our Traditions is like staying sober: I do not have to do it by myself, not as long as I am in AA.

Who do I think I am, anyway?

Twelfth Tradition Checklist

1. Why is it a good idea for me to place the common welfare of all AA members before individual welfare? What would happen to *me* if AA as a whole disappeared?
2. When I do not trust AA's current servants, who do I wish had the authority to straighten them out?
3. In my opinions of and remarks about other AAs, am I implying membership requirements other than a desire to stay sober?
4. Do I ever try to get a certain AA group to conform to *my* standards, not its own?
5. Have I a personal responsibility in helping an AA group fulfill its primary purpose? What is *my* part?
6. Does my personal behavior reflect the Sixth Tradition--or belie it?
7. Do I do all I can do to support AA financially? When is the last time I anonymously gave away a Grapevine subscription?
8. Do I complain about certain AAs' behavior--especially if they are paid to work for AA? Who made *me* so smart?
9. Do I fulfill all AA responsibilities in such a way as to please privately even my own conscience? Really?
10. Do my utterances always reflect the Tenth Tradition, or do I give AA critics real ammunition?
11. Should I keep my AA membership a secret, or reveal it in private conversation when that may help another alcoholic (and therefore me)? Is my brand of AA so attractive that other drunks want it?
12. What is the real importance of *me* among 500,000 AAs?

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