

# About AA

## Anonymity: Keeping Alive the Lessons of History

*Tradition Eleven: "Our public relations policy is based on attraction rather than promotion; we need always maintain personal anonymity at the level of press, radio, and films."*

*Tradition Twelve: "Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our Traditions, ever reminding us to place principles before personalities."*

A.A.'s co-founder, Bill W., affirmed the ongoing importance of anonymity in his "last message" to the Fellowship in October 1970. "If I were asked which of these blessings I felt was most responsible for our growth as a fellowship and most vital to our continuity, I would say, the 'Concept of Anonymity.' . . . A.A. must and will continue to change with the passing years. We cannot, nor should we, turn back the clock. However, I deeply believe that the principle of anonymity must remain our primary and enduring safeguard. As long as we accept our sobriety in our traditional spirit of anonymity we will continue to receive God's grace."

When Bill spoke these words A.A. was 35 years old, and they had been landmark years for everyone concerned with the problem of alcoholism. Thanks in large part to A.A.'s growth and success, the public was increasingly knowledgeable about the illness, a wide variety of professional resources were available to the sick alcoholic; and thousands of drunks were getting sober, many before their lives had been devastated by alcoholism.

Almost 30 years later, the A.A. message has been carried to 150 countries, with a worldwide membership of approximately two million. Organizations patterned after A.A. have made "recovery" a buzz word and the phrase "twelfth-stepping" part of the common vocabulary. A.A. is acclaimed by some as one of the significant social movements of the 20th century. And there are voices—both within and outside of A.A.—shouting that with such an outstanding record of achievement in the public eye, the Fellowship has outgrown the need for anonymity.

Why, then, does Alcoholics Anonymous hold firmly to the tradition? In pragmatic terms, because it serves A.A. today as effectively as it has done for more than 60 years.

### Anonymity Protects the Newcomer

On the practical level, anonymity protects the newcomer. In a society that regarded alcoholism as a moral issue and scorned the weak-willed drunkard, the founding members clung to anonymity as their lifeline. Today, even though alcoholism is recognized as an illness and the stigma has lessened greatly, the individual alcoholic's own feelings of fear, shame, and guilt are as strong as ever. A.A.'s promise of

anonymity may be the only thing that allows a sick and shaking alcoholic to feel safe enough to pick up the phone or walk into an A.A. meeting and take the first halting steps toward recovery. Without it, many who need A.A. might never enter the door.

The individual alone decides just how much personal anonymity to observe with family, friends and employers, and with other A.A. members as well as.

### "Twelve Points to Assure Our Future"

The Twelve Traditions were first disseminated to the Fellowship in April 1946, when Bill W. introduced "Twelve Points to Assure Our Future" (now known as the long form of the Traditions). "Nobody invented Alcoholics Anonymous," he wrote. "It grew. Trial and error has produced a rich experience. Little by little we have been adopting the lessons of that experience, first as policy and then as Tradition."

Point number eleven set forth A.A.'s public relations policy: "Our relations with the outside world should be characterized by modesty and anonymity. We think A.A. ought to avoid sensational advertising. 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."

Anonymity first baffled, then impressed, the media. Bill wrote in 1946 that "almost every newspaper reporter who covers us complains, at first, of the difficulty of writing his story without names. But he quickly forgets this difficulty when he realizes that here is a group of people who care nothing for personal gain. . . . Therefore, the journalist writes a friendly piece, never a routine job. It is enthusiastic writing because the reporter feels that way himself." (Grapevine, 3/46)

In point number twelve, Bill explained the core meaning of anonymity: "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 humble modesty. 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."

### The Lessons of Experience

Humility has never come easily to alcoholics. A.A.'s founding members, with no traditional guidelines to follow, learned through a painful process of trial and error that success could be the greatest danger to their sobriety and to the

budding Fellowship. Some members who returned to their old ways of power-grabbing and attention-getting got drunk again, tarnishing the Fellowship's reputation. And in the long run, even when solidly sober A.A.s sought public recognition "for the good of A.A.," Alcoholics Anonymous paid a heavy price.

In the January 1955 Grapevine, Bill W. described the devastating results of "the pursuit of power, prestige, public honors and money—the same implacable urges that when frustrated once caused us to drink; the same forces that are today ripping the globe apart at its seams. . . . Gradually we saw that the unity, the effectiveness—yes, even the survival—of A.A. would always depend upon our continued willingness to sacrifice our personal ambitions and desires for the common safety and welfare. Just as sacrifice meant survival for the individual, so did sacrifice mean unity and survival for the group and for A.A.'s entire Fellowship." Always the storyteller, Bill related striking examples of how the short-term good holds the potential for long-term disaster.

A noted ball player sobered up in A.A., and because his comeback was so spectacular he got tremendous press coverage, giving A.A. the credit for his recovery. "Alcoholics flocked in. We loved this." Bill W. himself hit the road, giving personal interviews in the name of A.A. "For two or three years I guess I was A.A.'s number one anonymity breaker." Everyone believed that anonymity was important, of course, but it seemed at the time that if circumstances were favorable, exceptions could be made.

More members followed Bill's example, shedding anonymity "for the good of A.A." One member undertook widespread alcohol education, using her full name and citing A.A. membership. "The results were immediate. . . . The public understanding of alcoholism increased, the stigma on drunks lessened, and A.A. got new members. Surely there could be nothing wrong with that.

"But there was. For the sake of this short-term benefit, we were taking on a future liability of huge and menacing proportions." An A.A. member began to publish a magazine devoted to the cause of Prohibition, using the A.A. name to attack the evils of whiskey. Then a liquor trade association proposed that a member take on a job of education, warning people that too much alcohol was harmful, and that certain people couldn't drink at all. Of course, the A.A. member had to break anonymity, inevitably creating the impression that A.A. was engaging in "education, liquor-trade style."

Developments such as these pointed up dramatically the dangers of using the A.A. name for any purpose other than anonymously carrying the message. The more valuable the A.A. name, the more alluring the temptation. Within a few years, Bill and other anonymity-breaking members knew that they must step out of the spotlight or A.A. itself would not survive.

## The Washingtonians

About a hundred years earlier, a similar movement aimed at helping alcoholics had flourished, then floundered, essentially for the lack of unifying spiritual principles. In April 1840, six drinking friends got together in Chase's Tavern in Baltimore and made a decision to stop drinking together. They called themselves the Washingtonians, and the fledgling organization had one aim: "the reclamation of drunkards." Within a year they had reformed 1,000 drunks and had 5,000 other members and friends; within a few more years, membership had swelled to several hundred thousand. But the Washingtonians did not have a body of tradition to unify its purpose. Its leaders were very much in the public eye, and soon became embroiled in political causes and in the temperance movement. By the end of 1847, the Washingtonians had all but vanished.

## Renouncing Public Recognition

Informed by these lessons of history, by 1950, when the Twelve Traditions were adopted by the Fellowship as a whole, A.A.s had learned the value of renouncing power and prestige and living in genuine humility. Members—with remarkably few exceptions—have stayed out of the limelight as individuals and turned down public recognition of their A.A. affiliation.

Over a period of years, Bill W. was offered a great deal of public recognition as the co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous. (Dr. Bob S., the other co-founder, died in 1950.) Bill declined awards from several colleges, turned down the inclusion of his name and personal history in *Who's Who in America*, said no to a *Time* magazine story that would have placed his picture on the cover, and refused the Lasker Award (which was given to the A.A. Fellowship instead). In 1954, Bill was offered, and turned down, an honorary degree of Doctor of Laws from Yale University. His reasons for doing so, set forth in a letter dated February 2, 1954 to then university secretary Reuben A. Holden, still hold true as watchwords for the new millennium:

"Were I to accept, the near term benefit to Alcoholics Anonymous and to legions who still suffer our malady would, no doubt, be worldwide and considerable. I am sure that such a potent endorsement would greatly hasten public approval of A.A. everywhere. Therefore, none but the most compelling of reasons could prompt my decision to deny Alcoholics Anonymous an opportunity of this dimension.

"Now this is the reason. The Tradition of Alcoholics Anonymous—our only means of self-government—entreats each member to avoid all that particular kind of personal publicity or distinction which might link his name with our society in the general public mind. A.A.'s Tradition Twelve reads as follows: 'Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our traditions, ever reminding us to place principles before personalities.'

"Because we have already had much practical experience with this vital principle, it is today the view of every thoughtful A.A. member that if, over the years ahead, we practice this anonymity absolutely, it will guarantee our effectiveness and unity by heavily restraining those to whom public honors and distinctions are but the natural stepping-stones to dominance and personal power.

"Like other men and women, we A.A.s look with deep apprehension upon the vast power struggle about us, a struggle in myriad forms that invades every level, tearing society apart. I think we A.A.s are fortunate to be acutely aware that such forces must never be ruling among us, lest we perish altogether.

"The Tradition of personal anonymity and no honors at the public level is our protective shield. We dare not meet the power temptation naked."

## A.A. Exhibits Available to Professional Organizations

A.A. has used Professional Exhibits to carry its message to the professional community at their conferences and conventions since the mid-1950s. If your organization is interested in having an A.A. presentation or exhibit at one of your professional gatherings, please contact the C.P.C. desk at the General Service Office, Box 459, Grand Central Station, New York, NY 10163.

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