

February 1978

12. *Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our Traditions, ever reminding us to place principles before personalities*

The Bill W. - Yale Correspondence

Bill's letters declining an honorary degree, unpublished in his lifetime, set an example of personal humility for AA today and tomorrow

EARLY IN 1954, after considerable soul-searching, Bill W. made a painful decision that ran counter to his own strong, self-admitted desire for personal achievement and recognition.

The AA co-founder declined, with humble gratitude, an honorary degree of Doctor of Laws offered by Yale, one of the nation's oldest, most famous, and most prestigious universities. Acceptance would have brought him—and AA—enormous amounts of favorable publicity. The university, too, would have received respectful recognition from press, public, and the academic world for presenting the degree. Yet he turned it down.

Would a yes from Bill have vastly changed AA as we know it today? Would the change have been for better, or for worse? Could Bill's

acceptance of the honor have sown seeds that, in time, would have destroyed AA? These are some of the questions that figured in Bill's perplexity and in his prayers.

The Grapevine is publishing the correspondence between Bill and Reuben A. Holden, then secretary of the university. The exchange of letters followed a personal visit to Bill from Mr. Holden and Professor Selden Bacon in January of 1954. The following week, Bill received this letter:

Yale University
New Haven, Connecticut
January 21, 1954
Dear Mr. W—:

I enclose a suggested draft of a citation which might be used in conferring upon you the proposed honorary degree on June 7th.



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF YALE UNIVERSITY

If your trustees approve this formula, I should then like to submit it to the Yale Corporation for their consideration.

The wording can be considerably improved. We shall work on that during the next few months, but in every instance we shall be sure it has your unqualified blessing.

Thanks for your hospitality on Tuesday and for your thoughtful consideration of our invitation.

Very sincerely yours,
Reuben A. Holden

(Naturally, Bill's full name was used in all this private exchange. In observance of the Eleventh and Twelfth Traditions, the Grapevine is maintaining his anonymity at the public level.)

This is the first draft of the text of the citation:

W. W.:

Co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous. For twenty years, this Fellowship has rendered a distinguished service to mankind. Victory has been gained through surrender, fame achieved through anonymity, and for many tens of thousands, the emotional, the physical, and the spiritual self has been rediscovered and reborn. This nonprofessional movement, rising from the depths of intense suffering and universal stigma, has not only shown the way to the conquest of a morbid condition of body, mind, and soul, but has invigorated the individual, social, and religious life of our times.

Yale takes pride in honoring this great anonymous assembly of men and women by conferring upon you, a worthy representative of its high purpose, this degree of Doctor of

Laws, admitting you to all its rights and privileges.

From the office of the Alcoholic Foundation (now the AA General Service Office), Bill sent this reply:

February 2, 1954

Mr. Reuben Holden, secretary
Yale University
New Haven, Connecticut
Dear Mr. Holden,

This is to express my deepest thanks to the members of the Yale Corporation for considering me as one suitable for the degree of Doctor of Laws.

It is only after most careful consultation with friends, and with my conscience, that I now feel obligated to decline such a mark of distinction.

Were I to accept, the near term benefit to Alcoholics Anonymous and to legions who still suffer our malady would, no doubt, be worldwide and considerable. I am sure that such a potent endorsement would greatly hasten public approval of AA everywhere. Therefore, none but the most compelling of reasons could prompt my decision to deny Alcoholics Anonymous an opportunity of this dimension.

Now this is the reason: The tradition of Alcoholics Anonymous—our only means of self-government—entreats each member to avoid all that particular kind of personal publicity or distinction which might link his name with our Society in the general public mind. AA's Tradition



Twelve reads as follows: "Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our Traditions, ever reminding us to place principles before personalities."

Because we have already had much practical experience with this vital principle, it is today the view of every thoughtful AA member that if, over the years ahead, we practice this anonymity *absolutely*, it will guarantee our effectiveness and unity by heavily restraining those to whom public honors and distinctions are but the natural stepping-

stones to dominance and personal power.

Like other men and women, we AAs look with deep apprehension upon the vast power struggle about us, a struggle in myriad forms that invades every level, tearing society apart. I think we AAs are fortunate to be acutely aware that such forces must never be ruling among us, lest we perish altogether.

The Tradition of personal anonymity and no honors at the public level is our protective shield. We dare not meet the power temptation naked.

Of course, we quite understand the high value of honors outside our Fellowship. We always find inspiration when these are deservedly bestowed and humbly received as the hallmarks of distinguished attainment or service. We say only that in our special circumstances it would be imprudent for us to accept them for AA achievement.

For example: My own life story gathered for years around an implacable pursuit of money, fame, and power, anticlimaxed by my near sinking in a sea of alcohol. Though I survived that grim misadventure, I well understand that the dread neurotic germ of the power contagion has survived in me also. It is only dormant, and it can again multiply and rend me—and AA, too. Tens of thousands of my fellow AAs are temperamentally just like me. Fortunately, they know it, and I know it. Hence our Tradition of anonymity,

and hence my clear obligation to decline this signal honor with all the immediate satisfaction and benefit it could have yielded.

True, the splendid citation you propose, which describes me as "W. W.," does protect my anonymity for the time being. Nevertheless, it would surely appear on the later historical record that I had taken an LL.D. The public would then know the fact. So, while I might accept the degree within the letter of AA's Tradition as of today, I would surely be setting the stage for a violation of its spirit tomorrow. This would be, I am certain, a perilous precedent to set.

Though it might be a novel departure, I'm wondering if the Yale Corporation could consider giving AA itself the entire citation, omitting the degree to me. In such an event, I will gladly appear at any time to receive it on behalf of our Society. Should a discussion of this possibility seem desirable to you, I'll come to New Haven at once.

Gratefully yours,
William G. W——

Six days later, Mr. Holden replied:

Dear Mr. W——:

I have waited to respond to your letter of February 2 until we had a meeting of the Committee on Honorary Degrees, which has now taken place, and I want to report to you on behalf of the committee that after hearing your magnificent letter,

they all wish more than ever they could award you the degree—though it probably in our opinion isn't half good enough for you.

The entire committee begged me to tell you in as genuine a way as I can how very deeply they appreciated your considering this invitation as thoroughly and thoughtfully and unselfishly as you have. We understand completely your feelings in the matter, and we only wish there were some way we could show you our deep sense of respect for you and AA. Some day, the opportunity will surely come.

Meanwhile, I should say that it was also the feeling of the committee that honorary degrees are, like knighthoods, bestowed on individuals, and that being the tradition, it would seem logical that we look in other ways than an honorary-degree award for the type of recognition that we should like to give the organization in accordance with the suggestion you made in your last paragraph. I hope this may be possible.

I send you the warmest greetings of the president of Yale University and of the entire corporation and assure you of our sincere admiration and good wishes for the continued contribution you are making to the welfare of this country.

Cordially yours,
Reuben A. Holden

The series of letters ends with Bill's acknowledgment:

March 1, 1954

Dear Mr. Holden,

Your letter of February 8th, in which you record the feelings of the Yale Corporation respecting my declination of the degree of Doctor of Laws, has been read with great relief and gratitude. I shall treasure it always.

Your quick and moving insight into AA's vital need to curb its future aspirants to power, the good thought you hold of me, and your hope that the Yale Corporation might presently find the means of giving Alcoholics Anonymous a suitable public recognition, are something for the greatest satisfaction.

Please carry to the president of Yale and to every member of the board my lasting appreciation.

Devotedly yours,
Bill W—

Recently, the Grapevine received a letter from an AA who was a trustee on the AA General Service Board at the time of this offer to Bill. The former trustee, Cliff W. of California, recalls talking to Bill at the board meeting following the exchange of correspondence.

"I suggested that we make a pamphlet of these letters, as his refusal letter was truly magnificent. Bill grinned and replied, 'Not while I'm alive. I don't want to capitalize on humility.' " Cliff suggested to the Grapevine that it would now be proper to print the letters.

During Bill's lifetime, copies of the Yale correspondence were privately circulated within the Fellowship, with Bill's knowledge and consent. Jim A., who in 1965 was AA public information chairman for a central office in a large West Coast city, wrote to Bill, asking permission to show the letters to anonymity-breakers "... as an example that AA probably does not need their individual names to keep it going or to make it more effective."

In reply, Bill wrote, "Certainly, you may show that Yale correspondence in a limited way. But I see you agree that it would not be exactly right on my part to consent to its general publication at this time. Actually, I'm not so damn noble as you suppose. In reality, I rather wanted that degree.... However, I think the principle of anonymity will be so invaluable to us, especially in future time, that one in my position should really fall over backwards in trying to demonstrate the principle. By way of example, it might help in the years to come."

Ten years before this, just one year after the Yale correspondence had ended and less than two weeks before the Twentieth Anniversary AA Convention in St. Louis in 1955, Bill replied to a Canadian AA friend who felt that publishing the letters at that time would "help consolidate AA and fortify the anonymity Tradition."

"I agree with you in part," Bill answered, "that publication now

could help temporarily. But I do think that publication would imply my permission and would therefore be not a little ego manifestation on my part.

"Actually, when I declined the degree, I did it with the long future in mind. I could picture a possible time

*"The tradition of . . .
personal anonymity
is our protective
shield."*

when AA might find itself in some great contention and crisis. At that time, this letter, though bearing the dead hand, might have a marked, even a deciding, effect. . . . Anyhow, I would be disinclined to have it generally published at present—that is, published under circumstances which will surely indicate to the reader that I have given my consent."

Under present circumstances—seven years after Bill's death—there is clearly no possibility of the consent that he called an "ego manifestation." The Grapevine feels that AA members, now numbering around eight times as many as were sober in 1954, have a right to know of Bill's example of both courage and humility. This correspondence may help all of us appreciate the sacrifice Bill made for us, and for the countless alcoholics yet to come to our Fellowship for help.