

Tradition Seven

“Every A.A. group ought to be fully self-supporting, declining outside contributions.”

SELF-SUPPORTING alcoholics? Who ever heard of such a thing? Yet we find that’s what we have to be. This principle is telling evidence of the profound change that A.A. has wrought in all of us. Everybody knows that active alcoholics scream that they have no troubles money can’t cure. Always, we’ve had our hands out. Time out of mind we’ve been dependent upon somebody, usually money-wise. When a society composed entirely of alcoholics says it’s going to pay its bills, that’s really news.

Probably no A.A. Tradition had the labor pains this one did. In early times, we were all broke. When you add to this the habitual supposition that people ought to give money to alcoholics trying to stay sober, it can be understood why we thought we deserved a pile of folding money. What great things A.A. would be able to do with it! But oddly enough, people who had money thought otherwise. They figured that it was high time we now—sober—paid our own way. So our Fellowship stayed poor because it had to.

There was another reason for our collective poverty. It was soon apparent that while alcoholics would spend lavishly on Twelfth Step cases, they had a terrific aversion to dropping money into a meeting-place hat for group

purposes. We were astounded to find that we were as tight as the bark on a tree. So A.A., the movement, started and stayed broke, while its individual members waxed prosperous.

Alcoholics are certainly all-or-nothing people. Our reactions to money prove this. As A.A. emerged from its infancy into adolescence, we swung from the idea that we needed vast sums of money to the notion that A.A. shouldn't have any. On every lip were the words "You can't mix A.A. and money. We shall have to separate the spiritual from the material." We took this violent new tack because here and there members had tried to make money out of their A.A. connections, and we feared we'd be exploited. Now and then, grateful benefactors had endowed clubhouses, and as a result there was sometimes outside interference in our affairs. We had been presented with a hospital, and almost immediately the donor's son became its principal patient and would-be manager. One A.A. group was given five thousand dollars to do with what it would. The hassle over that chunk of money played havoc for years. Frightened by these complications, some groups refused to have a cent in their treasuries.

Despite these misgivings, we had to recognize the fact that A.A. had to function. Meeting places cost something. To save whole areas from turmoil, small offices had to be set up, telephones installed, and a few full-time secretaries hired. Over many protests, these things were accomplished. We saw that if they weren't, the man coming in the door couldn't get a break. These simple services would require small sums of money which we could and would pay our-

selves. At last the pendulum stopped swinging and pointed straight at Tradition Seven as it reads today.

In this connection, Bill likes to tell the following pointed story. He explains that when Jack Alexander's *Saturday Evening Post* piece broke in 1941, thousands of frantic letters from distraught alcoholics and their families hit the Foundation* letterbox in New York. "Our office staff," Bill says, "consisted of two people: one devoted secretary and myself. How could this landslide of appeals be met? We'd have to have some more full-time help, that was sure. So we asked the A.A. groups for voluntary contributions. Would they send us a dollar a member a year? Otherwise this heartbreaking mail would have to go unanswered.

"To my surprise, the response of the groups was slow. I got mighty sore about it. Looking at this avalanche of mail one morning at the office, I paced up and down ranting how irresponsible and tightwad my fellow members were. Just then an old acquaintance stuck a tousled and aching head in the door. He was our prize slippee. I could see he had an awful hangover. Remembering some of my own, my heart filled with pity. I motioned him to my inside cubicle and produced a five-dollar bill. As my total income was thirty dollars a week at the time, this was a fairly large donation. Lois really needed the money for groceries, but that didn't stop me. The intense relief on my friend's face warmed my heart. I felt especially virtuous as I thought of all the ex-drunks who wouldn't even send the Foundation

*In 1954, the name of the Alcoholic Foundation, Inc., was changed to the General Service Board of Alcoholics Anonymous, Inc., and the Foundation office is now the General Service Office.

a dollar apiece, and here I was gladly making a five-dollar investment to fix a hangover.

“The meeting that night was at New York’s old 24th Street Clubhouse. During the intermission, the treasurer gave a timid talk on how broke the club was. (That was in the period when you couldn’t mix money and A.A.) But finally he said it—the landlord would put us out if we didn’t pay up. He concluded his remarks by saying, ‘Now boys, please go heavier on the hat tonight, will you?’

“I heard all this quite plainly, as I was piously trying to convert a newcomer who sat next to me. The hat came in my direction, and I reached into my pocket. Still working on my prospect, I fumbled and came up with a fifty-cent piece. Somehow it looked like a very big coin. Hastily, I dropped it back and fished out a dime, which clinked thinly as I dropped it in the hat. Hats never got folding money in those days.

“Then I woke up. I who had boasted my generosity that morning was treating my own club worse than the distant alcoholics who had forgotten to send the Foundation their dollars. I realized that my five-dollar gift to the slippee was an ego-feeding proposition, bad for him and bad for me. There *was* a place in A.A. where spirituality and money would mix, and that was in the hat!”

There is another story about money. One night in 1948, the trustees of the Foundation were having their quarterly meeting. The agenda discussion included a very important question. A certain lady had died. When her will was read, it was discovered she had left Alcoholics Anonymous in trust with the Alcoholic Foundation a sum of ten thou-

sand dollars. The question was: Should A.A. take the gift?

What a debate we had on that one! The Foundation was really hard up just then; the groups weren't sending in enough for the support of the office; we had been tossing in all the book income and even that hadn't been enough. The reserve was melting like snow in springtime. We needed that ten thousand dollars. "Maybe," some said, "the groups will never fully support the office. We can't let it shut down; it's far too vital. Yes, let's take the money. Let's take all such donations in the future. We're going to need them."

Then came the opposition. They pointed out that the Foundation board already knew of a total of half a million dollars set aside for A.A. in the wills of people still alive. Heaven only knew how much there was we hadn't heard about. If outside donations weren't declined, absolutely cut off, then the Foundation would one day become rich. Moreover, at the slightest intimation to the general public from our trustees that we needed money, we could become immensely rich. Compared to this prospect, the ten thousand dollars under consideration wasn't much, but like the alcoholic's first drink it would, if taken, inevitably set up a disastrous chain reaction. Where would that land us? Whoever pays the piper is apt to call the tune, and if the A.A. Foundation obtained money from outside sources, its trustees might be tempted to run things without reference to the wishes of A.A. as a whole. Relieved of responsibility, every alcoholic would shrug and say, "Oh, the Foundation is wealthy—why should I bother?" The pressure of that fat treasury would surely tempt the board to invent all kinds of schemes to do good with such funds,

and so divert A.A. from its primary purpose. The moment that happened, our Fellowship's confidence would be shaken. The board would be isolated, and would fall under heavy attack of criticism from both A.A. and the public. These were the possibilities, pro and con.

Then our trustees wrote a bright page of A.A. history. They declared for the principle that A.A. must always stay poor. Bare running expenses plus a prudent reserve would henceforth be the Foundation's financial policy. Difficult as it was, they officially declined that ten thousand dollars, and adopted a formal, airtight resolution that all such future gifts would be similarly declined. At that moment, we believe, the principle of corporate poverty was firmly and finally embedded in A.A. tradition.

When these facts were printed, there was a profound reaction. To people familiar with endless drives for charitable funds, A.A. presented a strange and refreshing spectacle. Approving editorials here and abroad generated a wave of confidence in the integrity of Alcoholics Anonymous. They pointed out that the irresponsible had become responsible, and that by making financial independence part of its tradition, Alcoholics Anonymous had revived an ideal that its era had almost forgotten.