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Our Anonymity Is Both Inspiration and Safety

By Bill

Discussing the subject of anonymity in a previous Grapevine article, I tried to make the following points - that anonymity has, for us A.A.s, an immense spiritual significance; that the principle ought to be preserved as part of our vital tradition; that since we have as yet no sharply defined policy there is confusion in some quarters as to what anonymity ought to mean; that we need, therefore, a perfectly clear tradition which all A.A. would feel bound to respect. I also offered some suggestions which I hoped might become, after further discussion, the basis of a national policy on anonymity. These suggestions were:

1. It should be the privilege of each A.A. to cloak himself with as much personal anonymity as he desires. His fellow A.A.s should respect his wishes and help guard whatever status he wants to assume.

2. Conversely, the individual ought to respect the feelings of his local group about anonymity. If his group wishes to be less conspicuous in their locality than he does, he ought to go along with them until they change their views.

3. With very rare exceptions, it ought to be a national policy that no member of Alcoholics Anonymous shall ever feel free to publish, in connection with any A.A. activity, his name or picture in

mediums of public circulation. This would not, however, restrict the use of his name in other public activities provided, of course, he does not disclose his A.A. membership.

4. If, for some extraordinary reason, a member thinks it desirable to drop his anonymity locally he should do so only after consulting his own group. If, as an A.A., he is to make a nationwide public appearance the matter ought to be referred to National headquarters.

If these suggestions, or variations of them, are to be adopted as a National policy, every A.A. will want to know more about our experience so far. He will surely wish to know how most of our older members are thinking on the subject of Anonymity at the present time. It will be the purpose of this piece to bring everybody up to date on our collective experience.

Firstly, I believe most of us would agree that the general idea of Anonymity is sound, because it encourages alcoholics and the families of alcoholics to approach us for help. Still fearful of being stigmatized, they regard our anonymity an assurance their problems will be kept confidential; that the alcoholic skeleton in the family closet will not wander in the streets.

Secondly, the Policy of Anonymity is a protection to our cause. It prevents our

founders or leaders, so called, from becoming household names who might at any time get drunk and give A.A. a black eye. No one need say that couldn't happen here. It could.

Thirdly, almost every newspaper reporter who covers us complains, at first, of the difficulty of writing his story without names. But he quickly forgets this difficulty when he realizes that here is a group of people who care nothing for personal gain. Probably it is the first time in his life he has ever reported an organization which wants no personal publicity. Cynic though he may be, this obvious sincerity instantly transforms him into a friend of A.A. Therefore his piece is a friendly piece, never a routine job. It is enthusiastic writing because the reporter feels that way himself. People often ask how Alcoholics Anonymous has been able to secure such an incredible amount of excellent publicity. The answer seems to be that practically everyone who writes about us becomes an A.A. convert, sometimes a zealot. Is not our Policy of Anonymity mainly responsible for this phenomenon?

Fourthly, why does the general public regard us so favorably? Is it simply because we are bringing recovery to lots of alcoholics? No, this can hardly be the whole story. However impressed he may be by our recoveries, John Q. Public is even more interested in our way of life. Weary of pressure selling, spectacular

promotion and shouting public characters, he is refreshed by our quietness, modesty and anonymity. It well may be that he feels a great spiritual power is being generated on this account - that something new has come into his own life.

If Anonymity has already done these things for us, we surely ought to continue it as a National Policy. So very valuable to us now, it may become an incalculable asset for the future. *In a spiritual sense, Anonymity amounts to the renunciation of personal prestige as an instrument of National policy.* I am confident that we shall do well to preserve this powerful principle; that we should resolve never to let go of it.

Now what about its application? Since we advertise Anonymity to every newcomer, we ought, of course, to preserve a new member's anonymity so long as he wishes it preserved. Because, when he read our publicity and came to us, we contracted to do exactly that. And even if he wants to come in under an assumed name, we should assure him he can. If he wishes us to refrain from discussing his case with anyone, even other A.A. members, we ought to respect that wish too. While most newcomers do not care a rap who knows about their alcoholism, there are others who care very much. Let us guard them in every way until they get over that feeling.

Then comes the problem of the newcomer who wishes to drop his anonymity too fast. He rushes to all his friends with the glad news of A.A. If this group does not caution him he may rush to a newspaper office or a microphone to tell the wide world all about himself. He is also likely to tell everyone the

innermost details of his personal life, soon to find that, in this respect, he has altogether too much publicity! We ought to suggest to him that he take things easy; that he first get on his own feet before talking about A.A. to all and sundry; that no one thinks of publicizing A.A. without being sure of the approval of his own group.

Then there is the problem of Group anonymity. Like the individual, it is probable that the Group ought to feel its way along cautiously until it gains strength and experience. There should not be too much haste to bring in outsiders or to set up public meetings. Yet this early conservation can be overdone. Some groups go on, year after year, shunning all publicity or any meetings except those for alcoholics only. Such groups are apt to grow slowly. They become stale because they are not taking in fresh blood fast enough. In their anxiety to maintain secrecy they forget their obligation to other alcoholics in their communities who have not heard that A.A. has come to town. But this unreasonable caution eventually breaks down. Little by little some meetings are opened to families and close friends. Clergymen and doctors may now and then be invited. Finally the Group enlists the aid of the local newspaper.

In most places, but not all, it is customary for A.A.s to use their own names when speaking before public or semi-public gatherings. This is done to impress audiences that we no longer fear the stigma of alcoholism. If, however, newspaper reporters were present they are earnestly requested not to use the names of any of the alcoholic speakers on the program. This preserves the

principle of Anonymity so far as the general public is concerned and at the same time represents us as a group of alcoholics who no longer fear to let our friends know that we have been very sick people.

In practice then, the principle of Anonymity seems to come down to this:

With one very important exception, the question of how far each individual or group shall go in dropping anonymity is left strictly to the individual or group concerned. The exception is: That all groups or individuals, when writing or speaking for publication as members of Alcoholics Anonymous, feel bound never to disclose their true names. Except for very rare cases, it is at this point of publication that nearly all of us feel we should draw the anonymity line. *We ought not disclose ourselves to the general public.*

In our whole history not more than a handful of A.A.s have ever dropped their anonymity so far as the general public is concerned. Some of these instances have been accidental, a few have been quite unnecessary and one or two are apparently justified. Of course there must be a few policies which cannot sometimes, in the general interest, be suspended. Yet any who would drop their anonymity must reflect that they may set a precedent which could eventually destroy a valuable principle. The exceptions will have to be few, far between, and most carefully considered. We must never let any immediate advantage shake us in our determination to hang on to such a really vital tradition.

Great modesty and humility are needed by every A.A. for his own permanent recovery. If these virtues are

such vital needs to the individual, so must they be to A.A. as a whole. This principle of Anonymity before the general public can, if we take it seriously enough, guarantee the Alcoholics Anonymous movement these sterling attributes forever. Our public relations policy should mainly rest upon the principle of attraction and seldom, if ever, upon promotion.