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Who Is A Member of Alcoholics Anonymous?

By Bill

The first edition of the book *Alcoholics Anonymous* makes this brief statement about membership: "The only requirement for membership is an honest desire to stop drinking. We are not allied with any particular faith, sect or denomination nor do we oppose anyone. We simply wish to be helpful to those who are afflicted." This expressed our feelings as of 1939, the year our book was published.

Since that day all kinds of experiments with membership have been tried. The number of membership rules which have been made (and mostly broken!) are legion. Two or three years ago the Central Office asked the groups to list their membership rules and send them in. After they arrived we set them all down. They took a great many sheets of paper. A little reflection upon these many rules brought us to an astonishing conclusion. If all of these edicts had been in force everywhere at once it would have been practically impossible for any alcoholic to have ever joined Alcoholics Anonymous. About nine-tenths of our oldest and best members could never have got by!

Who'd Have Lasted?

In some cases we would have been too discouraged by the demands made upon us. Most of the early members of A.A. would have been

thrown out because they slipped too much, because their morals were too bad, because they had mental as well as alcoholic difficulties. Or, believe it or not, because they did not come from the so-called better classes of society. We oldsters could have been excluded for our failure to read the book *Alcoholics Anonymous* or the refusal of our sponsor to vouch for us as a candidate. And so on ad infinitum. The way our "worthy" alcoholics have sometime tried to judge the "less worthy" is, as we look back on it is rather comical. Imagine, if you can, one alcoholic judging another!

At one time or another most A.A. Groups go on rule-making benders. Naturally enough, too, as a Group commences to grow rapidly it is confronted with many alarming problems. Panhandlers begin to pan-handle. Members get drunk and sometimes get others drunk with them. Those with mental difficulties throw depressions or break out into paranoid denunciations of fellow members. Gossips, gossip, and righteously denounce the local Wolves and Red Riding Hoods. Newcomers argue that they aren't alcoholics at all, but keep coming around anyway. "Slippers" trade on the fair name of A.A., in order to get themselves jobs. Others refuse to accept all the 12 Steps of the Recovery Program. Some go still further, saying that the "God business" is bunk and quite unnecessary. Under these

conditions our conservative program-abiding members get scared. These appalling conditions must be controlled, they think. Else A.A. will surely go to rack and ruin. They view with alarm for the good of the Movement!

At this point the group enters the rule and regulation phase. Charters, by-laws and membership rules are excitedly passed and authority is granted committees to filter out undesirables and discipline the evil doers. Then the Group Elders, now clothed with authority, commence to get busy. Recalcitrants are cast into the outer darkness, respectable busybodies throw stones at the sinners. As for the so-called sinners, they either insist on staying around, or else they form a new Group of their own. Or maybe they join a more congenial and less intolerant crowd in their neighborhood. The Elders soon discover that the rules and regulations aren't working very well. Most attempts at enforcement generate such waves of dissension and intolerance in the Group that this condition is presently recognized to be worse for the Group life than the vary worst that the worst ever did.

After a time fear and intolerance subside. The Group survives unscathed. Everybody has learned a great deal. So it is, that few of us are any longer afraid of what any newcomer can do to our A.A. reputation or effectiveness. Those who slip, those who pan-handle, those

who scandalize, those with mental twists, those who rebel at the program, those who trade on the A.A. reputation - all such persons seldom harm an A.A. Group for long. Some of these have become our most respected and best loved. Some have remained to try our patience, sober nevertheless. Others have drifted away. We have begun to regard these ones not as menaces, but rather as teachers. They oblige us to cultivate patience, tolerance and humility. We finally see that they are only people sicker than the rest of us, that we who condemn them are the Pharisees whose false righteousness does our Group the deeper spiritual damage.

Ours Not to Judge

Every older A.A. remembers when he remembers the names of persons he once condemned; people he confidently predicted would never sober up; persons he was sure ought to be thrown out of A.A. for the good of the movement. Now that some of these very persons have been sober for years, and may be numbered among his best friends, the oldtimer thinks to himself "What if everybody had judged these people as I once did? What if A.A. had slammed its door in their faces? Where would they be now?"

That is why we all judge the newcomers less and less. If alcohol is an uncontrolled problem *to him* and *he* wishes to do something about it, that is enough for us. We care not whether his case is severe or light, whether his morals are good or bad, whether he has

other complications or not. Our A.A. door stands wide open, and if he passes through it and commences to do anything at all about his problem, he is considered a member of Alcoholics Anonymous. He signs nothing, agrees to nothing, promises nothing. We demand nothing. He joins us on his own say so. Nowadays, in most Groups, he doesn't even have to admit he is an alcoholic. He can join A.A. on the mere suspicion that he may be one, that he may already show the fatal symptoms of our malady.

Of course this is not the universal state of affairs throughout A.A. Membership rules still exist. If a member persists in coming to meetings drunk he may be led outside; we may ask someone to take him away. But in most Groups he can come back next day, if sober. Though he may be thrown out of a club, nobody thinks of throwing him out of A.A. He is a member as long as he says he is. While this broad concept of A.A. membership is not yet unanimous, it does represent the main current of A.A. thought today. We do not wish to deny anyone his chance to recover from alcoholism. We wish to be just as inclusive as we can, never exclusive.

Perhaps this trend signifies something much deeper than a mere change of attitude on the question of membership. Perhaps it means that we are losing all fear of those violent emotional storms which sometimes cross our alcoholic world; perhaps it bespeaks our confidence that every storm will be followed by a calm; a calm which is more understanding, more compassionate, more tolerant than any we even knew before.