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Dollars and Sense

*Some thoughts on self-support
as originally presented to the
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WEBSTER DEFINES prudence as wisdom in the management of affairs. Prudence is defined as the ability to discipline oneself by use of reason. We might say that we use the Steps to discipline ourselves individually and that, collectively, we use the Traditions to discipline the group.

So much for prudence. Wisdom, on the other hand, means sense. I should like to link that word with the word "dollars." Dollars and sense—a good pair to use when talking about self-support. It is a sneaky way to do it, but just consider it a hangover from the old days.

Our Preamble says that "we are self-supporting through our own contributions." I don't think anyone would seriously argue the wisdom of this policy. We are all familiar with AA history: In the beginning, frustrated by lack of funds to carry the message, to extend the hand of AA wherever it was needed, we hoped to get help from outside the Fellowship. That we failed was really a blessing in disguise.

But the idea of self-support implies more than just financial self-sufficiency. How often we have heard these words from the podium: "But most devastating of all was my loss of self-respect." Would it not be devastating to the Fellowship of AA if it were to lose self-respect and self-determination because it was not self-supporting? Moreover, this policy has gained for us the respect of non-AAs everywhere, even though it sometimes seems to baffle them. It seems to baffle some of us, too. At least, I think it must—because we don't always follow this policy in our own dealings, whether within AA or with those outside. Let me cite two personal experiences, one inside and one outside.

Many years ago, I was treasurer of our intergroup. My problem was that there was no treasury—about \$40, as I recall. The pressing problem was our need for meeting lists. We had just a few on hand, and those were out-of-date, with half the groups not listed. Now, one group in the area was known as the "two pants" group. They had all the

money—and so had their treasury. At our next meeting, their representative came forth with a solution: Three or four of their members had offered to foot the bill. You could hear sighs of relief and a trickle of applause. That problem was solved.

However, some of us remembered our Traditions, and although we had no money, we had the gall to say this wasn't wise. Of course, our rescuers also had suggestions as to how the job should be done, and if they paid for it, they could certainly call the shots. Well, when the smoke cleared (and it wasn't all cigarette smoke), our policy of self-support prevailed. The meeting-list booklet got published—economically, you might say (not in the style wanted)—but it served us well.

The other incident occurred not long ago—only last year, in fact. A member called me to say that intergroup was accepting outside contributions, and would I please speak to the people at that office, since they had turned a deaf ear to his protests. So, just "happening by" one night when their executive committee was in session, I asked them about it. "Oh, yes," said one member, "but it was only \$50."

"Only \$50," said I. "What if it had been 500 or 5,000?"

"Oh, that would be different."

"How would it be different?" I asked. Silence. Looks were exchanged, and then someone commented that it was too late to do anything about it anyway, since the

money had been deposited. That remark was followed by a counter comment to the effect that the money could be returned with a letter explaining our Tradition of self-support. Later that night, the situation was explained to a full meeting of intergroup representatives, and the money *was* returned.

The disturbing fact here is that the five or six people on that committee were what we like to call "good" members, and all had several years' sobriety. This sort of thing has happened before, and it will happen again. The AA policy became established a long time ago. While we may not have been fully aware then how important it was to be in the growth of our Fellowship, we do know now. There still are temptations, as AA gains more respect from the public and well-meaning people offer contributions because we have helped someone dear to them. It is easy to understand their offering—they are unfamiliar with our policies. What is disturbing is that so many of our members also are unfamiliar with our policies.

The policy of self-support, like every other policy set forth in our Traditions, was established by us, the members of our Fellowship. Have you ever received a letter from our General Service Office telling you what your policy should be in a certain situation? No. What you *did* receive was the shared experience of other areas or groups whose group conscience had solved similar prob-

lems. GSO does not establish policy. *You* do.

Our primary purpose is to carry the message to the alcoholic who is out there suffering. We do this through personal contact and shared experience. We also help this new member by supporting the many other services that he will need as he begins to walk into a sober life. At the 1965 International Convention in Toronto, we said that we were responsible for seeing that the hand of

AA would always be there. It will continue to be there only if we continue to support it.

Self-support breeds self-respect. We, individually and collectively, carry our own weight. Even within AA, the same top limit on annual contributions applies to the more affluent among us and to those with limited means.

And who is responsible for seeing that this policy is better understood? You, that's who!

J. W., Washington, D.C.
