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The last of a series
of articles explaining
The Twelve Traditions

by
Bill

TRADITION TWELVE

*"Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our Traditions,
ever reminding us to place principles above personalities."*

THE spiritual substance of anonymity is sacrifice. Because AA's Twelve Traditions repeatedly ask us to give up personal desires for the common good, we realize that the sacrificial spirit—well symbolized by anonymity—is the foundation of them all. It is AA's proved willingness to make these sacrifices that gives people their high confidence in our future.

But in the beginning, anonymity was not born of confidence; it was the child of our early fears. Our first name-

less groups of alcoholics were secret societies. New prospects could find us only through a few trusted friends. The bare hint of publicity, even for our work, shocked us. Though ex-drinkers, we still thought we had to hide from public distrust and contempt.

When the big book appeared in 1939, we called it "Alcoholics Anonymous." Its foreword made this revealing statement: "It is important that we remain anonymous because we are too

few, at present, to handle the overwhelming number of personal appeals which may result from this publication. Being mostly business or professional folk, we could not well carry on our occupations in such an event." Between these lines it is easy to read our fear that large numbers of incoming people might break our anonymity wide open.

As the AA groups multiplied, so did anonymity problems. Enthused over the spectacular recovery of a brother alcoholic, we'd sometimes discuss those intimate and harrowing aspects of his case meant for his sponsor's ear alone. The aggrieved victim would then rightly declare that his trust had been broken. When such stories got into circulation outside of AA, the loss of confidence in our anonymity promise was severe. It frequently turned people from us. Clearly, every AA member's name—and story, too—had to be confidential, if he wished. This was our first lesson in the practical application of anonymity.

With characteristic intemperance, however, some of our newcomers cared not at all for secrecy. They wanted to shout AA from the housetops, and did. Alcoholics barely dry rushed about bright-eyed, button-holing anyone who would listen to their stories. Others hurried to place themselves before microphones and cameras. Sometimes they got distressingly drunk and let their groups down with a bang. They had changed from AA members into AA show-offs.

This phenomenon of contrast really

set us thinking. Squarely before us was the question, "How anonymous should an AA member be?" Our growth made it plain that we couldn't be a secret society, but it was equally plain that we couldn't be a vaudeville circuit either. The charting of a safe path between these extremes took a long time.

As a rule, the average newcomer wanted his family to know immediately what he was trying to do. He also wanted to tell others who had tried to help him—his doctor, his minister, and close friends. As he gained confidence, he felt it right to explain his new way of life to his employer and business associates. When opportunities to be helpful came along, he found he could talk easily about AA to almost anyone. These quiet disclosures helped him to lose his fear of the alcoholic stigma, and spread the news of AA's existence in his community. Many a new man and woman came to AA because of such conversations. Though not in the strict letter of anonymity, such communications were well within its spirit.

But it became apparent that the word-of-mouth method was too limited. Our work, as such, needed to be publicized. The AA groups would have to reach quickly as many despairing alcoholics as they could. Consequently many groups began to hold meetings which were open to interested friends and the public, so that the average citizen could see for himself just what AA was all about. The response to these meetings was warmly sympa-

thetic. Soon groups began to receive requests for AA speakers to appear before civic organizations, church groups, and medical societies. Provided anonymity was maintained on these platforms, and reporters present were cautioned against the use of names or pictures, the result was fine.

Then came our first few excursions into major publicity, which were breath-taking. Cleveland's Plain Dealer articles about us ran that town's membership from a few into hundreds overnight. The news stories of Mr. Rockefeller's dinner for Alcoholics Anonymous helped double our total membership in a year's time. Jack Alexander's famous Saturday Evening Post piece made AA a national institution. Such tributes as these brought opportunities for still more recognition. Other newspapers and magazines wanted AA stories. Film companies wanted to photograph us. Radio, and finally television, besieged us with requests for appearances. What should we do?

As this tide offering top public approval swept in, we realized that it could do us incalculable good or great harm. Everything would depend upon how it was channeled. We simply

couldn't afford to take the chance of letting self-appointed members present themselves as messiahs representing AA before the whole public. The promoter instinct in us might be our undoing. If even one publicly got drunk, or was lured into using AA's name for his own purposes, the damage might be irreparable. At this altitude (press, radio, films, and television), anonymity—one-hundred-percent anonymity—was the only possible answer. Here principles would have to come before personalities, without exception.

These experiences taught us that anonymity is real humility at work. It is an all-pervading spiritual quality which today keynotes AA life everywhere. Moved by the spirit of anonymity, we try to give up our natural desires for personal distinction as AA members both among fellow alcoholics and before the general public. As we lay aside these very human aspirations, we believe that each of us takes part in the weaving of a protective mantle which covers our whole society and under which we may grow and work in unity.

We are sure that humility, expressed by anonymity, is the greatest safeguard that AA can ever have.

(Editor's Note: This brings to a close "The Twelve Traditions," a new series of explanation. Bill has also completed a new interpretation of the Twelve Steps. These will not appear in *The Grapevine*, but we will soon announce publication date and details of a new book containing both the series on the Traditions and the Steps. Authorized by the 1952 General Service Conference, the book will be published by Works Publishing, Inc.)