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Dangers In Linking A.A. to Other Projects

By Bill

Our A.A. experience has been raising the following set of important, but as yet unresolved questions. First, should A.A. as a whole enter the outside fields of hospitalization, research and non-controversial alcohol education? Second, is an A.A. member, acting strictly as an individual, justified in bringing his special experience and knowledge into such enterprise? And thirdly, if an A.A. member does take up these phases of the total alcohol problem, under what conditions should he work?

With respect to these questions, almost any opinion can be heard among our groups. Generally speaking, there are three schools of thought, the "do everything" school; the "do something" school; and, the "do nothing" school.

We have A.A.s so fearful we may become entangled, or somehow exploited, that they would keep us a strictly closed corporation. They would exert the strongest possible pressure to prevent all A.A.s, whether as individuals or groups, from doing anything at all about the total alcohol problem, except, of course, their straight A.A. work. They see the spectre of the Washingtonian movement among alcoholics of a hundred years ago which fell into disunity partly because its members publicly took up cudgels for abolition, prohibition - and what not. These A.A.s believe that we

must preserve our isolation at any cost; that we must keep absolutely to ourselves if we would avoid like perils.

Then we have the A.A.s who would have us "do everything" for the total alcoholic problem - anytime, anyplace and any way! In his enthusiasm, he not only thinks his beloved A.A. a "cure-all" for drunks, but he also thinks we have the answer for everything and everybody touching alcohol. He strongly feels that A.A. ought to place its name and financial credit squarely behind any first rate research, hospital or educational project. Seeing that A.A. now makes the headlines, he argues that we should freely loan out our huge good will. Says he, "Why shouldn't we A.A.s stand right up in public and be counted? Millions could be raised easily for good works in alcohol." The judgment of this enthusiast is sometimes beclouded by the fact he wants to make a career. But with most who enthuse so carelessly, I'm sure it's more often a case of sheer exuberance plus, in many instances, a deep sense of social responsibility.

Policy Now Clear

So we have with us the enthusiasts and the ultra-cautious; the "do everything" and the "do Nothings."

But the average A.A. is not so worried about these phenomena as he used to be. He knows that out of the heat and smoke there will soon come light. Presently there will issue an enlightened policy, palatable to everyone. Tested by time, that policy, if sound, will become A.A. Tradition.

Sometimes I've feared that A.A. would never bring forth a workable policy. Nor was my fear abated as my own views swung with complete inconsistency from one extreme to the other. But I should have had more faith. We are commencing to have enough of the strong light of experience to see more surely; to be able to say with more certainty what we can, and what we cannot do, about causes such as education, research and the like.

For example, we can say quite emphatically that neither A.A. as a whole nor any A.A. Group ought to enter any other activity than straight A.A. As groups, we cannot endorse, finance or form an alliance with any other cause, however good; we cannot link the A.A. name to other enterprises in the alcohol field to the extent that the public gets the impression we have abandoned our sole aim. We must discourage our members and our friends in these fields from stressing the A.A. name in their publicity or appeals for funds. To act otherwise

will certainly imperil our unity, and to maintain our unity is surely our greatest obligation - to our brother alcoholics and the public at large. Experience, we think, has already made these principles self-evident.

Though we now come to more debatable ground, we must earnestly ask ourselves whether any of us, as individuals, ought to carry our special experience into other phases of the alcohol problem. Do we not owe this much to society, and can it be done without involving A.A. as a whole?

To my mind the "do nothing" policy has become unthinkable, partly because I'm sure that our members can work in other non-controversial alcohol activities without jeopardizing A.A. if they observe a few simple precautions, and partly because I have developed a deep conviction that to do less would be to deprive the whole society of the immensely valuable contributions we could almost certainly make. Though we are A.A.s, and A.A. must come first, we are also citizens of the world. Besides, we are, like our good friends the physicians, honorbound to share all we know with all men.

We're A.A.s First

Therefore it seems to me that some of us must heed the call from other fields. And those who do need only remember first and last they are A.A.s; that in their new activities they are individuals only. This means that they will respect the principle of anonymity in the press; that if they do appear before the

general public they will not describe themselves as A.A.s; that they will refrain from emphasizing their A.A. status in appeals for money or publicity.

These simple principles of conduct, if conscientiously applied, could soon dispel all fears, reasonable and unreasonable, which many A.A.s now entertain. On such a basis, A.A. as a whole could remain uncommitted yet friendly to any non-controversial cause seeking to write a brighter page in the dark annals of alcoholism.

A concluding word. Several years ago, I believed that we might, in a limited and cautious way, lend our name to selected outside ventures. One of these was a very promising educational project. I was asked by the faculty members of Yale University sponsoring the National Committee for Education on Alcoholism whether they might hire an A.A. And could that A.A., for this special purpose, break anonymity? My answer was that of course an A.A. could be engaged; that such an engagement could not, by any imagination, be a professionalization of A.A. as the work to be done would be in another field entirely; that if an A.A. could make a better educator, then why not? Though there has never been much question that this was sound enough policy, the same could not be said for my reply on the matter of dropping anonymity, to which, in this instance, I gave approval.

That of course has since proved mistaken. A good friend of mine took this particular post and then dropped anonymity. The first effect was good. It brought A.A. a considerable amount of

publicity and many members. On the educational side the public was made conscious as never before that alcoholism is a sickness and that something could be done about it. So far very good.

But of late, some confusion has arisen. Because of the large amount of publicity linking the A.A. name and that of the educational project, the public tends to think A.A. as a whole has gone

in for alcohol education. And when the A.A. name became associated in the public mind with a fund raising campaign, there was still more confusion. Some givers were under the impression they were contributing to A.A., only to be told by friends that A.A. did not solicit money. Hence a long-term liability of dropping anonymity is beginning to offset its short-term advantages. As experience makes this more clear, not only to me, but to my friends of the university and of the educational committee, they agree perfectly and are now endeavouring to correct the situation.

Naturally, and most earnestly, I hope that none of those involved or the work of the committee will suffer to any degree from our mistake. Such, after all, is the purpose of trial and error by which we all learn and grow.

Briefly summarizing, I'm rather sure our policy with respect to "outside" projects will turn out to be this: A.A. does not sponsor projects in other fields. But, if these projects are constructive and non-controversial in character, A.A. members are free to engage in them without criticism if they act as individuals only, and are careful of the A.A. name. Perhaps that's it. Shall we try it?