

Requiem for a Resentment  
by Mel B. (Toledo, Ohio)  
July 1997 AA Grapevine

I was surprised to learn recently that I may be a party to offenses against certain rights. That's because some alcoholics consider it a violation of their rights when people in authority such as judges and employers prod them into attending Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, where I have sometimes signed court slips for them. And since our program also mentions God, some agnostics are challenging AA's strong influence in treatment supplied by public funds.

I don't think AA members or groups ever wanted to violate anybody's rights. It would be hard to find any group of people more attentive to individual rights than AA members appear to be. For me, this high regard for the individual has always been one of AA's great attractions.

Whether this rights matter is really a genuine issue or only a teapot tempest, it did remind me of the time when I thought my own rights were being violated by a quartet of gospel singers. Though it took years to learn any lesson from this, the experience eventually helped give me more tolerance and understanding. Here's how it unfolded.

It was a Sunday morning in the spring of 1948, and I was in jail in a small Idaho town, serving a sentence for being drunk and disorderly. It is still disturbing to remember my horrible state of mind that morning. Not surprisingly, I was filled with resentment toward the police who had arrested me and the judge who had sentenced me. But there was more. Much of my anger was righteous indignation about the disgusting conditions in the jail, where the clogged toilet had overflowed and everything was filthy.

Yet in a perverse way I'd managed to get some strange satisfaction out of my plight. I'd become a martyr in my own mind, the victim of an unjust society which would allow these terrible jail conditions to continue. Somebody owed me something, or deserved to suffer, because of the way I was being treated.

Then something happened to raise my anger and resentment to a higher pitch. A quartet of singers--two men and two women--arrived in the corridor outside the cells to preach and sing gospel hymns. They were nice-looking, well-dressed people in their late twenties, but to me they exuded smug self-righteousness.

I saw their arrival as an unforgivable violation of my rights, since there was no way I could avoid hearing their preaching and singing. I prided myself on being an agnostic who had abandoned the hypocrisy of religion, and I had special contempt for people who performed their proselytizing services in public. I also felt that all people should have an absolute right not to have such preaching and singing shoved down their throats, even if they were serving jail time, as I was, for being drunk and disorderly.

Absolute right or not, I was forced to sit in my jail cell and listen to the songs and Bible messages. I retaliated as best I could by directing waves of silent hatred and contempt toward them, probably displaying an angry sneer at the same time. And in my own mind, I also took the moral high ground by passing judgment on the quartet. If they were so good and thoughtful, I thought, why weren't they concerned about the filth and degradation of the jail? How could they come to such a terrible place without being indignant toward the community for maintaining this disgraceful facility? Why weren't they out preaching to the city fathers for improvements in conditions? And what gave them the right to force me to listen to their preaching and singing? Why were they able to use public property in this way? I believed that both they and the jail officials had violated my rights to be free from religion.

The singers left and I smoldered for the rest of the morning. I got out of jail that afternoon, and soon left town and drifted to southern California. My drinking got worse, though I managed to stay out of jail. Several months later, I made my first contact with AA, a rather humiliating experience because the meeting was in a church in Santa Paula, California. It took eighteen months and many such meetings before I was able to establish what has turned out to be continuous sobriety, beginning in April 1950.

In the process of getting sober, I gave up my agnosticism and became a believer in AA's spiritual program. But this didn't put me on common ground with the young people who had sung to me through the bars of the jail. Far from it! I even managed to arrive at the belief that AA had the true and correct spiritual program while people such as the young gospel singers were misguided Bible-thumpers who were working entirely in the wrong way. I still felt they had violated my rights. And I apparently ignored AA co-founder Bill W.'s writings about AA's debt to religion and the need to get over any resentment toward religious people. My commitment to AA and sobriety was strong, however, and none of these lingering resentments got me into trouble.

But the time did come when I took another look at that Sunday morning experience. It took a kindly nonalcoholic friend named Les to help give me this new slant.

Les was a graduate of a college founded by an evangelist known for his rigid fundamentalism. We had become friends while working for a large corporation, where I was public relations manager and he held a sales training position. Though Les was still a religious man, he no longer shared fundamentalist views. Yet he acknowledged that he had obtained a fine education at his college and had received excellent preparation for graduate studies. He seemed to remember his undergraduate years in the same way I thought about

Navy boot camp: it was a valuable experience, but not one I'd like to repeat.

As we talked, Les's reference to this strict religious background made me think of the gospel singers who had invaded my privacy in the jail back in 1948 (it was now 1965). It seemed to me that they would have been right at home in this school. So I told my friend something of my own background: how I had found a spiritual program in AA and--finishing rather scornfully--how I objected to the practice of forcing prisoners to listen to singing and preaching against their will.

I paused in my tirade, expecting Les to agree with me. But he said, with a thoughtful expression, "You know, Mel, you might be too hard on those people. Did you ever stop to think that they might have been praying for you? And maybe it was their prayers that helped get you to your AA program."

Here was an idea that had never occurred to me. And I didn't really have an answer, except to admit that Les could be right. After all, I had learned in AA that prayer works, that it changed people and situations. Many of us in AA also believe in praying for others. And if my prayers have power to change lives, how could I say that the prayers of roving gospel singers might not be just as effective? It was arrogant and egotistical to believe that only AA prayers work.

That was more than thirty years ago, and I've lost track of the friend who steered me to this new viewpoint. But from that moment on, my thoughts about the gospel singers changed. While I still don't believe it's right to force religious teachings onto jail inmates, I've dropped any blame in the matter. Sure, my rights were violated. But real honesty would have compelled me to admit that I was in jail because I had been violating the rights and safety of other people in society. And how safe would anybody's rights be if everybody in society lived and behaved as I did?

I also began to develop a touch of gratitude for that Sunday morning experience. Of all the people in that town, the four young singers were the only people who cared enough to visit the jail in the hope of helping us. None of my drinking companions came to see me in jail. I suspect that most of them were laughing and joking about my plight, and didn't care whether I lived or died. None of the bar owners whose establishments I had patronized came to see me, nor did any other fair-weather friends.

But these four young people probably did care about those whom they considered to be lost souls. And it's almost certain that they did pray for me, as Les suggested.

Today, when I think of these four singers, I pray for them in my AA way, thankful now that there are all kinds of caring people in the world to offset the evil and destruction that are all around us. I also see it as a very minor problem that they violated my rights. The larger issue is that I and other men in that jail were in terrible trouble with ourselves and life, and these singers wanted to help. I disagreed with their approach, but they were at least on the right track in their desire to help and their belief that God has answers for people who are in deep difficulties, as I certainly was.

Now, ironically, I hear that I may be violating people's rights because my Fellowship and the Twelve Step approach are sometimes being imposed on people without their consent, at least according to our critics. And come to think of it, I have visited jails and talked to inmates about the AA program when other inmates were within earshot and thus forced to listen. Maybe these unwilling victims of my preaching felt the same way I did when the gospel singers arrived!

Well, we've always said that ours is a program of attraction only, so we should be willing to drop or modify any practice that violates individual rights or smacks of too much coercion. If we are being criticized for too-close involvement with courts and employer programs, we should heed Bill W.'s reminder that "our critics can be our benefactors." We should also concede that AA should not be offered as the only way out of alcoholism.

But like those young gospel singers I resented for so many years, I never really set out to violate anybody's rights, nor would most of my AA friends. What most of us really want is to offer every alcoholic the same recovery and new life that was given to us. And I hope I'm not being offensive by declaring that every suffering person should have that opportunity as a God-given right!