

October 1947

WHY CAN'T WE JOIN A.A., TOO?

Dear A.A.s:

Dr Bob and I have a problem. We'd like to share it frankly with you.

In actuality, A.A. has a score of "founders," men and women without whose special contributions A.A. might never have been. But somehow the title, "founder," seems to have attached itself almost solely to Dr. Bob and me - a phenomenon due perhaps to the general lack of information about our early days. This sentiment, though it prompts A.A.s to set us somewhat apart from the whole, it is deeply touching to us both. We surely have more reasons for gratitude than anyone in the world. But we are now beginning to ask ourselves if this over-emphasis will be good for A.A. in the long run. Is so much sentiment for the "founders" entirely wise?

Perhaps we A.A.s can become a new kind of human society. To a degree hitherto unknown, A.A. may be able to function upon the power of its own fundamental principles rather than upon the prestige or inspiration of a highly personalized leadership. Thus the whole can become of transcending importance over any part; continued unity and success can then mostly depend upon God as we understand him working vitally in thousands of hearts rather than a few.

Deep down, I think we A.A.s have begun to sense this magnificent possibility. The widening conviction that

active leadership ought to be transitory and rotating; that each A.A. group with respect to its own affairs needs be accountable to its own conscience; that our committees and boards are really servants, not officials; that we, as a movement, ought to remain poor, so avoiding the risks of disrupting wealth; that as individual members of A.A. we should remain anonymous before the general public - these are the signs and portents of a unique future. Such concepts certainly leave little room for a prestige-clothed leadership.

"But," some will say, "how shall we make such a vision actually work when most societies have to rely so greatly on management, money, and heavily-publicized leadership exercising powerful personal suasion?" Yet incredibly, we are beginning to see our vision come alive. Even though we persist in looking with misgiving on any large accumulation of money or personal prestige in the name of Alcoholics Anonymous, we do continue to grow despite the absence of those sometimes unstable factors upon which other human endeavors must so often depend.

Why is this possible? Is it because we are a superior people? Well, hardly! Far from being better than average, we are surely much more fallible. Strangely enough, our group strength seems to stem from our individual and ever potential weakness. We are alcoholics.

Even though now recovered, we are never too far removed from the possibility of fresh personal disaster. Each knows he must observe a high degree of honesty, humility, and tolerance, or else drink again. For us of A.A. to drink is to die; to love God and fellow man is to live.

Under such potent conditions the impossible has become possible. When each A.A.s life literally depends upon his unselfish service to others, when false pride, self-pity, or unhealthy self-seeking is almost certain to be unmercifully chastised by John Barleycorn, he needs but a minimum of man-made rules or inspired leaders to hold him on the right course. Nor for long is he apt to continue anything harmful to A.A. unity. He knows so well that we A.A.s shall have to hang together - or else hang separately! At first living the spiritual life because he must, he presently lives it because he wants to. Such is the truly providential circumstance in which we all find ourselves; that is why we are beginning to see new values in A.A. We perceive in our midst *a spiritual realm* which can be little disturbed by the distractions of wealth or self-serving egocentricity.

Against this background let's have another look at Dr. Bob and me. Seemingly, the larger A.A. grows, the more our particular part in its creation and continuance tends to be emphasized. Our status remains exceptional. Nearly all other early A.A.s

have long since slipped over to the "sidelines" where, they have retained the confidence of all, they are frequently consulted. By common consent they have become unofficial coaches, reservoirs of longer experience, to be sought out in the pinches. Their Alma Matter is now served by new teams. These too will have their day on the field, then finally retire. This is, we think, as it ought to be.

Dr. Bob and I feel this sound doctrine should apply to us as well. There seems no good reason to make an exception of "the founders." The more we early members continuously occupy the center of the A.A. stage the more we shall set risky precedents for a highly personalized and permanent leadership. To insure well A.A.'s future, is this not the very thing we should carefully avoid? Of course, Dr. Bob and I do not want to ignore any special responsibility remaining still upon us. Quite the contrary; our principal mission today is probably that of helping A.A. form a sound tradition. But how, for example, can we advocate the traditional principle of rotating leadership if we allow the belief to grow that we ought to be permanent exceptions ourself? Of course, we cannot.

Take, for instance, my own situation. It is known that my health is recently improved; that I'm going to a large regional conference. Instantly come warm but most urgent invitations to speak at gatherings all over North America. Most A.A.s being good salesmen, the pressure on me is truly enormous.

While it's a wonderful feeling to be so much wanted, these bids do leave me in the middle of an acute dilemma - a real heart-breaker. How, in fairness, can I speak at ten anniversary dinners and refuse 90; how can I make special recordings or telephone talks for all these occasions? Or, again, how can I respond to all the mail I receive; how can I advise hundreds of individuals and groups about their special problems? It is a physical impossibility. Even though I could somehow accomplish all these things and remain in the center of A.A. affairs indefinitely, would that be the best for A.A. in the long run? Surely you will agree it would not.

So the problem of Dr. Bob and me comes down to this: We shall somehow have to decide just what few things we are still specially fitted to do for A.A. and, within the limits of our health, set about them.

For my part, I feel I ought to do much more writing: more *A.A. Grapevine* pieces, more pamphlets and possibly a new book dealing with the vital matter of A.A. unity. This material ought to be widely informative of our developing tradition and of the little understood A.A. General Service Center. Occasionally I would like to appear at the larger regional gatherings, for the purpose of discussing these matters with as many A.A.s as possible.

Over the next two or three years it will be desirable to broaden the base of our General Service Center here at New York so that it can include a yearly meeting of out-of-town A.A.s with the

trustees of *The Alcoholic Foundation*, the A.A. General Office staff, and *The A.A. Grapevine* editors, this to be called The General Service Conference of Alcoholics Anonymous. To help construct such a conference will be a real task which may eventually require us to visit a number of our large A.A. centers the country over.

For the good of A.A. as a whole these seem the things most needful to be done. If these projects are ever to be finished, I'm sure we can do little else. To succeed we shall need real freedom of decision and few diversions. Hence, we beg your whole-hearted cooperation.

Though these assignments are still before us, Dr. Bob and I are going to confess a deep yearning. As private citizens of A.A., we shall often wish to come and go among you like other people, without any special attention. And while we would like always to keep the wonderful satisfaction of having been among the originators, we hope you will begin to think of us as early A.A.s only, not as "founders."

So can't we join A.A., too?

As Ever,
Bill