

What's With the Dress Code?

BY: JEFF Y. | CLEVELAND HEIGHTS, OHIO

Are the local small-t traditions at our meetings the same as our Twelve Traditions? A member shares his thoughts

When I came into AA in the mid-1980s, there were a number of local customs that were rarely spoken of in the present tense. These usually took the form of recollections and perhaps remonstrances from the speaker about the way things used to be.

Where I went to meetings, I'd hear people say, "We were taught that when you sober up, you should clean up." A jacket and tie for the men, skirt and stockings for the women. That was the expected dress code when one led a meeting. And most emphatically, profanity was not tolerated. These recollections may have been a commentary on the changing times, as people flooded into meetings fresh out of 28 days of treatment back then. AA was changing and the oldtimers were concerned.

Thus, a kindly elder statesman explained to me the difference between AA's Twelve Traditions and local meeting traditions. Every AA group has its customs and culture. These are the local traditions with a lower-case "t." These customs varied from group to group, city to city, country to country. They might include the meeting format, specific readings and prayers recited and sponsorship practices. It even included whether and how the group participated in the local AA service structure and how group funds were allocated to support vital AA services of the local central office, district, area, AA Grapevine and the General Service Office.

All these things, this old-timer continued, were the result of the group conscience, which is outlined in Tradition Two. It's not surprising then that the local AA small "t" traditions can and will change over time with an informed group conscience.

But are we placing more emphasis on tradition and custom than on our Twelve Traditions? I can't say for certain because AAs tend to vote with their feet. Don't like a meeting? Go to another. Try as many as you like until you feel comfortable. Get out of your zip code once in a while to see how others are doing it. Think they are doing it all wrong? Well, people are getting sober there. How bad could it be?

There's a wonderful cross-pollination of ideas that occurs when I attend an AA meeting in another part of the country, and the recent impact of virtual meetings cannot be overstated. The ability to attend a meeting in London, Paris or Mexico City will show differing customs, but one primary purpose—to carry the AA message to the still-suffering alcoholic. AA has no secondary purpose.

Let's say that you are asked to lead a meeting or share your story. The group conscience stipulates that men are to wear a tie and jacket at the podium. If you're not the jacket and tie kind of guy, there arises a dilemma. It occasionally roars to life as a topic of local debate. Do you wear the tie or refuse the invitation? If you show up without a tie, some groups will provide you with one. Is it more important to honor the local custom or stand on your personal principles? More importantly, how is the new person served by this tempest in a teacup? What is your motivation in accepting the invitation to speak? The Big Book tells us that, "Our real purpose is to fit ourselves to be of maximum service to God and the people about us."

To the traditionalists who think form is more important than function, I would offer this spiritual principle. The only requirement for AA membership is a desire to stop drinking (Third Tradition). The "long form" of this Tradition is more enlightening: "Our membership ought to include all who suffer from alcoholism. Hence, we may refuse none who wish to recover. Nor ought AA membership ever depend upon money or conformity." Everything else is subject to a well-informed group conscience.

How well informed am I?