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Guardian of AA

Our General Service Conference

by **Bill W.**

EVERY AA WANTS TO MAKE SURE of his survival from alcoholism, and his own spiritual well-being afterward. This is just as it should be. He also wants to do what he can for the survival and well-being of his fellow alcoholics. Therefore he is bound to have a vital interest in the permanence and well-being of AA itself.

In his AA group, every good member feels deeply about this. He knows, once the miracle of sobriety has been received, that Providence expects all of us to work and to grow—to do our part in maintaining our blessings in full force. A perpetual miracle—with no effort or responsibility on our part—simply isn't in the cards. We all understand that the price of both personal

and group survival is willingness and sacrifice, vigilance and work.

What is so true for each member and for each group must also be true for AA as a whole. Yet many of us have never given this self-evident proposition the thought it deserves. We are apt to take it for granted that AA, as a whole, will go on forever—no special attention or contribution being required of us. Save an occasional glow of pride in AA's size and reach, it is possible that half of AA's members and groups still have little active concern for the total welfare. That isn't negligence on their part at all. They simply haven't seen the need.

There are two good reasons for this. One is that AA as a whole has never run into any trouble. The

other is that, until recently, a small group of AA's old timers—acting as parents—have tended to the perils and problems of our whole society without consulting the membership very much about such matters.

Never have we had a problem that cut clear across us. The public admires us, our friends love us. Religion and medicine are in our corner. Nobody has seriously exploited us. We have avoided public controversy. The world's political strife hasn't touched us. We haven't had even one full-sized family quarrel. While members and groups have had just about all the woe there is, AA as a whole has never had any. This is the miracle of our twenty-three years of existence.

No wonder so many truly believe that nothing can ever happen to AA itself!

That we have been so long exempt from the pains that all nations and societies must suffer is something for the deepest gratitude. But we certainly cannot presume that this benign phenomenon will last forever. For one, I do not think that it should last. We can never call ourselves "grown up" until we have successfully met with all those temptations and problems that invariably harass every large grouping of men and women. This will be good for us—very good, I'm sure.

Some day we may have to resist all the pressure that a destruction-bent world can put upon us in this

craziest and most perilous century that the human race has ever seen. As a fellowship, we shall always need to make whatever sacrifices are necessary to insure AA's unity, service, and survival, *under any conditions whatever*. That is why I'm now writing to you about AA's General Service Conference, the guardian of our future.

Until recently, we have behaved like a still-young family. This family, like all families, has had parents. These parents have been the so-called old timers and originators of AA. I was fortunate enough to have been one of them. Since the earliest days we parents have been more concerned with the future welfare of AA than with anything else. At local levels, we old timers used to look after things; until very recently, Dr. Bob and I, mightily assisted by dedicated alcoholic and non-alcoholic friends, have been doing the same at national and international levels.

As parents of AA we had to see to it that our growing brood was protected against itself, and against the world outside. Very early, our family had to have principles to live by, and schooling in those principles. The good news of AA had to be spread far and wide so that we could grow in numbers as well as in quality. Such were our responsibilities.

It was in 1937 when Dr. Bob and I first began to see what we must do. We knew there would have to

be an AA text of principles and methods. Other old timers agreed. By 1939, with lots of help, we had published the "big book," *Alcoholics Anonymous*. This ended all doubt about AA's methods. The 300,000 "big books" today in circulation constitute the platform of recovery upon which our whole fellowship stands.

We next realized that AA would have to have publicity—lots of it, and of the right kind. We commenced work on this problem. Maybe half of today's members owe their lives and their fortunes to the telling efforts of the press and other means of communication.

From 1940 to 1950, we were beset by group problems of every sort, frightening beyond description. Out of these experiences the Twelve Traditions of AA were forged . . . traditions that now protect us against ourselves and the world outside. This effort, requiring immense office correspondence and experience, finally resulted in a whole new literature dealing with AA's unity and services. Under these influences we grew solid.

The news of AA began to spread around the world, finally reaching into seventy lands. This brought a host of new problems and the need to publish AA literature in many tongues. Hospitals and prisons and loners and men on ships also had to be reached and helped. AA's lifelines had to extend everywhere. AA needed a monthly magazine. Today,

The AA Grapevine reaches 40,000 subscribers plus countless thousands of others each month.

These have been the duties and privileges of our parenthood worldwide. We did our best to protect AA so that it could grow undisturbed. Not troubling the growing family about these critical matters, we acted on the principle that "father knows best." In the early days, it was just as simple as that. It was then far too soon to throw the full weight of responsibility onto our whole fellowship.

From the beginning, Dr. Bob and I found that we needed special help ourselves. Therefore we called upon certain dedicated non-alcoholics to give us a lift. With these men, we formed a trusteeship for Alcoholics Anonymous. It was created 'way back in 1938 and we called it The Alcoholic Foundation (since renamed The General Service Board of AA). In 1940, our trustees acquired the AA book, assumed full responsibility for AA's general funds, its world service office, its magazine and its public relations.

To this body of trustees—alcoholic and non-alcoholic—must go most of the credit for making our world Headquarters what it now is. I am very glad that this issue of the Grapevine carries the pictures of two of our distinguished non-alcoholic Chairmen of the Board, men whose steadfastness saw us through a long season of labor and peril. In the faces of Leonard Har-

ison and Bernard Smith you can see what these men are. And in our new history book, *AA Comes of Age*, you can read what they and others like them did for us in our pioneering time as the moving drama of AA unfolded.

During the year 1948 we workers at AA's Headquarters got a terrific jolt. Dr. Bob was stricken with a consuming and slowly fatal malady. This created a severe crisis in our affairs because it made us face up to the fact that the old time parents of our society weren't going to last forever.

We were filled with foreboding as we realized how insecure were the existing links between our Headquarters and the vast sprawling fellowship that it served. There was, of course, our small Board of Trustees. But not one AA in a thousand could name half of them. At the Headquarters office, there were Bobbie, Ann and Charlotte. There was Dr. Bob and myself. We few were just about the *only links* to worldwide AA!

Meanwhile thousands of our members went serenely about their business. They knew little or nothing about AA's over-all problems. They vaguely supposed that God, with maybe a slight assist from Dr. Bob and me, would go right on handling them. Thus they were completely ignorant of the actual state of our affairs, and of the awful potential there was for an ultimate collapse.

It was a racking dilemma. Somehow AA as such—*AA as a whole*—would have to take over the full responsibility. Without doubt the groups would have to elect numerous delegates and send them to New York each year, where they could sit with and guide the trustees. Only by so doing could AA assume effective direction of its own policy and business. Only through these elected delegates could the increasing isolation of the trustees from the movement itself be halted. Only such a body could take binding decisions in any future crisis.

When our scheme for a joint Conference of trustees and delegates was first proposed, a howl went up country-wide. At first it looked as though the AA family didn't want any part of this new and unexpected responsibility. To them, "AA delegates" spelled nothing but politics, controversy, and confusion. "Let's keep it simple," they cried.

But after a couple of years of agitation and education, our fellowship clearly realized that the ultra simplicity of the early days could be no more. Direct family responsibility there would have to be, or else AA would fold up at its very center. The erstwhile elders, fathers and founders would have to be taken off the hook and replaced by delegates. There was no other way. The family would have to "come of age" or suffer dire penalties for the failure to do so.

So we called in some seventy-five

delegates from the U. S. and Canada. Together with the trustees and the Headquarters and Grapevine staff, those delegates formed themselves into the General Service Conference of Alcoholics Anonymous. By then, it was 1951.

At first this was an experiment, pure and simple. If it worked it would mean that AA had truly "come of age," and could really manage its own affairs. Through its representative Conference, it could become the guardian of its own future and the protector of its own lifelines of service.

Well, our Conference did work. Its performance, God be thanked, exceeded all our expectations. At the end of its five-year experimental period, we knew that it could become a permanent part of our fellowship.

In July of 1955, at AA's twentieth anniversary, I stood before the great St. Louis Convention. Amid a dwindling band of old timers, and on their behalf, I delivered the destiny of AA into the hands of its chosen representatives, the General Service Conference of Alcoholics Anonymous. I cannot remember any happier day in my life. A gaping chasm had been bridged . . . AA was secure at last.

Some people still ask these ques-

tions: Will the AA family send to the Conference its finest delegates? Will we continue to choose able and wise trustees? Will AAs back their Conference members, their trustees and their world Headquarters with enough funds, enough interest and enough understanding?

For me, these are questions no longer. The history of AA shows that whenever a great need arises, that need is always met. In this respect, I'm quite sure that our history will go on repeating itself. Indeed, I can have no doubt whatever.

I think, too, that my own influence at the Headquarters should continue to lessen. Through its Conference, complete authority and responsibility is now fully vested in AA. The parent who overstays his time can only hamper the growth of his offspring. This I must not do. My proper place will soon be along the sidelines, cheering you newer ones as you carry on. Our family is now fully of age, and it should firmly remind me of that fact if I am ever again tempted to take charge.

For these all-compelling reasons, my friends, the future belongs to you. Embrace these new responsibilities eagerly, fear naught, and the Grace of God will surely be yours.