

About AA

Self-Supporting Through Our Own Contributions

- Members of an A.A. group realize that their group bank account has accumulated more money than they need to cover expenses for the next couple of months. The chairperson calls a special meeting to discuss getting rid of the excess cash.
- A local A.A. office receives a donation of \$2,000 from a nonalcoholic relative of a member. The manager declines it with gratitude, explaining that A.A. does not accept outside contributions.

Situations like these, which occur regularly throughout Alcoholics Anonymous, highlight the tremendous importance A.A. members, groups, and service entities place on Tradition Seven: "Every A.A. group should be self-supporting, declining outside contributions."

Clearly, the question of money and how to handle it is answered very differently in Alcoholics Anonymous than it is in most organizations, and that answer has profound implications for Alcoholics Anonymous, past, present, and future.

A Slice of History

Like all of A.A.'s Twelve Traditions, the Seventh emerged from trial and error, often in spite of the efforts of those who shaped it. In the 1930s and '40s when the fate of the new movement looked shaky at best, many of the founding members were convinced that a large infusion of cash was absolutely necessary if A.A. was to survive and grow. The Akron and New York groups were well grounded, while other groups were just getting off to an uncertain start. In 1940 a small central office was opened, to provide literature and Twelfth Step assistance for alcoholics and their families. But millions more suffering alcoholics needed the message of recovery, and the newly sober drunks felt an urgent need to reach them.

The "promoters" among the early members had big ideas: publishing a book, building hospitals and rehabilitation centers, sending out missionaries. The "conservatives," though, advised caution. Finally, a meeting of the Akron alcoholics was called, and "by the barest majority, and over the most strenuous objections" they decided to go for "the whole works — the missionaries, the hospitals, and the book." Bill W. went back to New York to get the ball rolling, and many of the New York A.A.s fell in with what he later called his "grandiose notions." (*Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, pp. 145-46)

The Alcoholic Foundation (now A.A.'s General Service Board) had been established in 1938, to handle the huge amounts of money expected from the operation of hospitals and rehabilitation centers around the country. They began soliciting funds, but no one was too excited about helping a bunch of drunks. Then Bill's nonalcoholic brother-in-law, Leonard V. Strong, introduced the alcoholics to a close associate of John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Mr. Rockefeller and his friends took an interest in the budding movement, but like the conser-

vative A.A.s, they too questioned the need for all that money. Finally, on the evening of February 8, 1940, Rockefeller gave a dinner for A.A., with some 75 of New York's rich and influential citizens in attendance. Nelson Rockefeller, present on behalf of his father, praised the movement, and as Bill tells the story in *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, said, "Gentlemen, you can all see that this is a work of good will. Its power lies in the fact that one member carries the good message to the next, without any thought of financial income or reward. Therefore, it is our belief that Alcoholics Anonymous should be self-supporting so far as money is concerned. It needs only our good will." Whereupon the guests clapped lustily, and . . . the whole billion dollars' worth of them walked out the door." (*ibid.*, pp. 184-85)

Rockefeller subsequently donated \$1,000 to A.A., and the favorable publicity generated by the dinner gave A.A. a generous boost in the public eye. Over the next four years, small contributions solicited from the dinner guests helped keep the tiny office functioning.

Only one of the original "grandiose" projects ever came to fruition: In 1939 the Big Book, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, came off press, and though initially it failed to generate the hoped-for record volume of sales, it was then, as it is now, A.A.'s best tool for carrying the message, as well as a source of income. Wisely, A.A. decided to publish its own literature, and thus has always been free to make publishing decisions on the basis of A.A. principles alone — never worrying about "what will sell," or "What will appeal to readers."

With the help of articles in national magazines, the efforts of traveling members, and the new central office, A.A. began to grow and thrive. After four years, the A.A.s were able to let Rockefeller and his friends know that no more help was needed — the A.A. groups had begun supporting the headquarters office.

Self-Support and the Individual Member

The principle of self-support affects every member of every group. An A.A. who got sober before the Traditions were officially adopted wrote in the October 1970 Grapevine: "On my first approach. . . already A.A. had effectively declared itself independent of all handouts. It was managing, somehow, to pay its own way. . . If it had turned out to be a government-financed project or a charitable branch of some church, my feelings about it could not have been so instantly warm and comfortable. The fact that it was just us drunks. . . lessened my shame at having to ask for help." (*Best of the Grapevine*, Vol. I, p. 114)

Sober members were able to demonstrate that an alcoholic is not always someone who must be helped. One A.A. reflected: "When I arrived at the doors of Alcoholics Anonymous, I had no job, very little money, and a life that was rapidly turn-

ing into a shambles. Even so, I contributed 25 cents at every meeting I attended. This was my first step back to regaining my self-respect and responsibility.” The Tradition allowed A.A.s to be givers, not takers, and went far to build public confidence in the movement. As Bill W. commented in *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, “When a society composed entirely of alcoholics says it’s going to pay its bills, that’s really news.” (p. 160)

While no A.A. group requires contributions from those who attend its meetings, the return of self-respect, an awakening sense of responsibility, and gratitude for sobriety spur even the newest A.A. members to contribute whatever they can. Some also send contributions to local or national A.A. offices to celebrate their sobriety date each year. Contributions are as important to the giver as to the recipient, for they allow the giver to participate in carrying the A.A. message around the world.

Where Money and Spirituality Mix

Yet speaking of money and A.A. in the same breath makes some members nervous—A.A. is a spiritual program, they feel, and should not concern itself with money at all. More pragmatic alcoholics contend that without enough money, it would be impossible to provide the services essential to carrying the message. Bill W. saw the resolution of this dilemma in “the hat” (the group’s collection basket), where money and spirituality mix, and the familiar announcement “We have no dues or fees, but we do have expenses” is an integral part of virtually every A.A. meeting.

By paying its own expenses — rent for the meeting room, the cost of A.A. literature and local meeting lists, coffee and refreshments, support of local and national service entities — the group ensures that meetings will be there for the suffering alcoholic, literature and information will be available, and the message will be carried around the world. Each group treasury keeps on hand a “prudent reserve” (amounts vary, but generally enough to cover one or two months’ expenses), and distributes any cash beyond that amount among local, area, and national A.A. service entities.

Fulfilling its financial responsibilities with members’ contributions alone allows the group to steer clear of influences that might distort the A.A. message. Occasionally, a generous and well-intended outside organization or individual will seek to help the Fellowship by offering a meeting place at no cost, or perhaps free printing of newsletters or flyers. In such situations, the Tradition suggests that — to avoid any possibility of outside influence or pressure — the group decline with thanks. If for some reason a landlord cannot accept money, groups can respond by providing services, such as painting the meeting room or buying furniture that can be used by others as well as the A.A.s.

Ideally, group contributions would support all A.A. service entities. In practice, however, not all groups do participate through contributions to either the General Service Office or their own local entities. So from the earliest A.A. days, when survival sometimes depended on the level of Big Book sales, a portion of the profits from the publication and sale of A.A. literature has made up the difference between expenses and contribution income.

Corporate Poverty

The trustees established the official policy on gifts and donations, in 1948, after a lively discussion triggered by a proposed \$10,000 bequest to A.A. At the time, the office and the Alcoholic Foundation were hard up for money, and some of the trustees were in favor of accepting the bequest. Once again, the conservatives stepped in and carried the day. Bill W. described the discussion in *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*: “. . . like the alcoholic’s first drink, [the bequest] would, if taken. . . set up a disastrous chain reaction. . . . 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. . . .” Bill continued, “Then our trustees wrote a bright page in A.A. history. They declared for the principle that A.A. must always stay poor.... Difficult as it was, they declined the 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. . . . 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.” (*ibid.*, pp. 164-65)

The fundamental principle that A.A. money belongs to the Fellowship as a whole guides the financial operations of the board of trustees and its two operating entities, A.A. World Services, Inc. (which oversees the General Service Office) and The A.A. Grapevine, Inc. (A.A.’s monthly meeting-in-print). These two corporations annually turn over any year-end profits to the General Service Board Reserve Fund (the “prudent reserve” for U.S./Canada A.A.), keeping only enough for current operating expenses.

British A.A. Goes to Parliament

A.A. service offices all over the world have made the decision to turn down outside gifts, and at times it has been necessary, in the words of the Big Book, to “go to any length” to uphold the principle of corporate poverty. In 1986, an action of Great Britain’s General Service Board provided a dramatic example of how far A.A. is willing to go. Faced with national laws that prohibited organizations from turning down certain kinds of gifts and legacies, the board went to Parliament for relief. On July 25, 1986, Parliament passed an act empowering A.A. in Great Britain “to disclaim all or parts of property donated to it in certain circumstances.... May it therefore please Your Majesty that it may be enacted, and be it enacted, by the Queen’s most Excellent Majesty, by and with the advice and consent of the Lords Spiritual and Temporal, and Commons. . . . The Company [A.A.] may it if it thinks fit disclaim all or part of the property comprised in any relevant disposition.”

Into the New Millennium

As Alcoholics Anonymous prepares to meet the challenges and changes of the year 2000 and beyond, the importance of the Seventh Tradition in strengthening the Fellowship to withstand temptations from without cannot be overstated. As early as June 1946, a Grapevine article by Bill W. sounded a warning that holds true today: “We must never let any immediate advantage, however attractive, blind us to the possibility that we may be creating a dangerous precedent for the future. Strife over money and property has too often wrecked better people than us temperamental alcoholics!” (*The Language of the Heart*, p. 31)

Today, with widespread public awareness of A.A.’s recovery program and the proliferation of alcoholism and substance abuse agencies, Alcoholics Anonymous faces all the problems and temptations of its own prosperity and success. Grounded firmly in Tradition Seven, the Fellowship can hold firmly to its essential principles and continue to do what it does best — carry the message of recovery through the experience, strength, and hope of individual A.A. members — while allowing others the freedom to use *their* unique strengths for the benefit of the suffering alcoholic.

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