

The Circle And Triangle

A way of life, and a spiritual yardstick.

The Circle and Triangle was used by AA World Services in an official capacity from 1956 to 1993 as the symbol of AA, and was used to mark conference-approved literature and materials. Its use in an official capacity was terminated in 1993 by an unsigned letter from AAWS due to conflicts with other organizations' use of the symbol. Although it is no longer an official symbol, its significance to our history, and in my own belief, to our personal recovery, is still valid.

Bill Wilson presented the circle and triangle figure at AA's 20th anniversary convention in St Louis, in July of 1955. At that time, he said the following:

"Above us we see a banner and that banner shows a circle which is A.A. circumscribing the world. Within it is a triangle...the base of the triangle (is the foundation) of recovery on which we stand. The left of the triangle symbolizes our unity, and the right of the triangle our arm of service. Such is the symbol of A.A.

I first saw it in Norway in 1950, but this symbol is not new with us. We have attributed [a] particular significance to it, but in actuality, its significance is very old.

Students of ancient days tell that centuries ago it was regarded by priests and witch doctors alike as the symbol by which evil spirits could be kept away, and may that symbol ever stand guard over the society of Alcoholics Anonymous."

A Three-Fold Problem

In my own journey in Alcoholics Anonymous toward physical and emotional sobriety, the circle and triangle were given to me as symbolizing AA's three-fold solution to my own three-fold disease.

Physically, I suffer from an allergy – the phenomenon we call 'craving' – that renders me incapable of predicting how much I am going to drink once I start. In my own case, it means that I usually drink much more than I intend (even though I generally intend to drink a lot). In fact, I usually drank until I was separated from alcohol by unconsciousness, or outside forces such as police or orderlies. I have come to realize that trying to control the amount I drink is a lot like jumping off a very high building and trying to stop falling at the 11th floor.

Now, this physical part is a problem, but it would be a problem with a very simple solution if this was the whole of it. I could exert power over this allergy in the same way that someone allergic to shellfish exerts power... by avoiding the offending substance entirely. I often joke that drinking Drano would cause many of the same problems for me that alcohol will – physical suffering, hospitalization, puzzled concern from my friends, frustration and anger from my family – and yet I have never found it necessary to seek out a Drano Anonymous meeting. My alcohol problem is MUCH deeper than just an allergy, because in addition I suffer from this mental obsession which ensures that at certain, generally unpredictable, times – I will succumb to the delusion that a drink is a good idea, no matter how stupid that idea might be. When these two things became operative in me, the overall effect was a complete stripping of any power, choice, or control over if, when, and how much I drank. Even when physically dry, it was generally only a matter of time before some 'insanely trivial excuse' presented itself to me, and my mind entered one of those 'strange mental blank spots' where a drink genuinely seems like a good idea, and I would begin the terrible cycle of spree/remorse/shame all over again.

Now, if all this wasn't bad enough, as if I needed any more bad news, it turns out that even if something keeps me separated from alcohol, this is just going to leave me smack in the middle of the spiritual component of the disease. I am as a rule, restless, irritable, discontent, and plagued by things like despair, frustration, fear, and bewilderment when I do not have alcohol to treat my spiritual condition. My INTERNAL condition is arguably even WORSE sober than when I am drinking! Even when outside forces conspire to keep me dry for a period of time, such as when I am staying (temporarily) sober based on my will-power, or I am institutionalized, or incarcerated, that just means that now I will begin to actively experience the problem that led me to drink in the first place.

So I have an intolerable internal condition when sober, a body that cannot predict what is going to happen when I start drinking (though statistically it is not usually pretty), and a mind that is prone to drinking, even – no, make that *especially* - at the worst possible time. All in all, this makes for a pretty hopeless condition. Any one of these conditions will automatically reinforce and re-activate the other two, bringing me back into that ever-steeper downward spiral... so any real solution to my alcoholism MUST address all three of these parts. One, or two are simply not enough to make any real difference.

A Three-Fold Solution

Enter the circle and triangle. Physically, AA suggests complete abstinence from alcohol to addresses that part of my problem. Any use of alcohol at all is completely unsafe for me. This solution suggests that I seek support in my abstinence from others with the same problem as me, that we march from our common problem along the path of our common solution shoulder-to-shoulder. I have heard

it said that no one meets God alone – that this is part of the meaning of Love thy Brother as Thyself. Thus, through the legacy of unity, governed by the 12 traditions, whereby I engage face to face with other alcoholics, I begin to treat the physical component of my alcoholism.

Now, this is all well and good, but I must also simultaneously seek treatment for the insanity that always leads me back to drinking. Unless I can find some source of soundness of mind, sooner or later I will fail at my attempt to remain abstinent. Therefore the base of the triangle, the legacy of recovery, deals with my mental condition – with the obsession of the mind which renders me incapable of *staying* abstinent. This part of AA's solution is governed by the twelve steps, which when practiced as a way of life, brought about in me a profound alteration in my thinking and my way of seeing the world, and altered me at such a deep level that I have not found it a good idea to drink since undertaking them.

This is still not the entirety of the problem, though. The spiritual malady that accompanies my physical and mental symptoms must also be addressed, or my internal condition becomes too intolerable – I need a sufficient replacement for the alcohol, which was for so long the only thing that brought me ease and comfort. The steps introduced me to the spiritual world, but now I also need to begin to live contrary to my old, selfish ways. At root, I learned that my basic problem was a fundamentally mis-seeing of the world: I had mistakenly believed that I was responsible for my own happiness – on the contrary, I discovered that I am actually responsible for anything BUT that. AA's legacy of Service, governed by the Twelve Concepts for World Service, suggests that I must focus on what I can do for you, and not on what you can do for me. By doing this, I attain to a level of peace and usefulness, a sense of wholeness and belonging that I realize I had always searched for.

A Simple Yardstick

Now, as a (generally) awakened member of Alcoholics Anonymous, I have found that sobriety, and peace of mind itself, really are granted 'on a daily basis'. That I am centered and whole today is in no way a guarantee that I will be tomorrow, because I am still in possession of an ego that will always seek to re-assert itself, and turn good into bad and joy into shame. For me, this re-building of the ego is essentially guaranteed – it is a question of *when* and *how*, rather than *if* and *how much*. This process must continue for me, or I begin moving back toward a drink rather than away from a drink.

Furthermore, I am hampered by my own conceptions of what is good for me and what is bad. I am prone above all else to the worship of comfort and feelings, to the lie that 'if it feels good, it is good...if it feels bad, it is bad'. This leaves me in a very troubling state, because the yardsticks I have always used to determine 'how I am doing' are hopelessly flawed – after all, don't I believe that the early stages of my sobriety, those hideously painful and confusing first weeks, was actually one of the best things that ever happened to me? And how many times have I felt wonderful, only to discover in hindsight that I had been merely cocky, and actually on the verge of catastrophe. If my reprieve is contingent on the maintenance of my spiritual condition, how do I do this? How can I know if I am enlarging my spiritual life, rather than drifting back into ego and insanity?

Again, enter the circle and triangle. I have found that there is one simple question that seems unfailingly to let me know whether I am moving toward a drink or away from one, toward spirit, or toward my ego:

"Am I currently living in all three sides of the triangle?"

I have found that if I am regularly attending meetings, actively living the twelve steps as a way of life, and am being of service to others on a daily basis, I am doing well. I may not enjoy every part of the journey that I am on, but if I am living all three sides of the triangle, I can be assured that I am going in the right direction. It is important to notice that the triangle is equilateral, and that no side is any more important than any other – if I back off on any one of the legacies, I am moving toward a drink again. A drink that may come immediately, or may not ever arrive – I do not get to know.

A Single-Fold Solution

Lastly, I have come to see that perhaps the most important part of the circle and triangle is the circle. With the triangle, we describe one side as dealing with the body, one with the mind, and one with the spirit. The circle that circumscribes the triangle reminds me, though, that these things are not actually separate...in actuality each side of the triangle is only part of the solution, and as I continue on my journey, they become less and less distinct. The twelfth step moves me into service, and the lion's share of my service work involves unity with other alcoholics, whether it be one-on-one or in a group. When I go to meetings, it is primarily to see what I can contribute to the others there, and it is a way to remind myself what I am really here for. While it is useful to me to refer to the three parts of the triangle to make sure that I am fulfilling my commitment to my own spiritual growth, it is also important that I remember that really none of these things is really separate.

The circle reminds me that, though the problem is three-fold, the solution at a deeper level is completely spiritual. When the *spiritual* malady is overcome, then and only then do we straighten out mentally and physically. Unity, Service and Recovery are different sides of the same spiritual process, so to speak, and to live in them is to recover spiritually. By living these three parts, I approach wholeness, without division and without imperfection.

By Raney N.