

Grapevine, October 1947
Traditions Stressed in Memphis Talk

Urging all members of Alcoholics Anonymous to strive for humility before success and for unity before fame, Bill W, speaking before the third annual Southeastern Regional Convention in Memphis, Tennessee, on September 19, reviewed the Twelve suggested Traditions for the organization.

Pointing out that the success of AA could be "heady wine and a serious problem", Bill reminded members that as alcoholics "we are a people who could not exist at all except for the grace of God."

Here are the highlights of the talk as given to the AA Grapevine in advance of the Memphis meeting:

"Some years ago, Dr. Bob and I, among others, did a lot of traveling and speaking at AA groups the length and breadth of the country. Alcoholics Anonymous was just starting its astonishing growth. There was concern whether we could successfully expand so fast. Widely separated clusters of AAs were making their uncertain start, often too far from the original few groups to get much direct help. Many had to rely wholly on literature and letters.

"To meet this seeming emergency, the few of us who could do so got out among the new groups. We wanted to bring our experience and encouragement directly to the incoming thousands who were still unsure; we wanted them to feel a part of the growing whole; we wanted them to see that AA had nothing to do with geography; that it would work for them under any conditions whatever. We wished to foster a sound growth and the spirit of unity. So a few of us traveled much.

"Times have changed. As everyone knows, AA has since exceeded our wildest expectations. Speaking for Dr. Bob and myself, we feel that we oldsters need not take the prominent roles we once did. AA leadership is becoming, happily and healthily, a rotating matter. And besides, our literature, a generous press, and thousands of new travelers are carrying AA to every corner of the world.

"Yet there does remain a problem -- a serious problem, in whose solution AAs will expect us oldsters to occasionally take a hand. That is the problem of success itself. Always a heady wine, success may sometimes cause us to forget that each of us lives on borrowed time; we may forget that we are a people who cannot exist at all, but for the grace of God. The wine of forgetfulness might make us dream that Alcoholics Anonymous was our success rather than God's will. The very malignancy which once tore us apart personally could again commence to rend us as groups. False pride might lead us to controversy, to claims of power and prestige, to bickerings over property, money, and personal authority. We would not be human if these illnesses didn't sometimes attack us.

"Therefore, many of us think today the main problem of Alcoholics Anonymous is this: How, as a movement, shall we maintain our humility -- and so our unity -- in the face of what the world calls a great triumph? Perhaps we need not look far afield for an answer. We need only adapt and apply to our group life those principles upon which each of us has founded his own recovery. If humility can expel the obsession to drink alcohol, then surely humility can be our antidote for that subtle wine called success."

Bill then went on to explain in detail the Twelve Points of Tradition, first printed in an article in the April 1946 issue of the AA Grapevine: "Two years ago my old friends urged that I try to sum up our experience of living and working together; that I try to state those definite principles of group conduct which had then quite clearly emerged from a decade of strenuous trial and error. In the spirit of our original Twelve Steps, and strictly within the ample proof's of our experience. I made

the following tentative attempt; Twelve Points to Assure Our Future, an Alcoholics Anonymous Tradition of Relations (recently revised in the light of later experience).

"Our AA experience has taught us that"

"1. Each member of Alcoholics Anonymous is but a small part of a great whole. AA 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 alcoholism. Hence we may refuse none who wish to recover. Nor ought AA membership ever depend upon money or conformity. Any two or three alcoholics gathered together for sobriety may call themselves an AA group, provided, of course, that as a group, they have no other affiliation.

"4. With respect to its own affairs, each AA 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 AA as a whole without conferring with the trustees of the Alcoholic Foundation. 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 AA group, as such should never go into business. Secondary aids to AA, such as clubs or hospitals which require much property or administration, ought to be incorporated and set apart that, if necessary, they can be freely discarded by the groups. Hence, such facilities ought not to use the AA name. Their management should be the sole responsibility of those people who financially support them. For clubs, AA managers are usually preferred. But hospitals, as well as other places of recuperation, ought to be well outside AA -- and medically supervised. While an AA group may cooperate with anyone, such cooperation ought never go so far as affiliation or endorsement, actual or implied. An AA group can bind itself to no one.

"7. AA 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 contributions carrying any obligation whatever, is unwise. Then, too, we view with much concern those AA treasuries which continue, beyond prudent reserves, to accumulate funds for on stated AA 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 AA Twelfth Step work is never to be paid for.

"9. Each AA 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 general service committee. They are the custodians of our AA Tradition and the receivers of voluntary AA contributions by which we maintain the AA General Service Office in New York. They are authorized by the groups to handle our overall public relations and they guarantee the integrity of our principal newspaper, the AA Grapevine. All such representatives are to be guided in the spirit of service, for true leaders in AA 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 AA group or member should ever, in such a way as to implicate AA, 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 AA ought to avoid sensational advertising. Our names and pictures as AA 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.

"To sum us: For thousands of alcoholics yet to come, AA does have an answer. But there is one condition. We must, at all costs, preserve our essential unity; it must be made unbreakably secure. Without permanent unity there can be little lasting recovery for anyone. Hence our future absolutely depends upon the creation and observance of a sound group Tradition. First things will always need to be first; humility before success, and unity before fame."

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