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The fifth of a new series  
of articles explaining

The Twelve Traditions . . .

by

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## TRADITION FIVE

*Each group has but one  
primary purpose . . .  
to carry the message  
to the alcoholic who still suffers.*

"S H O E M A K E R , stick to thy last". . . better do one thing supremely well than many badly. That is the central theme of this tradition. Around it our society gathers in unity. The very life of our fellowship requires the preservation of this principle.

Alcoholics Anonymous can be likened to a group of physicians who might find a cure for cancer, and upon whose concerted work would depend the answer for sufferers of this disease. True, each physician in such a group might have his own specialty. Every doctor concerned would at times wish he could devote himself to his chosen field rather than work only with the group. But once these men had hit upon a cure, once it became apparent that only

by their united effort could this be accomplished, then all of them would feel bound to devote themselves solely to the relief of cancer. In the radiance of such a miraculous discovery, any doctor would set his other ambitions aside, at whatever personal cost.

Just as firmly bound by obligation are the members of Alcoholics Anonymous, who have demonstrated that they can help problem drinkers as others seldom can. The unique ability of each AA to identify himself with and bring recovery to the newcomer in no way depends upon his learning, eloquence, or on any special individual skills. The only thing that matters is that he is an alcoholic who has found a key to sobriety. These legacies of suffering and of

recovery are easily passed among alcoholics, one to the other. This is our gift from God, and its bestowal upon others like us is the one aim that today animates AAs all around the globe.

There is another reason for this singleness of purpose. We know that we can seldom keep the precious gift of sobriety unless we give it away. If a group of doctors possessed a cancer cure they might be conscience-stricken if they failed their mission through self-seeking. Yet such a failure wouldn't jeopardise their personal survival. For us, if we neglect those who are still sick, there is unremitting danger to our own lives and sanity. Under these compulsions of self-preservation, duty, and love, it is not strange that

our society has concluded that it has but one high mission ... to carry the AA message to those who don't know there's a way out.

Highlighting the wisdom of AA's single purpose, a member tells this story:

"Restless one day, I felt I'd better do some Twelfth Step work. Maybe I should take out some insurance against a slip. But first I'd have to find a drunk to work on.

"So I hopped the subway to Town's Hospital where I asked Dr. Silkworth if he had a prospect. 'Nothing too promising,' the little doc said. 'There's just one chap on the third floor who might be a possibility. But he's an awfully tough Irishman. I never saw a man so obstinate. He shouts that if his partner would treat him better, and

his wife would leave him alone, he'd soon solve his alcohol problem. He's had a bad case of d.t.'s, he's pretty foggy, and he's very suspicious of everybody. Doesn't sound too good, does it? But work\*ing with him may do something for you, so why don't you have a go at it?'

"I was soon sitting beside a big hulk of a man. Decidedly unfriendly, he stared at me out of eyes which were slits in his red and swollen face. I had to agree with the doctor ... he certainly didn't look good. But I told him my own story, I explained what a wonderful fellowship we had, how well we understood each other. I bore down hard on the hopelessness of the drunk's dilemma. I insisted that few drunks could ever get well on their own steam, but that in our groups we could do together what we could not do separately. He interrupted to scoff at this and asserted he'd fix his wife, his partner, and his alcoholism by himself. Sarcastically he asked, 'How much does your scheme cost?' I was thankful I could tell him 'Nothing at all,' His next question: 'What are you getting out of it?' Of course my answer was, 'My own sobriety and a mighty happy life.' Still dubious, he demanded, 'Do you really mean the only reason you are here is to try and help me and to help yourself?' 'Yes,' I said, 'That's absolutely all there is to it. There's no angle.'

"Then, hesitantly, I ventured to talk about the spiritual side of our program. What a freeze that drunk gave me! I'd no sooner got the word 'spiritual' out of my mouth than he pounced. 'Oh!' he said. 'Now I get it! You're proselyting for some damn religious sect or other. Where do you get that 'no angle' stuff? I belong to a great church that means everything to me. You've got a nerve to come in here talking religion!'

"Thank heaven I came up with the right answer for that one. It was based foursquare on the single purpose of AA. 'You have faith,' I said. 'Perhaps far deeper faith than mine. No doubt you're better taught in religious matters than I. So I can't tell you anything about religion. I don't even want to try. I'll bet, too, that you could give me a letter-perfect definition of humility. But from what you've told me about yourself and your problems and how you propose to lick them, I think I know what's wrong.' 'Okay,' he said. 'Give me the business.' 'Well,' said I. 'I think you're just a conceited Irishman who thinks he can run the whole show.'

"This really rocked him. But as he calmed down he began to listen while I tried to show him that humility was the main key to sobriety. Finally he saw that I wasn't attempting to change his religious views, that I wanted him to find the grace in his own religion that

would aid his recovery. From there on we got along fine.

"Now," concludes the old timer, "Suppose I'd been obliged to talk to this man on religious grounds. Suppose my answer had to be that AA needed a lot of money: that AA went in for education, hospitals, and rehabilitation? Suppose I'd

suggested that I'd take a hand in his domestic and business affairs? Where would we have wound up? No place, of course."

Years later this tough Irish customer liked to say, "My sponsor sold me one idea, and that was sobriety. At the time, I couldn't have bought anything else."



*Yea, a man may say, Thou hast faith, and I have works: shew me thy faith without thy works, and I will shew thee my faith by my works.*

— James: 2:18

