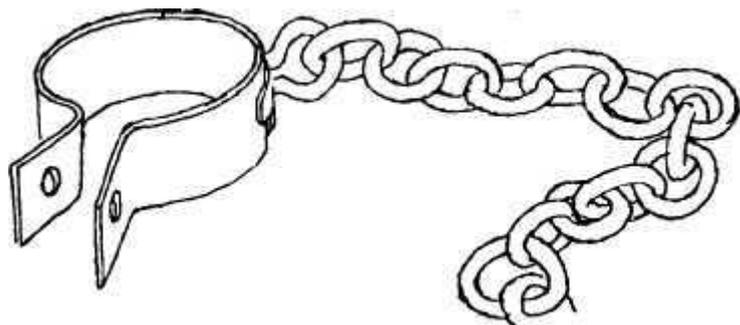


WHAT IS FREEDOM IN AA?



By Bill W.

THE Traditions and customs of Alcoholics Anonymous reveal a charter for individual and group freedom, the like of which history has never before produced. We have no humanly administered government whatever.

Once upon a time there was an AA member who got the notion that his own group was a little too stuffy, respectable and intolerant. Hence it was, he thought, over-fearful of the lapses and deviations of its members. Tongue in cheek, he pondered a remedy. Finally he hung a placard in the club room. It read as follows: "Folks, just about anything goes in here. But if you happen to be drunk at this meeting, don't be too noisy about it. And please don't smoke your opium in the club elevators!"

True, our friend had gone overboard to make out his case. An AA drunk at an AA meeting is seldom seen, and it's probable that nobody has yet smoked opium in a clubhouse. Nevertheless any of us can read between the lines of that placard, and to good effect.

Our prankster was really saying to each of the respectable and the fearful, "But for the Grace of God, there go I." To disturbers of the group peace he was saying, "Nobody can compel you to behave, or punish you if you do not. AA has Twelve Steps for recovery and for spiritual growth. It has Twelve Traditions for the unity of every AA group and our whole fellowship. These Traditions show how we can all stay in one piece, if we will. Now

this meeting place costs some money. We hope you will put some cash in the hat, but don't want to make you do it. You can attack us, but you'll probably find that most of us won't fight back. You can bust your anonymity in public and misuse the AA name for your own prestige and pocketbook. If you insist on such foolishness, we can't stop you. The same is true if you drag the AA name into public controversy. We hope you won't do any of these things to us, or to yourself. We simply say that you will have to practice AA's principles because *you want them for yourself*—not because we insist. The choices are yours; this is your charter of freedom in AA."

For any other society such unlimited freedom for the individual would be disastrous. Sheer anarchy would take it over in jig-time. How is it, then, that we AAs can stand this amount of liberty, a liberty which sometimes looks like a license to do exactly as we please, individually and collectively? Then, too, is this unheard-of charter of liberty made possible by our virtues? Or is it actually powered by our necessities?

Well, our necessities are certainly immense and compelling. Each of us must conform reasonably well to AA's Steps and Traditions, or else we shall go mad or die of alcoholism. Therefore the compulsion among most of us to survive and to grow soon becomes far stronger than the temptation to drink, or to misbehave. Literally, we must "do or die." So

we make the choice to live. This, in turn, means the choice of AA principles, practices and attitudes that can salvage us from total disaster by insuring our sobriety. This is our first great and critical choice. Admittedly this is made under the fearful and immediate lash of John Barleycorn, the killer. Plainly enough, this first choice is far more a necessity than it is an act of virtue.

But once over this hump, we commence to make another kind of choice. We begin to see that AA principles are good ones. Though we are still beset with much rebellion, we increase the practice of these principles out of a sense of responsibility to ourselves, our families, and our groups. We begin to obey because we feel we *ought to obey*. Though painful, we see that this is the right thing to do. As we try for results we see that we are growing. This is an earned satisfaction. Life still isn't easy, but it's a whole lot better. Besides, we have a lot of company. All around us there are plenty of fellow travelers, individuals or groups. We can do together what we can't do in separation.

Finally we see that there is still another dimension of choice which may now and then be attained. This is the "point where we can take an attitude, engage in a practice or obey a sound principle, because, without reservation or rebellion, that is what we really want. When our willingness and acceptance becomes this complete, we find that all rebellion

disappears. Now we conform because we fully want to conform. Or to put it another way: we want nothing else but God's will for us, and His Grace for our fellows.

Looking back we see that our freedom to choose badly was not, after all, a very real freedom. When we chose because we "must," this was not a free choice either. But it got us started in the right direction. When we chose because we "ought to" we were really doing better. This time we were earning some freedom, making ourselves ready for more. But when, now and then, we could gladly make right choices without rebellion, hold-out or conflict, then we had our first view of what perfect freedom under God's will could be like. Few indeed can long remain on that lofty plateau; for most of us its permanent attainment has to be a lifetime and, more probably, an eternal job. But we know that this highest plateau is really there—a goal someday to be reached.

Such are the several freedoms in AA, and this is how they seem to work among us. To gain these insights took a long time. It was not until 1945, ten years after I met Dr. Bob, that we even dared put the Traditions of Alcoholics Anonymous on paper. There had been a period in which we continually feared what erratic members within and the world without might do to us. It was difficult to believe that our group conscience could be a reliable guide. Hence we questioned the wisdom of

giving every AA group its local autonomy.

Still more, we questioned whether we shouldn't throw out undesirables, and even unbelievers. To give every alcoholic in the world an exclusive right to say whether or not he would be an AA member was a breathtaking decision. Such were the fears of those days, and such were the restrictions that we were tempted to place upon each other. After all, these were the restrictions that even the more benign of societies and governments had had to place on their members and citizens. Why should we be the exception?

Happily, however, we adopted no governmental measures. Instead, we cast up the Twelve Traditions of AA. These were truly the utterance of our entire group conscience. The amazing degree of today's voluntary conformity to them is something for the greatest wonder and thanksgiving. We now know that we shall always practice these principles: first because we must, then because we ought to, and finally because the majority of us will deeply want to do just that. There cannot be the slightest question of this.

We trust that we already know what our several freedoms truly are; that no future generation of AAs will ever feel compelled to limit them. Our AA freedoms create the soil in which genuine love can grow — the love of each for the other, and all for God Himself.

(End)