

On Tradition Three

“Our membership ought to include all who suffer alcoholism. Hence we may refuse none who wish to recover. Nor ought A.A. membership ever depend upon money or conformity. Any two or three alcoholics gathered together for sobriety may call themselves an A.A. group, provided that, as a group, they have no other affiliation.”

This is a sweeping statement indeed; it takes in a lot of territory. Some people might think it too idealistic to be practical. It tells every alcoholic in the world that he may become, and remain, a member of Alcoholics Anonymous so long as he says so. In short, Alcoholics Anonymous has no membership rule.

Why is this so? Our answer is simple and practical. Even in self-protection, we do not wish to erect the slightest barrier between ourselves and the brother alcoholic who still suffers. We know that society has been demanding that he conform to its laws and conventions. But the essence of his alcoholic malady is the fact that he has been unable or unwilling to conform either to the laws of man or God. If he is anything, the sick alcoholic is a rebellious nonconformist. How well we understand that; every member of Alcoholics Anonymous was once a rebel himself. Hence we cannot offer to meet him at any half-way mark. We must enter the dark cave where he is and show him that we understand. We realize that he is altogether too weak and confused to jump hurdles. If we raise obstacles, he might stay away and perish. He might be denied his priceless opportunity.

So when he asks, “Are there any conditions?” we joyfully reply, “No, not a one.” When skeptically he comes back saying, “But certainly there must be things that I have to do and believe,” we quickly answer, “In Alcoholics Anonymous there are no musts.” Cynically, perhaps, he then inquires, “What is this all going to cost me?” We are able to laugh and say, “Nothing at all, there are no fees and dues.” Thus, in a brief hour, is our friend disarmed of his suspicion and rebellion. His eyes begin to open on a new world of friendship and understanding. Bankrupt idealist that he has been, his ideal is no longer a dream. After years of lonely search, it now stands revealed. The reality of Alcoholics Anonymous bursts upon him. For Alcoholics Anonymous is saying, “We have something priceless to give, if only you will receive.” That is all. But to our new friend, it is everything. Without more ado, he becomes one of us.

Our membership tradition does contain, however, one vitally important qualification. That qualification relates to the use of our name, Alcoholics Anonymous. We believe that any two or three alcoholics gathered together for sobriety may call themselves an A.A. group provided that, as a group, they have no other affiliation. Here our purpose is clear and unequivocal. For obvious reasons we wish the name Alcoholics Anonymous to be used only in connection with straight A.A. activities. One can think of no A.A. member who would like, for example, to see the formation of “dry” A.A. groups, “wet” A.A. groups, Republican A.A. groups, Communist A.A. groups. Few, if any, would wish our groups to be designated by religious denominations. We cannot lend the A.A. name, even indirectly to other activities, however worthy. If we do so we shall become hopelessly compromised and divided. We think that A.A. should offer its experience to the whole world for whatever use can be made of it. But not its name. Nothing could be more certain.

Let us of A.A. therefore resolve that we shall always be inclusive, and never exclusive, offering all we have to all men save our title. May all barriers be thus leveled; may our unity thus be preserved. And may God grant us a long life –and a useful one!

Bill W.

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