



Fragments of AA History

Exploring Anonymity

(from a presentation to the 39th General Service Conference)

There are many in Alcoholics Anonymous today who are of this opinion concerning anonymity: that we urge upon each other the practice of anonymity not as an act of hiding or humility but as a route to one of life's most elusive rewards - a genuine and well-deserved contentment with oneself. However, we are not the first in history to do so.

The Greeks had a word for it almost four thousand years ago: *anonymos*, or "without name."

But though they had a word for it, they didn't have a way with it. According to today's authorities on those ancient times - particularly that period when Athens was in its glory - the Greeks were justifiably too boastful a bunch even to consider anonymity, much less to practice it.

These same Athenians, however, created and nurtured a democracy in a form so pure that it was in fact, as well as in spirit, a recognition of at least some of the protectiveness and reward of anonymity.

All public offices were open to every citizen of the state. But the terms of those offices were limited to one year, or two years at the most. This was the ancient Athenians' way of providing equal opportunity for all and, at the same time, guarding against anyone from the general population rising too far above the crowd, becoming a big shot and big mouth and attempting to take over.

In the *Ha-Siddur Ha-Shalom*, the daily prayer book of Judaism, it is revealed most eloquently and sometimes graphically that the Hebrew people of more than two thousand years ago praised anonymity as a virtue and strove to practice it for its spiritual as well as its material gains.

In the ancient Mishnah of the *Talmud*, excerpts from the chapter entitled "Ethics of the Fathers" show how strongly it was urged upon the people of those times to recognize the danger of seeking self-greatness and acknowledging the greater good of being one of the crowd and working

with one another.

People of those times were advised, for example, to "be a tail among lions rather than the head among foxes." They were reminded also that "envy . . . and vainglory shorten a man's life." In addition, they were urged: "Do not seek greatness for yourself and do not crave honors . . . do not desire the table of kings for your table is greater than theirs, your crown is more glorious than theirs."

Still further they were advised that "he who seeks greater reputation loses his reputation; he who makes unworthy use of learning shall perish." It was also taught and practiced by the faithful that "nothing (is) better for a person than silence . . . and whoever talks too much brings about sin."

As evidence of how strongly the ancient Hebrews believed in the rewards of anonymity, a commandment of the Sukkah reads: "Him that humbles himself the Holy One raises up and him who exalts himself the Holy One humbles" and "from him who seeks greatness, greatness flees [while] him who flees from greatness, greatness follows."

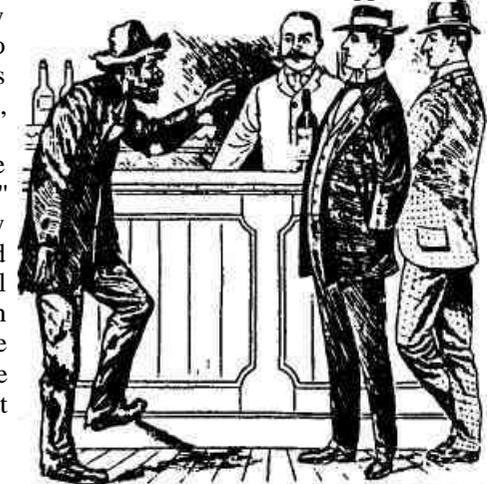
Several hundred years after the time of the "Ethics of the Fathers," Christ spoke in praise of the humility that fosters anonymity when he said "blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth." In his Sermon on the Mount, he went on to say: "Take heed that ye do not your alms before men to be seen by them . . . do not

sound a trumpet before thee as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets that they may have glory of men . . . and when thou prayest enter into thy closet and when thou hast shut thy door pray to thy Father which is in secret and thy father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly."

It's a long way in time and space and atmosphere from the Mount of Olives early in the first century A.D. to the second day of April, 1840, and Chase's Tavern on Liberty Street in Baltimore, Maryland. A big difference in specific purpose, too - though the spirit of the event was one of mutuality.

For on that date, six drinking friends met to launch a series of nightly meetings, made a decision to stop their drinking, and took a pledge to do so.

They called themselves the Washingtonians and in a year's time they had reformed 1,000 drunks and had 5,000 other members and supportive



friends. On their second anniversary, one of their groups in the Midwest was addressed by a young United States Congressman from Illinois named Abraham Lincoln.

So rapid was its rise that it soon had 600,000 members. Along the way, however, it became so involved - even concentrated - on promotion of its aims and success that its main and original purpose began to evaporate. Still further, many of its members became embroiled in public controversies, giving voice to and taking sides in such outside matters as abolition of slavery and temperance.

By the end of 1847, just seven years after it began its original noble venture, the Washingtonian movement had faded out of existence and ceased activity except in Boston where, in all too brief a time, it vanished altogether.

About seventy years later, another movement surfaced that was to be remarkably effective for a couple of decades. This was the Oxford Group (whose purpose was not primarily to sober up drunks - though some did sober up using their principles). Interestingly, its founder, Frank Buchman, saw great virtue in anonymity; for a considerable length of time he preferred to be known only as "Frank B." This was to change, however, along with the overall tone of the original Oxford Group movement. Before too long, ordinary membership purposes were shunted aside and eventually overwhelmed by increasing cases of personal ambition,

campaigns for funds, and eager public searches for support, endorsement, and even group participation of well-known personalities.

AA's earliest members, chief among them co-founders Bill W. and Dr. Bob, were associated with the Oxford Group and were on hand, it is reported, for a gathering in New York City where Buchman revealed for the first time his personal hopes for dealing with the problem of alcoholism. "I'm all for alcoholics getting changed," he announced, "but we have drunken nations on our hands as well."

It was 1938, and before long the Oxford Group was transformed into what was called Moral Rearmament, with Frank Buchman still at the head of it - now with the purpose of bringing the nations of the world together by strictly peaceful means.

By 1939, a changing AA and a changing Oxford Group had drifted apart. But in talking later about AA's infancy in that fellowship, Bill said of the Oxford Group members: "They had clearly shown us what to do" (and) "we also learned from them what not to do so far as alcoholics were concerned - too authoritarian, aggressive evangelism, absolute concepts which were frequently too much for drunks, dependence upon the use of prominent names (mighty hazardous for us)." And, because of the stigma at that time of alcoholism, "most alcoholics wanted to be anonymous."

Commenting on this still further,

Bill said, "Anonymity was not born of confidence; the bare hint of publicity shocked us . . . we were afraid of developing erratic public characters who . . . might get drunk in public and so destroy confidence in us . . ."

There was also a practical side for this early need for anonymity. With so few members in the beginning years, with no office staff or printed matter to explain or describe the AA program, there was a fear that individuals would be overwhelmed with a flood of requests for information and a chorus of urgent pleas for help - all beyond the ability of that small membership to handle. So AA anonymity at that time was not a cover-up; it was a necessity.

Was there ever any thought, however, that there might be exceptions concerning certain individuals or certain circumstances, when the urgency of anonymity need not apply and could be dropped? Bill himself had to struggle with just that question in the early days. In responding to a friend who asked, "Is there ever a time when anonymity could or even should be dropped?" Bill wrote:

"Just before publication of the book, I toyed with the idea of signing my name to it. I even thought of calling AA 'The Wilson Movement.' Had I then dropped my anonymity it is entirely possible that you and thousands of others might not be alive today. This movement would have gotten off to a false start entirely."

Another time, Bill (along with the entire AA office) was faced with

another "yes" or "no" decision about anonymity. And this one was not so easy to solve. The year was 1941 and the subject was the Jack Alexander article scheduled to appear in a forthcoming edition of the *Saturday Evening Post*. All had gone just as planned during preparation of the piece. Jack Alexander had exhibited great enthusiasm and also unusual understanding of the program. Members' names had been changed. No pictures had been taken. Everyone concerned was overjoyed with the opportunity to let the whole nation - the world in fact - know about AA, its purpose and progress.

Then came a message from editors at the *Post*: Pictures would now be taken to go along with the article.

Back went a message from the AA office to the *Post*: "Because of anonymity - sorry, no pictures."

In quick return came the reply from the *Post*: "No pictures? Sorry, no article."

Now a decision - and a hard one - had to be made, and quickly. Would the expected positive effect of the article - especially that of carrying the message of hope to the still-active alcoholic - outweigh the possible negative effect of the anonymity break and therefore justify that break?

AA's answer was "yes" and Jack Alexander's article ran with pictures. (One picture in the *Saturday Evening Post* article showed full faces of AA members; however, they were not identified by name.) His report is recognized to this day as a major turning



point in the strength and growth of AA as a Fellowship looked upon with respect, admiration, and even honor around the world.

No look at anonymity as practiced by AA can be truly complete, however, without including the question: Is it possible for an AA member to be too anonymous - too anonymous for the good of the individual and the Fellowship? The answer is "yes." And there are more than a few examples of this. For example, there are members who feel they must not tell their families or their friends or co-workers or doctors or ministers or lawyers that they are members of AA. There have even been instances when members have sent requests for information to GSO and not included a last name or have sent checks - hard to believe - unsigned.

So, there is indeed such a thing as an AA member being "too anonymous": (1) where it can mean failure to extend the helping hand when the need arises; (2) where it can mean failure to correct misconceptions about AA, both inside and outside the Fellowship; and (3) where it can stifle - even stop - the flow of AA knowledge and subsequent sobriety from one person to another.

This is anonymity at the personal level and can indeed be - and sometimes is - carried too far, even as Bill says to "the point of real absurdity." Anonymity at the public level, however, is another matter, and no member of the AA Fellowship has shown the genuine humility to practice anonymity at the public level more dramatically and in a more truly self-sacrificing manner than Bill himself.

Considering the size of today's AA population, the number of public anonymity breaks - though most discomforting when they do occur and sometimes potentially dangerous - are comparatively few and infrequent. This may be because as AA matures, its members more fully understand the value to themselves for anonymity at the public level. It may be also because of Bill's remarkably powerful example of personal sacrifice - his consistent backing away from personal honor for the good of all.

What a demonstration of anonymity in action this is for all to follow. Over a period of years, Bill:

1. discouraged any Nobel Prize possibility for himself;
2. declined awards from several colleges (suggesting they be offered instead to the Fellowship itself);
3. turned down inclusion of his name and a brief personal history in *Who's Who in America* (his mother did the same);
4. said thank you but no thanks to an honorary degree from Yale University in New Haven;
5. rejected a *Time* magazine story that would have included his full-face picture on the cover of that national publication;
6. refused the Lasker Award (which was then given to Alcoholics Anonymous instead);
7. and posthumously (through his wife Lois) declined an honorary degree from his old school, Vermont's Norwich University.

When Bill died, his anonymity was broken in the press (as was Dr. Bob's at the time of his earlier death). But both Bill and Dr. Bob were buried, years and miles apart, without fanfare and there is no mention on their tombstones of their great and lasting contributions to Alcoholics Anonymous.

Clearly, in the manner in which they both lived their anonymity, Dr. Bob and Bill acted on the same ideas as the advice given in the ethics of the fathers more than 2,300 years ago: "that it is better to be a tail among lions than the head among foxes." And just as clearly, their lives have demonstrated how sure are the rewards of humility promised those same many centuries ago, to wit: "from him who seeks greatness, greatness flees [while] him who flees greatness, greatness follows."

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