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Again at the Crossroads

By Bill

The substance of Bill's remarks at the closing session of AA's 1961 General Service Conference

WE AAs are everywhere developing a keener sense of our history and the meaning of its turning points. Moreover, I believe that we are getting a *right sense* of our history; something of the utmost importance indeed. The world's past reveals that many societies and nations have fallen victims to fear and pride, or to their aggressive designs. Thus they lost their sense of meaning, purpose and right destiny, and so they disintegrated and vanished. Neither power nor glory nor wealth could in the least guarantee their long-time survival.

There is little on the record of AA's first quarter-century to suggest such a fate for us. In our personal lives, and therefore in our Fellowship itself, we have steadily striven to lay aside all those vainglorious clamors for prestige, power and possessions

which had ruined so many of us in the drinking days. With those fearful experiences vividly before us, it is not strange that AA's Twelve Steps continually remind us of the stark need for ego reduction; that our Twelve Traditions warn heavily against the perils of concentrated wealth, the vain pursuit of fame and the ever-present temptation to controversy and attack.

We did not come to such wisdom by reason of our virtues; our better understanding is rooted in our former follies. In the nick of time, and by God's Grace, each of us has been enabled to develop a growing sense of the meaning and purpose of his own life. Because this has been the essence of our individual experience, it is also the essence of our experience as a Fellowship. We have suffered enough to learn something of

the love of God and of each other. Thus we have been taught to choose those principles and practices by which we can surely survive and grow. This is the spiritual climate in which we AAs are today privileged to live.

Even our sometimes erratic behavior since sobriety has never changed this all-pervading climate of humility and love. This, we think, is the spiritual condition which has invited into our midst so much wise and Providential guidance. We say this in no conceit; it is an obvious fact of our experience. We only need to ponder the long series of apparently correct choices that we have been enabled to make over the past twenty-six years; choices respecting our principles and right methods of communicating them. Not a single one of these major decisions has yet shown the slightest sign of being a mistake. Up to now AA seems to have taken the right turning at each new crossroad. This could scarcely have been our doing alone. Our Fellowship has afforded a convincing proof of that wise old adage which declares that "Man's extremity is God's opportunity." This being our record, we can surely face the next hour of decision in confident faith.

The fact is that AA does now stand at a new turning point in its affairs. This has to do with the future World Service leadership of AA as a whole. Therefore, we shall have to take a new look at the shape of things to come. At this particular crossroad a

crucial decision is required of me. And here it is:

It is my conviction that I should now retire from all active management of AA World Service affairs, and that my leadership in these matters should be fully transferred to the Trustees of AA's General Service Board.

This is not at all a new concept; it is simply the last step in a plan which has been in development for more than ten years. It was in mind when, in 1948, Dr. Bob and I jointly wrote an article for the Grapevine which was called, "Why Can't We Join AA Too?" It was even more in mind when our first General Service Conference was experimentally assembled in 1951. And when, at St. Louis in 1955, the full authority and responsibility for the maintenance of World Services was transferred to our Conference, my retirement from active service leadership was definitely foreshadowed.

Yet a vestige of my old-time status remains, and this should be explained. Following the St. Louis transference there were a few tasks that still required my full attention. But these are now virtually completed. During the last six years I have, respecting these particular matters, exercised a joint leadership with our Trustees. This sustained activity has no doubt tended to confirm me, in the minds of many AAs, as a continuing fact and symbol of AA leadership world-wide. This is the last remainder of my service leadership.

For this action there are excellent and even compelling reasons. The basic one is the present need to strictly apply AA's Tradition Two to every area of our World Service operation. This means that I should no longer act in service leadership for the group conscience of AA. This must now become fully the function of our Trustees, as guided by the Conference Delegates. Consider, too, AA's very healthy tradition of rotating leadership. Everywhere today this is a strictly applied principle—expecting to me. This is a left-over inconsistency that ought to be eliminated by my own retirement to the sidelines, where practically all of AA's old-timers now are.

But this is not all. My continued activity at AA's Headquarters may be covering up unforeseen flaws in our organizational structure. These should be given an opportunity to reveal themselves, if they exist. Moreover, the excellent leadership that we now have among the Trustees and in the Headquarters should be allowed to operate without further collaboration with me. We know that, in the long run, double-headed management is highly unsound. My retirement from active service would cure this defect.

There are also psychological reasons of the deepest import. AA is very much a family, of which we elders have surely been the spiritual parents. Now the parent who quits before his family has arrived at the

age of responsibility, has unquestionably forsaken his trust. But the parent who far overstays his time can be extremely damaging, too. If he insists on continuing his parental authority and the protective custody of his wards well after they have reached the age of responsibility, he is simply robbing them of the priceless privilege of facing life on their own. What was perfectly right for their infancy and adolescence becomes strictly no good for their maturity. So the wise parent always changes his status accordingly. Of course he is still one who, if asked, will lend a hand in serious emergencies. But he knows that he simply must let his heirs make and repair most of their own mistakes, live their own lives, and grow up. Tradition Two of the AA program deeply recognizes this universal truth when it declares "There is but one ultimate authority ... a loving God as He may express Himself *in our group conscience.*"

Of course I am not suggesting a complete withdrawal; I propose only to change my relationship with AA. For example, I expect to be available at Trustee and Conference meetings. Should marked defects appear in our present service structure, I shall, if asked, be very happy to aid in the work of repair. In short, I expect to be "on tap" but never again "on top," this being precisely the stance that AA hopes all its old-timers will take.

My coming shift to the sidelines will necessarily involve other changes. Save for the possibility of a

future visit or two overseas, and my attendance at whatever international conventions there may be, I think that my days of traveling and speaking are over. Practically speaking, it is no longer possible for me to respond to the hundreds of invitations that now come in. It is very clear, too, that continued appearances would increase my prominence in AA at the very time when this should greatly diminish. There is much the same situation respecting my very large correspondence which has grown so far out of hand that I can no longer do it justice.

Nevertheless, one primary channel of communication still stands wide open—my writing for the Grapevine. This I would certainly like to continue. Just now, for example, I'm doing a series of articles entitled "Practicing These Principles in All Our Affairs." Maybe these pieces can later be expanded into a full-sized book which would try to deal with the whole problem of living, as seen by us AAs. If it turns out that I can

write it, such a volume might be of permanent value.

There is another factor that bears upon my decision. Like every AA member I have a definite responsibility to become a citizen of the world around me; to channel into it the experience of living and working which has been mine in our Fellowship. Therefore, I'm already exploring certain areas of outside activity in which I may be able to make a helpful, and possibly a meaningful, contribution. For the first time, I now feel at liberty to follow the constructive example already set by uncounted numbers of my fellow members. But of course my principal reason for taking this new direction is the deep and confident belief that this will prove to be in the best long-time interest of Alcoholics Anonymous.

It scarce needs be said that I approach this new crossroad for AA and for me with a lump in my throat, and with a heart very full of gratitude for all those unexampled privileges and gifts with which I have so long been blessed.