

About AA

Guarding Anonymity—The Spiritual Foundation of A.A.

We are sure that humility, expressed by anonymity, is the greatest safeguard that Alcoholics Anonymous can ever have.

Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions, p. 187

'Anonymous'—More Than a Word

The word "anonymous" constitutes half of A.A.'s name and appears frequently in its Twelve Traditions. The word is 4,000 years old and comes from the Greeks. *An* means "without"; *onoma* means "name"—together they form "without a name."

In ancient Greece, as elsewhere, political pamphlets appeared that were unsigned, or anonymous, a practice that saved the authors from possible imprisonment or worse. Later, in the monasteries and cloisters of Europe, the practice of having novitiates surrender their own names for new ones became entrenched. The purpose: to encourage the loss of self and to facilitate unselfish service to others.

In our time, the principle remains strong. In *A.A. Comes of Age*, the late Bill W., A.A. co-founder, wrote, "Moved by the spirit of anonymity, we try to give up our natural desires for personal distinction as A.A. members both among fellow alcoholics and before the general public. As we lay aside these very human aspirations . . . each of us takes part in the weaving of a protective mantle that covers our whole society and under which we may grow and work in unity."

How Does A.A. Respond To Anonymity Breaks?

The vast majority of members—and professionals working in the field of alcoholism—understand that individual recovery in A.A. comes first; and that the Anonymity Tradition is designed to keep our egos deflated, to give us a way of bridling our drive for power and prestige—in short, to keep us sober. In spite of our anonymity and, more, because of it, approximately two million alcoholics have found their way to A.A., with more coming in all the time.

Despite the vigilance of most members, anonymity breaks do occur, a number of them at the hands of well-meaning celebrities eager to harness their fame (or notoriety) "to help other alcoholics like me." What does the Fellowship do about such breaks and the hundreds of others that occur yearly? As mail received by A.A.'s General Service Office reveals, members have expressed continuing concern about such violations of the Anonymity Tradition, which Bill W. called "the key to A.A.'s spiritual survival."

Every December, the trustees' Public Information Committee

mails out a memo explaining A.A.'s tradition of anonymity at the public level to national radio and TV stations, and to newspapers with a circulation of more than 50,000.

"We ask your help," the memo reads in part, "in maintaining our tradition of personal anonymity by not identifying members by name, or by recognizable photos, as 'members of Alcoholics Anonymous.' We have learned from experience that alcoholics or potential newcomers to A.A. may avoid any help that might reveal their identity."

When a specific anonymity break occurs, A.A. members frequently ask G.S.O. to send a letter to the publication or broadcast station involved. But it has long been the consensus of the A.A. General Service Board and the A.A. General Service Conference that responsibility for protecting the Anonymity Tradition at the public level, and for responding to breaks in the media, rests with the individuals, groups and service committees within the Fellowship.

When a specific anonymity break occurs at the public level, the Public Information desk at G.S.O. writes to the area delegate, recommending that a gentle reminder of the Anonymity Tradition be sent. Only if the delegate so requests does G.S.O. write the letter.

How Members Can Observe Anonymity at the International Convention

A.A.'s tradition of maintaining personal anonymity at the public level has meaning for members attending the Fellowship's large International Convention in Seattle this July. The identifying badges worn by attendees will contain their first names and last initials only—neither the A.A. name nor logo will appear.

A situation that could cause some sticky moments relates to the media—with thousands of A.A.s in town for assorted general sessions, workshops, marathons and dances, they will hardly be ignorant of our presence. What's more, many reporters may be on the lookout for personal interviews.

A.A.'s collective experience suggests that members use their first names only in talking to reporters; and that they employ some "camera-shy" tactics if there is the possibility of their being identified in newspaper photo captions or TV airings as A.A. members.

Chances are that at least one group of people will know who we are instantly. All the restaurants in Seattle have been informed that most of the July conventioners consume huge

quantities of ice cream, coffee, and decaf—but no booze.

At a 1989 General Service Conference workshop on “Anonymity—Living Our Traditions,” the use of bumper stickers, t-shirts, jewelry and trinkets imprinted with A.A. logos or other identifying marks were considered by most of those present to be a form of public advertising. However, bumper stickers bearing such slogans as “Easy Does It,” “One Day at a Time,” or “Keep It Simple” passed with flying colors. Most non-A.A.s, it was agreed, don’t seem to associate such expressions with the Fellowship, so preserving anonymity is not a problem.

Non-A.A. Friends Speak at International Convention

A number of A.A.’s friends in the professional community will be featured speakers at the Fellowship’s International Convention, to be held from July 5-8 in Seattle, Washington. The Convention, celebrating A.A.’s 55th Anniversary, is expected to attract more than 45,000 A.A.s across the world.

Members of the professional community who will make presentations on subjects ranging from “A.A. and the Medical Profession” to “A.A. as a Community Resource” and “A.A. and Alcoholism Agencies” include: Enoch Gordis, M.D., director, the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, Rockland, Maryland; Gail Gleason Milgram, Ed.D., professor-director, the Education and Training Center of Alcohol Studies, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey; Thomas J. Delaney, Jr., executive director, Employee Assistance Professionals Association, Belmont, Massachusetts; Stanley E. Gitlow, M.D., clinical professor of medicine, Mount Sinai School of Medicine, New York City; and Gordon R. Grimm, senior vice president for Institutional Advancement, Hazelden, Center City, Minnesota.

The first large A.A. Anniversary meeting in 1945 drew 3,000 members from 36 states and Canada. When it was proposed that a second be held in 1950, co-founder Bill W. and other members at first vacillated, concerned as they were with the expense, possible “cries of professionalism” and other anticipated problems. However, the 1950 Convention was held; it marked the historic acceptance of the short form of A.A.’s Twelve Traditions. Writing to a friend afterward, Bill said, “Far from proving the exhibitionistic and Chatauqua-like affairs we once feared these meetings might be, the experience everywhere now shows such gatherings as very powerful and unifying and spiritual forces indeed.”

Big Book Turns 51

Launched on a shoestring, the first edition of *Alcoholics Anonymous* rolled off the presses in April 1939. No one foresaw that it would become one of the top nonfiction bestsellers of all time—and perhaps A.A.’s most effective “sponsor.” In the intervening years, approximately nine million copies have been sold, mainly to alcoholics who have found sobriety as a result of its scope and spiritual power.

Back in 1939, after heated discussion, the list price was set at \$3.50, high for those days; today it sells for the bargain price of \$4.60. To compensate, Bill W. and his friends chose the thickest paper they could find. “The original volume proved to be so bulky that it became known as the ‘Big Book,’ ” Bill later recalled. “Of course, the idea was to convince the alcoholic purchaser that he was indeed getting his money’s worth!”

It took 35 years to sell one million copies; now A.A. distributes a million every year in the English language alone. At last tally, the Big Book had been published in fifteen other tongues: Afrikaans, Dutch, Finnish, Flemish, French, German, Icelandic, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Norwegian, Portuguese, Spanish, Russian and Swedish. Polish, Hungarian and Czechoslovakian translations are in the works.

In 1986, a softcover edition was published. This unabridged edition is smaller in size than the hardcover copy, lighter in weight and, at \$4.20, less expensive. A large-type edition is available at \$12.00.

The book *Alcoholics Anonymous* provided the name for the small self-help movement that, until 1939, had been known simply as the Alcoholic Foundation. More importantly, it has opened the way to a life of comfortable sobriety for thousands of alcoholics who otherwise might not have found help. It also has offered convincing evidence to their relatives and friends that compulsive drinkers can recover; and has furnished revealing insights to physicians, psychologists, the clergy, law-enforcement personnel and other professionals who work with alcoholics.

What Would You Like To Know About A.A.?

Over the past several years, *About A.A.* has published articles that we felt would be of interest to our friends in the professional community.

These articles have covered subjects ranging from A.A.’s singleness of purpose to various surveys in the membership. Some have focused on our efforts to “cooperate but not affiliate” with specific professional groups and individuals in the field of alcoholism—among them the clergy, physicians, correctional facilities personnel, attorneys and educators. Other issues have covered certain developments and activities such as the influx of young people into A.A. and our progress in reaching out to Native North Americans.

About A.A. is published expressly for you—to further your understanding of A.A. as we go about our common purpose: to help the alcoholic who still suffers. We welcome your comments and your suggestions for future articles. So let us hear from you!

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