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"Rules" Dangerous, But Unity on Public Policies Vital to Future of A.A.

By Bill

(Second in a series of articles presenting basic A.A. policies for discussion.)

Does Alcoholics Anonymous have a public relations policy? Is it adequate to meet our present and future needs?

Though it has never been definitely formulated or precisely stated, we certainly have a partly formed public relations policy. Like everything else in A.A., it has grown up out of trial and error. Nobody invented it. Nobody has ever laid down a set of rules or regulations to cover it, and I hope no one ever will. This is because rules and regulations seem to be little good for us. They seldom work well.

Were we to proceed by the rules, somebody would have to make them and, more difficult still, somebody would have to enforce them. "Rulemaking" has often been tried. It usually results in controversy among the "rule makers" as to what the rules should be. And when it comes to enforcing an edict - well, you all know the answer. When we try to enforce rules and regulations, however reasonable, we almost always get in so "dutch" that our authority disappears. A cry goes up, "Down with the dictators, off with their heads!" Hurt and astonished "Control Committee" after "Control Committee," "leader" after "Leader" makes the discovery that *human*

authority, be it ever so partial or benign, seldom works long or well in our affairs. Alcoholics (no matter if ragged) are yet the most rugged of individualists, true anarchists at heart.

Of course nobody claims this trait of ours to be a sterling virtue. During his first A.A. years every A.A. has had plenty of the urge to revolt against authority. I know I did, and can't claim to be over it yet. I've also served my time as a maker of rules, a regulator of other people's conduct. I too, have spent sleepless nights nursing my "wounded" ego, wondering how others whose lives I sought to manage could be so unreasonable, so thoughtless of "poor" me. I can now look back upon such experiences with much amusement. And gratitude as well. They taught me that the very quality which prompted me to govern other people was the identical egocentricity which boiled up in my fellow A.A.s when they themselves refused to be governed!

Non - A.A. Questions

A non-A.A. reader can be heard to exclaim, "This looks very serious for the future of these people. No organization, no rules, no authority? It's anarchy; it's dynamite; it's 'atomic' and bound to blow up. Public relations indeed! If there is no

authority how can they have any public relations policy at all? That's the very defect which ruined the Washingtonian alcoholics a hundred years ago. They mushroomed to 100,000 members, then collapsed. No effective policy or authority. Quarrelled among themselves, so finally got a black eye with the public. Aren't these A.A.s just the same kind of drunks, the same kind of anarchists? How can they expect to succeed where the Washingtonians failed?

Good questions these. Have we the answers? While we must never be too sure there is reason to hope that we have, because forces seem to be at work in A. A. which were little evident among our brother alcoholics of the 1840s.

For one thing our A.A. program is spiritually centered. Most of us have found enough humility by facing the fact that alcoholism is a fatal malady over which we are individually powerless. The Washingtonians, on the contrary, thought drinking was just another strong habit which could be broken by will power as expressed in pledges, plus the sustaining force of mutual aid through an understanding society of ex-drunks. Apparently they thought little of personality change, and nothing at all of spiritual conversion.

Mutual aid plus pledges did do a lot for them but it wasn't enough; their individual

egos still ran riot in every channel save alcohol. Self-serving forces having no real humility, having little appreciation that the penalty for too much self will is death to the alcoholic, having no Greater Power to serve, finally destroyed the Washingtonians.

Unity Thus Far

When, therefore, we A.A.s look to the future, we must always be asking ourselves if the *spirit* which now binds us together in our common cause will always be stronger than those personal ambitions and desires which tend to drive us apart. So long as the positive forces are greater we cannot fail. Happily, so far, the ties which bind us have been much stronger than those which might break us. Though the individual A.A. is under no human coercion, is at almost perfect personal liberty, we have, nevertheless, achieved a wonderful unity on vital essentials.

For example, "The 12 Steps" of our A.A. program are not crammed down anybody's throat. They are not sustained by any human authority. Yet we powerfully unite around them because the truth they contain has saved our lives, has opened the doors to a new world. Our experience tells us these universal truths work. The anarchy of the individual yields to their persuasion. He sobers up and is led, little by little, to complete agreement with our simple fundamentals.

Ultimately, these truths govern his life and he comes to live under their authority, the most powerful authority known, *the authority of his full consent, willingly given*. He is ruled, not by people, but by principles, by truths and, as most of us would say, he is ruled by God.

Now some might ask, "What has all this to do with an A.A. public relations policy?" An older A.A. would say, "Plenty." While experience shows that in A.A. no policy can be created and announced full blown, much less effectively enforced by human authority, we are, nevertheless, faced with the problem of developing a public relations policy and securing for it the only authority we know - that of common understanding and widespread, if not universal, consent. When this consent is secured we can then be sure of ourselves. A.A.s will everywhere put the policy into effect as a matter of course, automatically. But we must at first be clear on certain basic principles. And these must have been tried and tested in our crucible of experience.

In forthcoming articles I shall therefore try to trace the development of our public relations from the very first day we came to public notice. This will show what our experience has already taught us. Then every A.A. can have a real background for constructive thinking on this terribly vital matter - a matter on which we dare not make grave mistakes; upon which, over the years, we cannot afford to become unsound.

Flexibility Is Vital

One qualification, however. A policy isn't quite like a fixed truth. A policy is something which can change to meet variable conditions, even though the basic underlying truths upon which it is founded do not change at all. Our policy might, for example, rest upon our 12 Steps for its underlying truths, yet remain reasonably flexible so far as the means or method of its application is concerned.

Hence I earnestly hope thousands of A.A.s start thinking a great deal about these policy matters which are now becoming so important to us. It is out of our discussions, our differences of opinion, our daily experiences, and our general consent that the true answers must finally come.

As an older member I may be able to marshal the facts and help analyze what has happened so far. Perhaps I can even make some suggestions of value for the future. But that is all. Whether we are going to have a clear-cut public relations policy will finally be determined by all of us together - not by me alone!

(To be continued in the October GRAPEVINE)