

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

A presentation to the 1988 General Service Conference
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Communication has been, is, and always will be the essence of AA. Our accepted task, then — our primary purpose — is to carry the message to the still-suffering alcoholic; to communicate with him about what we were like, what happened, and what we are like now; to communicate our experience, strength, and hope to him constantly; to communicate with him about his obligation, in turn, to carry the message further; and to communicate to him the knowledge of how to do it and the tools to do it with.

On the face of it, this looks like a straightforward process — one person communicating with another, until a vast safety net is woven for alcoholics which covers the globe. But it *isn't* that simple or that straightfor-

ward. Therein lie the challenges to us in this fifty-third year of our existence, the tests which will decide whether we are made of the same stuff as those who made it possible for us to get here, whether we can meet today's pressures on us as those before us met the pressures of their day.

If we look at AA in 1988 in the context of our history, we are made aware that those who came before us built what we now have one block at a time as they tried to carry the message effectively. They have left us with codifications of their shared experiences about dealing with such problems, their pooled information, and their shared conclusions about what worked best, what got us into trouble, and what was plain useless. But they, and Bill who recorded their ex-

periences and conclusions masterfully, saw AA as always being in a state of becoming, never completed. In so many places in his writings, Bill is explicit about their fears that we might become rigid and thereby unable to realistically assess and meet new challenges, about their — and Bill's — firm belief that as long as we were able to think about past solutions only as past solutions, rather than as sacred and binding rules, we would survive and function well. This was one more time our predecessors stressed the importance of willingness to change.

And what has this to do with challenges, communications, and 1988? In my view, the crucial communication challenge is to communicate to those who follow us in AA an historically accurate sense of what AA is and how it works. Gradually our past is becoming distorted and endowed with a halo effect as those who made

our beginnings are no longer around to correct our views of them and of what they did and said. We have the obligation to help those who come into AA after us to understand that AA is an ongoing process, not an end point, so that new members can continue to meet challenges in the spirit of AA — looking at new problems from a wide variety of perspectives, trying out all kinds of solutions (including traditional ones), keeping an open mind to the problems and open ears to each other, and finally choosing the solutions which are best for that particular problem at that particular place and at that particular time. Only with this kind of understanding of our history will AA continue as the vital and effective carrier of the message which it is in 1988.

Over the past fifty-three years, we have gained a great deal of experience in carrying the message. From the outset the most effective passing of

the message was through the words of one alcoholic to another. But almost from the beginning we learned that nonalcoholics could also spread the message and transmit our program. Our history tells of many groups being started by concerned relatives or professionals. The written word has also served us well. The press wrote glowingly about us and thousands upon thousands knocked on our doors. Suffering alcoholics wrote to what is now GSO (the General Service Office) and were told how to find a group, or, if there was no group, were supported in their efforts to form one or to work the program by themselves. The Big Book was often the only source of hope, shared experience, and information about the program. By now the Fellowship has developed an extensive body of literature to serve the still-suffering alcoholic as well as those who seek to reach him and help him. We have

made superb use of new media as they develop — tapes, videos, films, and, lately, computer networking.

You would think we could rest on our laurels. But that is not the AA way. There are still alcoholics out there whom we are not reaching. Why? Sometimes it seems to be due to a language barrier, sometimes it is because we have not yet made it possible for some alcoholics to identify with us. We have created translations and pamphlets to reach them, but there are still others whom we do not reach as effectively as we should. We need to find ways to help more black, Hispanic, Native American, handicapped, aged, and, lately, Russian alcoholics to use our program.

Some of our challenges, however, arise out of our great success. We are sent large numbers of suffering people, in such numbers that they threaten to overwhelm us. Some are alcoholics who want our help; many

are alcoholics who are not ready or willing to come to us; and others have problems other than alcohol. We are faced with communicating to the courts, to treatment centers, and to hospitals what we can and cannot do. We are faced with somehow meeting the needs of those who do not — or do not *yet* — belong to us, who prove disruptive to our meetings and to our ability to help each other as well as those who *do* want what we have to offer.

We have made constructive beginnings. Service committees, armed with workbooks which provide our pooled experiences, are seeking to open up communications, to use tried and true AA methods for resolving misunderstandings, meeting with those who do not understand, trying to hear their problems and work out solutions. We are experimenting with ways of orienting those who are sent to us so that we can serve them and yet continue to serve our own members. We are working on concepts such as bridge sponsorship so that newcomers might come to us one by one instead of en masse.

Some of our experimental solutions, however, tend to close communication down. Some groups have opted out of the challenge and have withdrawn upon themselves. Some have resorted to classifying, judging, making rules. And yet all this does is cut these groups off from hearing and responding to the pain of people who come to them.

One hears that we cannot help non-alcoholic sufferers. Yet this is untrue.

Twelve Step programs in myriad variety have followed our lead and have proved helpful to people with problems other than alcohol. Some AA groups have been hostile to such people. And yet some have heard the pain, understood the search for help, and guided these newcomers to the Twelve Step programs which are right for them.

These are only a few of the challenges to effective communicating we face today. We need to think of more ways and we need to try them out. We need more communicating with each other so that our pooled experiences can yield the best solutions. And it will take every one of us. Thus, there is another major communication problem to be solved. What kind of communicating is necessary to persuade those groups who do not now contribute to the overall search for solutions to join the service structure and do their part? What kind of communicating is necessary to ensure that we will all — each member of AA — be a part of carrying the message to those who have not yet heard it, and of supporting those who are taking their early steps toward recovery?

These are only a few of the challenges of 1988. Our predecessors met the challenges which, in their day, seemed equally overwhelming. Now, to you, the challenge is thrown. Can we continue the process of communication which has come down to us, can we work out solutions in the AA way to the problems we now have? To the problems still to come?