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Will A.A. Ever Have a Personal Government?

By Bill

The answer to this question is almost surely "no." That is the clear version of our experience.

To begin with, each A.A. has been an individual who, because of his alcoholism, could seldom govern himself. Nor could any other human being govern the alcoholic's obsession to drink, his drive to have things his own way. Time out of mind, families, friends, employers, doctors, clergymen, and judges have tried their hand at disciplining alcoholics. Almost without exception the failure to accomplish anything by coercion has been complete. Yet we alcoholics can be led, we can be inspired, coming into A.A. we can, and we gladly do, yield to the will of God. Hence it is not strange that the only real authority to be found in A.A. is that of Spiritual Principle. It is never personal authority.

Our unreasonable individualism (egocentricity if you like) was, of course, the main reason we all failed in life and betook ourselves to alcohol. When we couldn't coerce others into conformity with our own plans and desires, we drank. When others tried to coerce us, we also drank. Though now sober, we still have a strong hangover of these early traits which caused us to resist authority. Therein probably hangs a clue to our lack of personal government in A.A.: no fees, no dues, no rules and regulations, no demand that alcoholics conform to A.A. principles, no one set in

personal authority over anyone else. Through no sterling virtue, our aversion to obedience does pretty well guarantee us freedom from personal domination of any kind.

Follow Program by Choice

Still, it is a fact that most of us do follow, in our personal lives, the "12 *Suggested Steps to Recovery*." But we do this from choice. We prefer recovery to death. Then, little by little, we perceive that the spiritual basis of life is the best. We conform because we want to.

Likewise, most A.A. groups become willing to follow the "Twelve Points of Tradition to Assure Our Future." The groups are willing to avoid controversy over outside issues such as politics, reform or religion; they stick to their single purpose of helping alcoholics to recover; they increasingly rely on self support rather than outside charity. More and more do they insist on modesty and anonymity in their public relations. The A.A. groups follow these other traditional principles for the very same reason that the individual A.A. follows the "12 Steps to Recovery." Groups see they would disintegrate if they didn't and they soon discover that adherence to our tradition and experience is the foundation for a happier and more effective group life.

Nowhere in A.A. is there to be seen any constituted human authority

that can compel an A.A. group to do anything. Some A.A. groups, for example, elect their leaders. But even with such a mandate each leader soon discovers that while he can always guide by example or persuasion he can never boss, else at election time he may find himself passed by.

No Place for Dictators!

The majority of A.A. groups do not even choose leaders. They prefer rotating committees to handle their affairs. These committees are invariably regarded as servants - they have only the authorization to serve, never to command. Each committee carries out what it believes to be the wishes of its group. That is all. Though A.A. committees used to try to discipline wayward members, though they have sometime composed minute rules and regulations and now and then have set themselves up as judges of other people's personal morals, I know of no case where any of these seemingly worthy strivings had any lasting effect - except, perhaps the election of a brand new committee!

Surely I can make these assertions with the greatest of confidence. For in my own turn I, too, have tried a hand at governing A.A. Each time I have strenuously tried it I have

been shouted down; so loudly, in fact, that on several occasions it looked as though I was due for swift and certain excommunication!

Sitting at a desk in our Central Office I often watch the incoming floods of personal, group and intergroup problems as they flow in. The tide has been rising so fast of late that each morning's mail brings us an avalanche invariably containing at least one very critical problem from some place or other in the world. The A.A. Central Office has become a hot spot; so hot; indeed, that a "crisis" a day is getting to be routine.

Once upon a time my temptation was to take a strong position on every one of these problems, to exert every bit of pressure and authority that I could bring to bear, to write hot letters telling erring groups or individuals where to head in. At such moments, I used to be convinced that A.A. needed a strong personal government - someone, for example, like myself!

After struggling a few years to run the A.A. movement I had to give it up - it simply didn't work. Heavy handed assertion of my personal authority always created confusion and resistance. If I took sides in a controversy, I was joyfully quoted by some, while others murmured, "And just who does this dictator think he is?" If I sharply criticized, I usually got double criticism on the return bounce. Personal power always failed. I can see my older A.A. friends smiling. They are recalling those times when they too, felt a mighty call to "save the A.A. movement" from something or other. But

their days of playing "Pharisee" are now over. So those little maxims, "Easy does it" - "Live and let live" have come to be deeply meaningful and significant to them and to me. In such fashion each of us learns that, in A.A., one can be a servant only.

Here at the Central Office we have long known that we can merely supply certain indispensable services. We can supply information and literature; we can usually tell how the majority of AA's feel about our current problems; we can assist new groups to start, giving advice if asked; we can look after the overall A.A. public relations, we can sometimes mediate difficulties. Similarly, the editors of our monthly journal, *The A.A. Grapevine*, believe themselves simply a mirror of current A.A. life and thought. Serving purely as such, they cannot rule or propagandize. So, also, the Trustees of the Alcoholic Foundation (our A.A. general service committee) know themselves to be simple custodians, custodians who guarantee the effectiveness of the A.A. Central Office and *The A.A. Grapevine* and who are the repository of our general funds and traditions - caretakers only.

Service Center Only

It is most clearly apparent that, even here at the very center of A.A., there can only exist a center of service - custodians, editors, secretaries and the like - each, to be sure, with a special vital function, but none of them with any

authority to govern Alcoholics Anonymous.

That such centers of service, international, national, metropolitan area or local, will be sufficient for the future, I can have no doubt. So long as we avoid any menacing accumulation of wealth or the growth of personal government at these centers, we cannot go astray. While wealth and authority lie at the foundation of many a noble institution, we of A.A. now apprehend, and thoroughly well, that these things are not for us. Have we not found that one man's meat is often another man's poison?

Shall we not do well, if instead, we can cling in some part to the brotherly ideals of the early Franciscans? Let all of us A.A.s, whether we be trustees, editors, secretaries, janitors or cooks - or just members - ever recall the unimportance of wealth and authority as compared with the vast import of our brotherhood, love and service.