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"LET'S KEEP IT SIMPLE" ...BUT HOW?

by *Bill W.*

THIS GRAPEVINE will be read as we celebrate AA's Twenty-fifth Anniversary in July at Long Beach, California. We shall be stepping over a new threshold into our future. We shall rejoice as we think of the gifts and the wonders of yesterday. And, as we rededicate ourselves to fulfilling the immense promise of AA's tomorrow, we shall certainly survey how we stand today. Have we really "kept AA simple"? Or, unwittingly, have we blundered?

Thinking on this, I began to wonder about our fundamental structure: those principles, relationships, and attitudes which are the substance of our Three Legacies of Recovery, Unity and Service. In our Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions we find twenty-four definitely stated principles. Our Third Legacy includes a Charter for World Service that provides thousands of General Service Representatives, hundreds of local Committeemen, eighty General Service Conference Delegates, fifteen

General Service Board Trustees, together with our Headquarters legal, financial, public relations, editorial experts and their staffs. Our group and area services add still more to this seeming complexity.

Twenty-two years ago last spring, we were just setting about the formation of a trusteeship for AA as a whole. Up to that moment, we had neither stated principles nor special services. Our Twelve Steps weren't even a gleam in the eye. As for the Twelve Traditions—well, we had only forty members and but three years* experience. So there wasn't anything to be "traditional", about. AA was two small groups: one at Akron and another in New York. We were a most intimate family. Dr. Bob and I were its "papas." And what we said in those days went. Home parlors were meeting places. Social life ranged around coffee pots on kitchen tables. Alcoholism was of course described as a deadly malady. Honesty, confession, restitution, working

with others and prayer was the sole formula for our survival and growth. These were the uncomplicated years of halcyon simplicity. There was no need for the maxim "Let's keep it simple." We couldn't have been less complicated.

The contrast between then and now is rather breath-taking. To some of us it is frightening. Therefore we ask, "Has AA really kept faith with Dr. Bob's warning, 'Let's keep it simple'? How can we possibly square today's Twelve Steps, Twelve Traditions, General Service Conferences and International Conventions with our original coffee-and-cake AA?"

For myself I do not find this difficult to do. Genuine simplicity for today is to be found, I think, in whatever principles, practices and services that can permanently insure our widespread harmony and effectiveness. Therefore it has been better to state our principles than to leave them vague; better to clarify their applications than to leave these unclear; better to organize our services than to leave them to hit-or-miss methods, or to none at all.

Most certainly indeed, a return to the kitchen table era would bring no hoped-for simplicity. It could only mean wholesale irresponsibility, disharmony and ineffectiveness. Let's picture this: there would be no definite guiding principles, no literature, no meeting halls, no group funds, no planned sponsorship, no stable leadership, no clear relations with hospitals, no sound public relations, no

local services, no world services. Returning to that early-time brand of simplicity would be as absurd as selling the steering wheel, the gas tank and the tires off our family car. The car would be simplified all right—no more gas and repair bills, either! But our car wouldn't go any place. The family life would hardly be simplified; it would instantly become confused and complicated.

A formless AA anarchy, animated only by the "Let's get together" spirit just isn't enough for AAs here and now. What worked fine for two score members in 1938 won't work at all for more than 200,000 of them in 1960. Our added size and therefore greater responsibility simply spells the difference between AA's childhood and its coming of age. We have seen the folly of attempting to recapture the childhood variety of simplicity in order to sidestep the kind of responsibility that must always be faced to "keep it simple" for today. We cannot possibly turn back the clock, and shouldn't try.

The history of our changing ideas about "simplicity for today" is fascinating. For example, the time came when we actually had to codify—or organize, if you please—the basic principles that had emerged out of our experience. There was a lot of resistance to this. It was stoutly claimed by many that our then simple (but rather garbled) word-of-mouth recovery program was being made too complicated by the publication of AA's Twelve Steps. We

were "throwing 'simplicity' out the window," it was said. But that was not so. One has only to ask, "Where would AA be today without its Twelve Steps?" That these principles were carefully defined and published in 1939 has done (only the Lord knows) how much good. Codification has vastly simplified our task. Who could contest that now?

In 1945, a similar outcry arose when sound principles of living and working together were clearly outlined in AA's Twelve Traditions. It was then anything but simple to get agreement about them. Yet who can now say that our AA lives have been complicated by the Traditions? On the contrary, these sharply defined principles have immensely *simplified* the task of maintaining unity. And unity for us AAs is a matter of life or death.

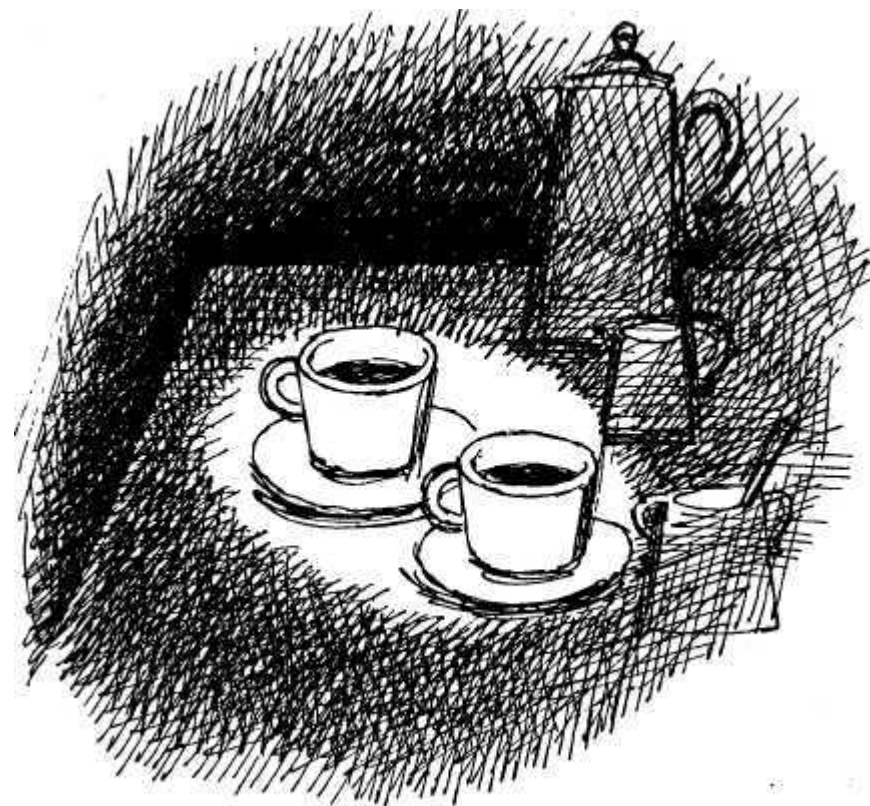
The identical thing has everywhere happened in our active services, particularly in World Services. When our first trusteeship for AA was created there were grave misgivings. The alarm was great because this operation involved a certain amount of legality, authority, and money, and the transaction of some business. We had been running happily about saying that AA had "completely separated the spiritual from the material." It was therefore a shocker when Dr. Bob and I proposed World Services; when we urged that these had to head up in some kind of a permanent board, and further stated that the time had come—at least in this realm

—when we would have to learn how to make "material things" serve spiritual ends. Somebody with experience had to be at the steering wheel and there had to be gas in the AA tank.

As our Trustees and their co-workers began to carry our message worldwide, our fears slowly evaporated. AA had not been confused—it had been simplified. You could ask any of the tens of thousands of alcoholics and their families who were coming into AA because of our World Services. Certainly their lives had been simplified. And, in reality, so had ours.

When our first General Service Conference met in 1951, we again drew a long breath. For some, this event spelled sheer disaster. Wholesale brawling and politicking would now be the rule. Our worst traits would get out in front. The serenity of the Trustees and everybody else would be disturbed (as indeed it sometimes was!). Our beautiful spirituality and the AA therapy would be interfered with. People would get drunk over this (and indeed a few did!). As never before, the shout went up, "For God's sake, let's keep this thing simple!" Cried some members, "Why can't Dr. Bob and Bill and the Trustees go right on running those services for us? That's the only way to keep it simple."

But few knew that Dr. Bob was mortally sick. Nobody stopped to think that there would soon be less than a handful of old-timers left; that



soon they would be gone, too. The Trustees would be quite isolated and unconnected with the fellowship they served. The first big gale could well bowl them over. AA would suffer heart failure at its vital center. Irretrievable collapse would be the almost certain result.

Therefore we AAs had to make a choice: what would really be the simpler? Would we get that General

Service Conference together, despite its special expense and perils? Or, would we sit on our hands at home, awaiting the fateful consequences of our fear and folly? What, in the long run, we wondered, would really be the better—and therefore the simpler? As our history shows, we took action. The General Service Conference of Alcoholics Anonymous has just held its tenth annual meeting.

Beyond doubt we know that this indispensable instrument has cemented our unity and has insured the recovery of the increasing hosts of sufferers still to come.

Therefore I think that we *have* kept the faith. As I see it, this is how we have made AA truly simple!

Some may still ask, "Are we nevertheless moving away from our early Tradition that 'AA, *as such*, ought never be organized'?" Not a bit of it. We shall never be "organized" until we create a government; until we say who shall be members and who shall not; until we authorize our boards and service committees to mete out penalties for non-conformity, for non-payment of money, and for misbehavior. I know that every AA heart shares in the conviction that none of these things can ever happen. We merely organize our principles so that they can be better understood, and we continue so to organize our services that AA's lifeblood can be transfused into those who must otherwise die. That is the all-in-all of AA's "organization." There can never be any more than this.

A concluding query: "Has the era of coffee-and-cake and fast friendships vanished from the AA scene because we are going modern?" Well, scarcely. In my home town I know an AA who has been sober several years. He goes to a small meeting. The talks he hears are just like those Dr. Bob and I used to hear—and also make—in our respective front par-

lors. As neighbors, my friend has a dozen AA cronies. He sees them constantly over kitchen tables and coffee cups. He takes a frequent whack at Twelfth Step cases. For him, nothing has changed; it's just like AA always was.

At meetings, my friend may see some books, pamphlets and Grapevines on a table. He hears the lady secretary make her timid announcement that these are for sale. He thinks the New York Intergroup is a good thing because some of his fellow members were sponsored through it. On World Services, he is not so clear. He hears some pros and cons about them. But he concludes they are probably needed. He knows his group sends in some money for these undertakings, and this is okay. Besides, his group's hall rent has to be paid. So when the hat comes by, he cheerfully drops a buck into it.

As far as my friend is concerned, these "modernizations" of AA are not a bit shattering to his serenity or to his pocketbook. They merely represent his responsibility to his group, his area, and to AA as a whole. It has never occurred to him that these are any but the most obvious obligations.

If you tried to tell my friend that AA is being spoiled by money, politics and over-organization, he would just laugh. He'd probably say, "Why don't you come over to my house after the meeting and we'll have another cup of coffee." (End)