

November 1956

# Our Experience Has Taught Us . . .

The five articles in this special issue identify AA's Twelve Traditions and concentrate on those which seem to be of great present concern: Tradition 1, which states the Fellowship's primary purpose; Tradition 2, which emphasizes the spiritual nature of the program; Tradition 3, which emphasizes the spiritual nature of the program; Tradition 4, which emphasizes the spiritual nature of the program; Tradition 5, which emphasizes the spiritual nature of the program. The Grapevine editors have chosen these particular articles in the belief that they affirm have special importance in the 1980s.

How SHALL we AAs best preserve our unity?

When an alcoholic applies the Twelve Steps of our recovery program to his personal life, his *disintegration* stops and his *unification* begins. The Power which now holds him together in one piece overcomes those forces which had rent him apart.

Exactly the same principle applies to each AA group and to Alcoholics Anonymous as a whole. So long as the ties which bind us together prove far stronger than those forces which would divide us if they could, all will be well. We shall be secure as a move-

carrying our message to fellow sufferers without charge or obligation; then only can we most effectively complete our mission.

It is becoming ever so clear that we ought never accept even the most alluring temporary benefits if these should consist of considerable sums of money, or could involve us in controversial alliances and endorsements, or might tempt some of us to accept, as AA members, personal publicity by press or radio. Unity is so vital to us AAs that we cannot risk those attitudes and practices which have sometimes demoralized other forms of human society. Thus far we

---

## Foreword by Bill W.

*From the November 1956 Grapevine*

---

ment; our essential unity will remain a certainty.

If, as AA members, we can each refuse public prestige and renounce any desire for personal power; if, as a movement, we insist on remaining poor, so avoiding disputes about extensive property and its management; if we steadfastly decline all political, sectarian, or other alliances, we shall avoid internal division and public notoriety; if, as a movement, we remain a spiritual entity concerned only with

have succeeded because we have been different. May we continue to be so!

But AA unity cannot automatically preserve itself. Like personal recovery, we shall always have to work to maintain it. Here, too, we surely need honesty, humility, open-mindedness, unselfishness, and above all — vigilance. So we who are older in AA beg you who are newer that you ponder carefully the experience we have already had of trying to work and live together. We would like each AA to

become just as much aware of those disturbing tendencies which endanger us as a whole as he is conscious of those personal defects which threaten his own sobriety and peace of mind. For whole movements have, before now, gone on benders, too!

The "Twelve Points of AA Tradition" reproduced herein is our first attempt to state sound principles of group conduct and public relations. As one of the originators of AA, I was asked to publish these "Points," together with supporting articles, serially in our principal monthly journal, The AA Grapevine. Many AAs already feel that these "Twelve Traditions" are sound enough to become the basic guide and protection for AA as a whole; that we ought to apply them as seriously to our group life as we do the Twelve recovery Steps to ourselves individually. Of this, it will take time to tell.

May we never forget that without permanent unity we can offer little lasting relief to those scores of thousands yet to join us in their quest for freedom.

Nobody invented Alcoholics Anonymous. It grew. Trial and error have produced a rich experience. Little by little, we have been adopting the lessons of that experience, first as policy and then as tradition. That process still goes on, and we hope it never stops. Should we ever harden too much, the letter might crush the spirit. We could victimize ourselves by petty rules and prohibitions; we could imagine that we had said the last

*"Trial and error  
have produced a  
rich experience.  
... That process  
still goes on"*

word. We might even be asking alcoholics to accept our rigid ideas or stay away. May we never stifle progress like that!

Yet the lessons of our experience count for a great deal. We now have had years of vast acquaintance with the problem of living and working together. If we can succeed in this adventure — and keep succeeding — then, and only then, will our future be secure.

Since personal calamity holds us in bondage no more, our most challenging concern has become the future of Alcoholics Anonymous: how to preserve among us AAs such a powerful unity that neither weakness of persons nor the strain and strife of these troubled times can harm our common cause. We know that Alcoholics Anonymous must continue to live — else, save few exceptions, we and our fellow alcoholics throughout the world will surely resume the hopeless journey to oblivion.

Almost any AA can tell you what our group problems are. Fundamen-

tally, they have to do with our relations one with the other and with the world outside. They involve relations of the AA to the group, the relation of the group to Alcoholics Anonymous as a whole, and the place of Alcoholics Anonymous in that troubled sea called modern society, where all of humankind must presently shipwreck or find haven. Terribly relevant is the problem of our basic structure and our attitude toward those ever pressing questions of leadership, money, and authority. The future may well depend on how we feel and act about things that are controversial and how we regard our public relations. Our final destiny will almost surely hang upon what we presently decide to do with these danger-fraught issues!

Now comes the crux of our discussion. It is this: Have we yet acquired sufficient experience to state clear-cut policies on these, our chief concerns? Can we now declare general principles which could grow into vital traditions — traditions sustained in the heart of each AA by his own deep conviction and by the common consent of his fellows? That is the question. Though full answer to all our perplexities may never be found, I'm sure we have come at last to a vantage point whence we can discern the main outlines of a body of tradition which, God willing, can stand us an effective guard against all the ravages of time and circumstance.

Acting upon the persistent urge of old AA friends, and upon the con-

viction that general agreement and consent among our members is now possible, I shall venture to place in words these suggestions for "An Alcoholics Anonymous Tradition of Relations — Twelve Points to Assure Our Future":<sup>1</sup>

*Our AA experience has taught us that:*

1. Each member of Alcoholics Anonymous is but a small part of a great whole. AA must continue to live or most of us will surely die. Hence our common welfare comes first. But individual welfare follows close afterward.

2. For our group purpose there is but one ultimate authority—a loving God as he may express himself in our group conscience.

3. Our membership ought to include all who suffer alcoholism. Hence we may refuse none who wish to recover. Nor ought AA membership ever depend upon money or conformity. Any two or three alcoholics gathered together for sobriety may call themselves an AA group, provided that, as a group, they have no other affiliation.

4. With respect to its own affairs, each AA group should be responsible to no other authority than its own conscience. But when its plans concern the welfare of neighboring groups also, those groups ought to be consulted. And no group, regional committee, or individual should ever take any action that might greatly affect AA as a whole without conferring with the trustees of the Alcoholic

*"The future  
may well depend  
on how we feel  
and act about  
things that are  
controversial"*

Foundation.<sup>2</sup> On such issues our common welfare is paramount.

5. Each Alcoholics Anonymous group ought to be a spiritual entity *having but one primary purpose* — that of carrying its message to the alcoholic who still suffers.

6. Problems of money, property, and authority may easily divert us from our primary spiritual aim. We think, therefore, that any considerable property of genuine use to AA should be separately incorporated and managed, thus dividing the material from the spiritual. An AA group, as such, should never go into business. Secondary aids to AA, such as clubs or hospitals which require much property or administration, ought to be incorporated and so set apart that, if necessary, they can be freely discarded by the groups. Hence such facilities ought not use the AA name. Their management should be the sole responsibility of those people who financially support them. For clubs, AA managers are usually preferred. But hospitals, as well as other

places of recuperation, ought to be well outside AA — and medically supervised. While an AA group may cooperate with anyone, such cooperation ought never go so far as affiliation or endorsement, actual or implied. An AA group can bind itself to no one.

7. The AA groups themselves ought to be fully supported by the voluntary contributions of their own members. We think that each group should soon achieve this ideal; that any public solicitation of funds using the name of Alcoholics Anonymous is highly dangerous, whether by groups, clubs, hospitals, or other outside agencies; that acceptance of large gifts from any source, or of contributions carrying any obligation whatever, is unwise. Then, too, we view with much concern those AA treasuries which continue, beyond prudent reserves, to accumulate funds for no stated AA purpose. Experience has often warned us that nothing can so surely destroy our spiritual heritage as futile disputes over property, money, and authority.

8. Alcoholics Anonymous should remain forever nonprofessional. We define professionalism as the occupation of counseling alcoholics for fees or hire. But we may employ alcoholics where they are going to perform those services for which we might otherwise have to engage nonalcoholics. Such special services may be well recompensed. But our usual AA Twelfth Step work is never to be paid for.

9. Each AA group needs the least possible organization. Rotating leadership is the best. The small group may elect its secretary, the large group its rotating committee, and the groups of a large metropolitan area their central or intergroup committee, which often employs a full-time secretary. The trustees of the Alcoholic Foundation are, in effect, our AA general service committee. They are the custodians of our AA tradition and the receivers of voluntary AA contributions by which we maintain our AA General Service Office at New York. They are authorized by the groups to handle our overall public relations and they guarantee the integrity of our principal journal, the AA Grapevine. All such representatives are to be guided in the spirit of service, for true leaders in AA are but trusted and experienced servants of the whole. They derive no real authority from their titles; they do not govern. Universal respect is the key to their usefulness.

10. No AA group or member should ever, in such a way as to implicate AA, express any opinion on outside controversial issues — particularly those of politics, alcohol

reform, or sectarian religion. The Alcoholics Anonymous groups oppose no one. Concerning such matters they can express no views whatever.

11. Our relations with the general public should be characterized by personal anonymity. We think AA ought to avoid sensational advertising. Our names and pictures as AA members ought not be broadcast, filmed, or publicly printed. Our public relations should be guided by the principle of attraction rather than promotion. There is never need to praise ourselves. We feel it better to let our friends recommend us.

12. And finally, we of Alcoholics Anonymous believe that the principle of anonymity has an immense spiritual significance. It reminds us that we are to place principles before personalities; that we are actually to practice a genuine humility. This to the end that our great blessings may never spoil us; that we shall forever live in thankful contemplation of him who presides over us all.

<sup>1</sup> These points are now known as the "long form" of the Traditions. The Twelve Traditions in the familiar short form are found on the inside back cover.

<sup>2</sup> Now known as the General Service Board of AA.