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A Tradition Born Of Our Anonymity

By Bill

(A continuation of the series begun in the July, 1945, issue presenting basic A.A. principles for discussion).

In the years that lie ahead the principle of anonymity will undoubtedly become a part of our vital tradition. Even today we sense its practical value. But more important still, we are beginning to feel that the word "anonymous" has for us an immense spiritual significance. Subtly but powerfully it reminds us that we are always to place principles before personalities; that we have renounced personal glorification in public; that our movement not only preaches, but actually practices a truly humble modesty. That the practice of anonymity in our public relations has always had a profound effect upon us, and upon our millions of friends in the outside world, there can hardly be doubt. Anonymity is already a cornerstone of our public relations policy.

How this idea first originated and subsequently took hold of us is an interesting bit of A.A. history. In the years before the publication of the book, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, we had no name. Nameless, formless, our essential principles of recovery still under debate and test, we were just a group of drinkers groping our way along what we hoped would be the road to freedom. Once we became sure that our feet were set on the right track we decided upon a

book in which we could tell other alcoholics the good news. As the book took form we inscribed in it the essence of our experience. It was the product of thousands of hours of discussions. It truly represented the collective voice, heart and conscience of those of us who had pioneered the first four years of A.A.

Search for a Title

As the day of publication approached we racked our brains to find a suitable name for the volume. We must have considered at least two hundred titles. Thinking up titles and voting upon them at meetings became one of our main activities. A great welter of discussion and argument finally narrowed our choice to a single pair of names. Should we call our new book *The Way Out* or should we call it *Alcoholics Anonymous*? That was the final question. A last minute vote was taken by the Akron and New York Groups. By a narrow majority the verdict was for naming our book *The Way Out*. Just before we went to print somebody suggested there might be other books having the same title. One of our early lone members (dear old Fitz M., who then lived over in Washington) went over to the Library of Congress to investigate. He found exactly twelve books already titled *The Way Out*. When this information was passed around, we shivered at the possibility of being the

"13th Way Out." So *Alcoholics Anonymous* became first choice. That's how we got the name for our book of experience, a name for our movement and, as we are now beginning to see, a tradition of the greatest spiritual import. God does move in mysterious ways His wonders to perform!

In the book *Alcoholics Anonymous* there are only three references to the principle of anonymity. The forward of our first edition states: "Being mostly business or professional folk some of us could not carry on our occupations if known" and "When writing or speaking publicly about alcoholism, we urge each of our fellowship to omit his personal name, designating himself instead as 'a member of Alcoholics Anonymous,'" and then, "very earnestly we ask the press also to observe this request for otherwise we shall be greatly handicapped."

Since the publication of *Alcoholics Anonymous* in 1939 hundreds of A.A. groups have been formed. Every one of them asks these questions: "Just how anonymous are we supposed to be?" and "After all, what good is this principle of anonymity anyway?" To a great extent each group has settled upon its own interpretation. Naturally enough wide differences of opinion remain among us. Just what our anonymity means and just how far it ought to go are unsettled questions.

How Opinions Differ

Though we no longer fear the stigma of alcoholism as we once did, we still find individuals who are extremely sensitive about their connection with us. A few come in under assumed names. Others swear us to the deepest secrecy. They fear their connection with Alcoholics Anonymous may ruin their business or social position. At the other end of the scale of opinion we have the individual who declares that anonymity is a lot of childish nonsense. He feels it his bounden duty to cry his membership in Alcoholics Anonymous from the house tops. He points out that our A.A. fellowship contains people of renown, some of national importance. Why, he asks, shouldn't we capitalize their personal prestige just as any other organization would?

In between these extremes the shades of opinion are legion. Some groups, especially newer ones, conduct themselves like secret societies. They do not wish their activities known even to friends. Nor do they propose to have preachers, doctors, or even their wives at any of their meetings. As for inviting in newspaper reporters - perish the thought! Other groups feel that their communities should know all about Alcoholics Anonymous. Though they print no names, they do seize every opportunity to advertize the activities of their group. They occasionally hold public or semi-public meetings where A.A.s appear on the platform by name. Doctors, clergymen and public officials are

frequently invited to speak at such gatherings. Here and there a few A.A.s have dropped their anonymity completely. Their names pictures and personal activities have appeared in the public prints. As A.A.s they have sometimes signed their names to articles telling of their membership.

So while it is quite evident that most of us believe in anonymity, our practice of the principle does vary a great deal.

The Principle Is Vital

Of course, it should be the privilege, even the right, of each individual or group to handle anonymity as they wish. But to do that intelligently we shall need to be convinced that the principle is a good one for practically all of us; indeed we must realize that the future safety and effectiveness of Alcoholics Anonymous may depend upon its preservation. Each individual will then have to decide where he ought to draw the line - how far he ought to carry the principle in his own affairs, how far he may go in dropping his own anonymity without injury to Alcoholics Anonymous as a whole.

The vital question is: Just where shall we fix this point where personalities fade out and anonymity begins?

As a matter of fact, few of us are anonymous do far as our daily contacts go. We have dropped anonymity at this level because we think our friends and associates ought to know about Alcoholics Anonymous and what it has

done for us. We also wish to lose the fear of admitting we are alcoholics. Though we earnestly request reporters not to disclose our identities, we frequently speak before semi-public gathering under our right names. We wish to impress audiences that our alcoholism is a sickness we no longer fear to discuss before anyone. So far, so good. If, however, we venture beyond this limit we shall surely lose the principle of anonymity forever. If every A.A. felt free to publish his own name, picture and story we would soon be launched upon a vast orgy of personal publicity which obviously could have no limit whatever. Isn't this where, by the strongest kind of attraction, we must draw the line?

A Suggestion

If I were asked to outline a tradition for anonymity it might run as follows:

1. It should be the privilege of each individual 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 A.A. ought to respect the feeling of his local group as to their anonymity. If his group wishes to be more anonymous than he does, he ought to go along with them until they change their views.

3. With very rare exception it ought to be a national tradition that no member of Alcoholics Anonymous shall ever feel free to publish his name or picture (in

connection with his Alcoholics Anonymous activities) in any medium of public circulation, or by radio. Of course, this should not restrict the free use of his name in other public activities, provided he does not disclose his A.A. connection.

4. If for some extraordinary reason, for the good of A.A. as a whole, a member thinks it desirable to completely drop his anonymity he should only do so after consulting the older members of his local group. If he is to make a nationwide public appearance as an A.A. the matter ought to be referred to our Central Office.

Of course, I am not for a moment thinking of these statements as rules or regulations; they merely suggest what would seem to be sound tradition for the future. In the last analysis every A.A. will have to search his own conscience.

If we are going to evolve a clear-cut tradition about anonymity we shall do it through our usual process, viz: - trial and error, much discussion, collective judgment and common consent.

To stimulate further discussion I would like, in an early issue of *The Grapevine*, to review our experience with anonymity. That we shall eventually come up with the right answers I can have no doubt.