The second of a new series
of articles explaining
The Twelve Traditions . . .

by

BILL

TRADITION TWO

For our group purpose there is but one ultimate authority — — a
loving God as he may express himself in our group conscience. Our
leaders are but trusted servants——they do not govern.

WHERE does AA get its direction? Who runs it? This too is
a puzzler for every friend and newcomer. Then told that our society
has no president having authority to run it, no treasurer who can com-
pel the payment of any dues, no board of directors who can cast an
errant member into outer darkness, when indeed no AA can give another
a directive and enforce obedience, our friends gasp and exclaim, "This
simply can't be. There must be an angle somewhere." These practical
folk then read Tradition Two, and
learn that the sole authority in AA
is a loving God as he may express
himself in the AA group conscience.

And what are the facts of AA
life that brought us to this seem-
ingsly impractical principle?

John Doe, a good AA, moves —
let us say - to Middletown, U.S.A.
Alone now, he reflects that he may
not be able to stay sober, or even
alive, unless he passes on to other
alcoholics what was so freely given
him. He feels a spiritual and ethi-
cal compulsion, because hundreds
like him may be suffering within
walking distance. Then, too, he
misses his home group. He needs
other alcoholics as much as they
need him. He visits preachers,
doctors, editors, policemen and bar-
tenders ... with the result that
Middletown now has a group, and
he is the founder.

Being the founder he is, at first,
the boss. Who else could be? Very
soon, though, his assumed authority
to run everything begins to be
shared with the first alcoholics he
has helped. At this moment, the
benign dictator becomes the chair-
man of a committee composed of
his friends. These are the growing
group's hierarchy of service — self-
appointed, of course, because
there is no other way. In a matter
of months, AA booms in Middle-
town.

The founder and his friends channel spirituality to newcomers, hire
halls, make hospital arrangements,
and entreat their good wives to
brew gallons of coffee. Being on the
human side, the founder and his
friends may bask a little in glory.
They say to each other, "Perhaps
it would be a good idea if we con-
tinue to keep a firm hand on AA in
this town. After all, we are ex-
perienced. Besides, look at all the
good we've done these drunks.
They should be grateful!" True,
founders and their friends are some-
times wiser and more humble. But
more often at this stage they are not.

Growing pains now beset the
group. Panhandlers panhandle. Lit-
tle Red Riding Hoods and Big Bad
Wolves cavort. Problems descend
like an avalanche. Still more im-
portant, murmurs are heard in the
body politic, which swell into a
loud cry, "Do these old-timers
think they can run this group for-
ever? Let's have an election!"
The founder and his friends are
hurt and depressed. They rush from
crisis to crisis and from member to
member, pleading. But it's no use;
the revolution is on. The group
conscience is about to take over.

Now comes the election. If the
founder and his friends have served
well, they may - to their surprise —
be reinstated for a time. If, how-
ever, they have heavily resisted
the rising tide of democracy, they
may be summarily beached. In ei-
er, case, the group now has a so-
called rotating committee, very
sharply limited in its authority. In
no sense whatever can its members
govern or direct the group. They
are servants. Theirs is the some-
times thankless privilege of doing
the group's chores. Headed by the
chairman, they look after public re-
lations and arrange meetings; their
treasurer, strictly accountable,
takes money from the hat that is
passed, banks it, pays the rent and
other bills, and makes a regular re-
port at business meetings. The
secretary sees that literature is on
the table, looks after the phone-
answering service, answers the
mail, and sends out notices of meet-
ings. Such are the simple services
that enable the group to function.
The committee gives no spiritual
advice, judges no one's conduct,
issues no orders. Every one of them may be promptly eliminated at the very next election if they try this. And so they make the belated discovery that they are really servants, not senators. Except in new groups, these are universal experiences. Thus throughout AA does the group conscience decree the terms upon which its leaders shall serve.

This brings us straight to the question, "Does AA have any real leadership?" Most emphatically the answer is "Yes, notwithstanding the apparent lack of it." Let's turn again to the deposed founder and his friends. What becomes of them? As their grief and anxiety wear away, a subtle change begins. Ultimately they divide into two classes known in AA slang as "elder statesmen" and "bleeding deacons." The elder statesman is the one who constantly connives for re-election to office, and who continues to be consumed with self-pity. Some hemorrhage so badly that — drained of all AA spirit and principle — they get drunk. At times the AA landscape seems to be littered with bleeding forms. Nearly every old-timer in our society has gone through this process in some degree. Happily, most of them survive and live to become elder statesmen. They become the real and permanent leadership of AA. Theirs is the quiet opinion, the sure knowledge and humble example that resolves a crisis. When sorely perplexed, the group inevitably turns to them for advice. They become the voice of the group conscience; in fact, these are the sure voice of Alcoholics Anonymous. They do not drive by mandate, they lead by example. Such is the experience which has led us to the conclusion that our group conscience, well-advised by its elders, will be in the long run wiser than any single leader.

When AA was only three years old, an event occurred that was destined to be historic, demonstrating this principle. One of the originators of AA, entirely contrary to his own desires, was obliged to conform to group opinion. Here is the story in his words.

"One day I was doing a Twelfth Step job at a hospital in New York. The proprietor, Charlie, summoned me to his office. 'Bill,' he said, 'I think it's a shame that you are financially so hard up. All around you these drunks are getting well and making money. But you're giving this work full time, and you're broke. It isn't fair,' Charlie fished in his desk and came up with an old financial statement. Handing it to me he said, 'This shows the kind of money my hospital used to make back in the 1920's. Thousands of dollars a month. It should be doing just as well now, and it would — if you'd help me. So why don't you move your work in here? I'll give you an office, a decent drawing account, and a very healthy slice of the profits. Three years ago, when my head doctor, Silkworth, began to tell me of your idea to cure drunks by spirituality, I thought it was crackpot stuff, but I've changed my mind. Someday this bunch of ex-drunks of yours will fill Madison Square Garden, and I don't see why you should starve while we wait. What I propose is perfectly ethical. You can become a lay therapist, and more successful than anybody in the business.'

"I was bowled over. There were a few feeble twinges of conscience until I saw how really ethical Charlie's proposal was. There was nothing wrong whatever with becoming a lay therapist. I thought of Lois coming home exhausted from the department store each day, only to crowd into our downstairs parlor. At once I burst into the story of my glowing opportunity. Never shall I forget their impassive faces, and the steady gaze they focused upon me. With waning enthusiasm, my tale trailed off to the end. There was a long silence.

"Almost timidly, one of my friends began to speak. 'We know how hard up you are, Bill. It bothers us a lot. We've often wondered what we might do about it. But I think I speak for everyone here when I say that what you now propose bothers us an awful lot more.' The speaker's voice grew more confident. 'Don't you realize,' he said, 'that you can never become a professional? As decent as Charlie has been to us, don't you see that we can't tie this thing up with his hospital or any other? You tell us
that Charlie's proposal is ethical — sure, it's ethical, but what we've got won't run on ethics only; it has to be better. Sure, Charlie's idea is good, but it isn't good enough. This is a matter of life and death, Bill, and nothing but the very best will do!' Challengingly, my friends stared hard into my eyes. 'Bill,' said their spokesman, 'haven't you often said right here in this meeting that sometimes the good is the enemy of the best? Well, this is a plain case of it. Bill, you can't do this thing to us!'

"So spoke the group conscience, as AA history was made. The group was right and I was wrong; the voice on the subway was not the voice of God. Here was the true voice, welling up out of my friends. I listened, and — thank God — I obeyed."