

Whatever Happened to Tradition Three?

Here are some thoughts on why Tradition Three is at the heart of the currently debated issue.

AA used to work very well. It grew by leaps and bounds and had an astonishing recovery rate by any comparative standard. There has never in recorded history been anything as successful or as long lived as AA, and we weren't the first kid on the block.

In the first 16 years of it's history AA produced a recovery rate in excess of 75%. By 1975 it had declined to about 65%. Today all estimates put it at less than 10% (many as low as 2 or 3%) and overall membership has actually declined in the last couple of years. By all accounts the "New and Improved AA" is "better" than the old more religious, more rigid, more dogmatic, more exclusive AA of the past. What happened? How can something that is said to be so much better work so much worse?

Could it be that the early members hit upon the keys to success and that subsequent "improvements" that were well intentioned were in reality the literal curse of death.

The founders were clear that they had a solution to the alcoholic dilemma and they were offering it freely to those who wanted it. If a prospective member didn't want what was being offered they went looking for someone else who did.

They didn't beg anybody to join and they didn't coddle the ones who balked at the rigor of their program. They figured the ones who didn't stick would drink some more and if they lived they would get them later. They expected the grave nature of alcoholism to force compliance with our spiritual principles.

They expected those who outright refused to follow the program to end up drinking their way to an open mind. Little did they know.

The long form of Tradition Three begins with the statement: "Our membership should include all who suffer from alcoholism." This statement implies that the potential member must be alcoholic. The more commonly stated short form:

"The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking." Is not a substitute for the long form. It was never meant as a "loophole" for a non-alcoholic to gain membership. There were very good reasons for excluding non-alcoholics at closed meetings, and excluded they were.

Here are some examples of how the early groups interpreted this principle before Bill wrote it down as such.

Definition of an Alcoholic Anonymous:

An Alcoholic Anonymous is an alcoholic who through application of and adherence to rules laid down by the organization, has completely forsworn the use of any and all alcoholic beverages. The moment he wittingly drinks so much as a drop of beer, wine, spirits, or any other alcoholic drink he automatically loses all status as a member of Alcoholics Anonymous.

A.A. is not interested in sobering up drunks who are not sincere in their desire to remain completely sober for all time. A.A. is not interested in alcoholic who want to sober up merely to go on another bender, sober up because of fear for their jobs, their wives, their social standing, or to clear up some trouble either real or imaginary.

In other words, if a person is genuinely sincere in his desire for continued sobriety for his own good, is convinced in his heart that alcohol holds him in its power, and is willing to admit that he is an alcoholic, members of Alcoholics Anonymous will do all in their power, spend days of their time to guide him to a new, a happy, and a contented way of life.

It is utterly essential for the newcomer to say to himself sincerely and without any reservation, "I am doing this for myself and myself alone."

Experience has proved in hundreds of cases that unless an alcoholic is sobering up for a purely personal and selfish motive, he will not remain sober for any great length of time. He may remain sober for a few weeks or a few months, but the moment the motivating element, usually fear of some sort, disappears, so disappears sobriety.

TO THE NEWCOMER: It is your life. It is your choice. If you are not completely convinced to your own satisfaction that you are an alcoholic, that your life has become unmanageable; if you are not ready to part with alcohol forever, it would be better for all concerned if you discontinue reading this and give up the idea of becoming a member of Alcoholics Anonymous.

For if you are not convinced, it is not only wasting your own time, but the time of scores of men and women who are genuinely interested in helping you. (A Manual For Alcoholics Anonymous published by the Akron Group in the early 40's)

The pass key to the door of understanding of alcoholism, as we members of ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS understand the problem, is the recognition and the admission on the part of the prospective member that he is an alcoholic. If he is not alcoholic, our group has

nothing to offer him.

If he is, an observance of our program will eliminate the alcoholic problem from his life. We have nothing to offer the controlled drinker. (page 2 Impressions Of AA published by Chicago Group in early 40's.)

MANY PEOPLE can "drink like gentleman," hold their liquor and feel no after-craving for a drink.

Alcoholics Anonymous has nothing to offer these drinkers. There exists no liquor problem for them, and we can only say, "More power to them; may they always be able to control their drinking."

This message is directed only to those too whom alcohol has become the BIGGEST problem in life...the true, heart-weary, ego-inflated, defeated Alcoholic.

(Who Me pamphlet published by Original Salt Lake Group in Early 40's)

You may ask what could be the problem with being a little more inclusive about our membership? Didn't Bill say that our way of life has it's advantages for all? Why not let them all in. Bill addressed these questions in a Grapevine Article that was later reprinted into a pamphlet called Problems Other Than Alcohol. In it he states the following:

Now there are certain things that AA cannot do for anybody, regardless of what our several desires or sympathies may be.

Our first duty, as a Society, is to insure our own survival. Therefore we have to avoid distractions and multipurpose activity. An AA group, as such, cannot take on all the personal problems of its members, let alone the problems of the whole world.

Sobriety - freedom from alcohol - through the teaching and practice of the Twelve Steps, is the sole purpose of an AA group.

Groups have repeatedly tried other activities and they have always failed. It has also been learned that there is no possible way to make nonalcoholic into AA members. We have to confine our membership to alcoholics and we have to confine our AA groups to a single purpose. If we don't stick to these principles, we shall almost surely collapse. And if we collapse, we cannot help anyone.

To illustrate, let's review some typical experiences. Years ago, we hoped to give AA membership to our families and to certain nonalcoholic friends who had been greatly helpful. They had their problems, too, and we wanted them in our fold. Regretfully, we found that this was impossible.

They couldn't make straight AA talks; nor, save a few exceptions, could they identify with new AA members. Hence, they couldn't do continuous Twelfth Step work. Close to us as these good folks were, we had to deny them membership. We could only welcome them at our open meetings. That's the problem with open membership. There is no identification .

As our book states on page 18:

But the ex-problem drinker who has found this solution, who is properly armed with facts about himself, can generally win the entire confidence of another alcoholic in a few hours. Until such an understanding is reached, little or nothing can be accomplished.

The problem is that they can't reach into our alcoholic world and make us believe they understand us and we can't hold drunken misery and death over their heads to entice them into practical application of our spiritual principles. It is a very inefficient system of mutual aid when none of the important motivational factors are shared.

The real tragedy of the situation is that only the alcoholics die. Why are they dying? They are dying because they aren't doing anything.

The first three chapters of our book and the Doctor's Opinion are summarized on page 43 as follows:

Once more: The alcoholic at certain times has no effective mental defense against the first drink. Except in a few rare cases, neither he nor any other human being can provide such a defense. His defense must come from a Higher Power.

That's what the promised spiritual awakening is for. It is the only thing ever in recorded history to reliably fix real alcoholics. It worked and kept working until it generally fell out of favor within the fellowship. How did this happen you ask? This slippery slope began in the mid-seventies with the proliferation of clinical treatment options for alcoholism and many of the less severe emotional dysfunctions.

An alcoholic algebra developed where if you drink at all and it causes you problems you are a problem drinker and that's as good as alcoholic in a fellowship where all you need is a desire to stop drinking. They sent them in droves. Rehabs, courts, mental health facilities, probation departments, concerned wives and parents, employers and many others sent us drinkers of all kinds and descriptions who were under the impression that they were alcoholics .

Some members I know personally stated that they were told by various outside agencies that they didn't have to be alcoholics to attend meetings or become members under the only requirement is a desire to stop drinking clause. So we had a situation where a outside agencies send us their clients who erroneously informed us as to our traditions, and we welcomed them.

We welcomed them because AA worked and these people deserved to experience the same benefits as the existing membership had. The problem occurred when these less-hopeless drinkers could not identify with the deadly drinking patterns described by the real alcoholics and opted out of working various parts of the program because they didn't seem necessary to them.

Turned out they were right. Non-alcoholic drinkers learned to their satisfaction just what Bill had written on page 39:

That may be true of certain nonalcoholic people who, though drinking foolishly and heavily at the present time, are able to stop or moderate, because their brains and bodies have not been damaged as ours were. But the actual or potential alcoholic, with hardly an exception, will be absolutely unable to stop drinking on the basis of self-knowledge.

This is a point we wish to emphasize and re-emphasize, to smash home upon our alcoholic readers as it has been revealed to us out of bitter experience.

Well, they learned the first part anyway. That second part where self-knowledge wouldn't fix the alcoholic problem, seemed to escape them. At least that is the impression that is conveyed by what they say at the meetings. I just don't drink and go to meetings is a program of will power and self knowledge.

Nothing else. The idea that I have frequently heard that "you can stay sober on Step One for the rest of your life and the other steps are for straightening out your life" is also based solely on self-knowledge as the cure.

The next time you have a headache see if goes away by telling yourself you have a headache. Sounds kind of ridiculous doesn't it? Why would it be any different with alcoholism? That's a program that will only work on drinkers who are not alcoholic by definition. When we allow them membership and they share their legitimate experience of not drinking and not working the program, they cannot help the real alcoholic who is the only one we are supposed to be concerned about.

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