

**“To those now in its fold,
Alcoholics Anonymous has made
the difference between misery and
sobriety, and often the difference
between life and death.**

**A.A. can, of course, mean just as
much to uncounted alcoholics not
yet reached.**

**Therefore, no society of men and
women ever had a more urgent
need for continuous effectiveness
and permanent unity. We
alcoholics see that we must work
together and hang together, else
most of us will finally die alone.”**

**-The A.A. Tradition, Appendix I
p. 561**



On What Slender Threads:

A.A.'s Twelve Traditions from a Historical
Perspective

Disclaimers about this workshop

- The book, *On What Slender Threads: A.A.'s Twelve Traditions from a Historical Perspective* is a study that relies on General Service Office literature and the published research of historians. This workshop provides an overview of that study.
- The inferences in this historical perspective of A.A.'s Twelve Traditions are strictly my own and in no way reflect the opinions of Alcoholics Anonymous
- In keeping with the Eleventh and Twelfth Traditions, I do not use the last names of any alcoholics. “Bill” is used only for Bill W. “Dr. Bob” is used only for Dr. Bob S.

Let's read Tradition 3

The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking

The Long Form: *Our A.A. experience has taught us that: Our membership ought to include all who suffer from alcoholism. Hence we may refuse none who wish to recover. Nor ought A.A. membership ever depend upon money or conformity. Any two or three alcoholics gathered together for sobriety may call themselves an A.A. group, provided that, as a group, they have no other affiliation*

A.A. General Service Office.. 1952. *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*. 1991. New York City: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc., 139, 189

We don't want you
here!

The Fellowship quickly outgrew meetings in homes

First edition in “Bill’s Story” “there are eighty of us and our families. We meet frequently at our different homes, . . .” with 40 to 80 people in attendance.

First edition, Second Printing “there are five hundred of us and our families.” With 50 to 200 persons at their meetings.

No mention of homes!

Third Printing in June 1942 “one thousand of us and our families.”

“An alcoholic in his cups is an unlovely creature. Our struggles with them are variously strenuous, comic, and tragic. One poor chap committed suicide in my home . . . ” (*Alcoholics Anonymous*, 16)

T. Henry and Clarace Williams in Akron – Oxford Group

Dr. Bob confessed his problems with alcohol

Henrietta Seiberling and others prayed and prayed

The rum-hound from New York

Spin off: Akron Squad separated from Oxford Group

“Had 74 Wednesday in my little house, but shall get a hall soon.” (*Dr. Bob and the Good Oldtimers*, 218)

A training program for newcomers

Cleveland may have had the earliest “beginners” meeting in 1941

June 1943 North-West Group of Detroit required prospects to attend four sessions of beginners meetings with the following themes: “(1) Admission (2) Spiritual (3) Restitution and Inventory (4) Working and Message

Back to Basics and Beginners meetings are the best meetings to find newcomers!

A universal and welcoming Fellowship?

Bill painted a rosy picture of A.A.'s open-door policy in (1957) *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age* (p. 102).

“Since that early time literally all kinds of people have found their way into Alcoholics Anonymous. Our inclusiveness is now very broad indeed.”

“That’s how universal A.A. is today.”

Was A.A. a truly universal and welcoming Fellowship?

Bill's essay: First Bill addressed A.A.'s early fears (reasonable) and its membership rules (not so reasonable)

“Keep it simple!” principle

One is about people who are different from the norm.

The other is about people who are unconventional in their beliefs.

Oddly, his answer to the first is an all-encompassing acceptance of people who are different.

While the second story implied conformity to the beliefs of the norm.

The “flying blind” period’s first test case – the atheist

“As he tossed on his bed, his hand brushed the bureau near by, touching a book. Opening the book, he read. It was a Gideon Bible. Ed never confided any more of what he saw and felt in that hotel room. It was the year 1938. He hasn’t had a drink since.” (12&12, 145)

“For a long time the only Higher Power I could concede was the power of the group, but this was far more than I had ever recognized before, and it was at least a beginning. It was also an ending, for never since June 16, 1938, have I had to walk alone.” (*Alcoholics Anonymous*, 229)

“I found myself in the middle of a brand-new group. When I started to tell the boys how we did it in New York and all about the spiritual part of the program, I found they would not believe me unless I was practicing what I preached.” *(Alcoholics Anonymous, 230)*

“Then I found that as I gave in to this spiritual or personality change, I was getting a little more serenity. In telling newcomers how to change their lives and attitudes, all of a sudden I found I was doing a little changing myself.” *(Alcoholics Anonymous, 230)*

The “flying blind” period’s second test case – alcoholic women

Lil in Akron

Remember this is the era of “Rules” in A.A.

Put alcoholic women with the wives!

Women who were “so bad” could not be admitted at all!

Rules had the effect of propelling alcoholics to their deaths.

If alcoholics' wives posed barriers, “the men could be just as bad and often acted in ways that did nothing to alleviate their wives' fears.” (Schaberg, p. 348)

Sylvia K. from Chicago “The Keys of the Kingdom”

“Sylvia was summarily escorted to the train station by several members and she left for the Windy City, much to the relief of Dr. Bob and all of the A.A. wives in Ohio.”
(Schaberg, p. 349)

Sadly, she relapsed on the way back to Chicago. The solution to the “Sylvia” problem could have resulted in her death.

The “sex problem”

It was Dr. Bob’s wife, Anne, who brought him around to accepting women in meetings.

Why not? What difference does it make? They’re just as drunk as the men are.

Florence R., “A Feminine Victory”

“To my lot falls the rather doubtful distinction of being the only ‘lady’ alcoholic in our particular section.”

Did the Fellowship forget “A Vision for You?”

No one is too discredited or has sunk too low to be welcomed cordially—if he means business. Social distinctions, petty rivalries and jealousies—these are laughed out of countenance. Being wrecked in the same vessel, being restored and united under one God, with hearts and minds attuned to the welfare of others, the things which matter so much to some people no longer signify much to them. How could they? (Big Book, 161)

How could they, indeed! Unfortunately, they could and they did.

Bill's frustration with race and the Third Tradition

Bill invited two black alcoholics to a New York area meeting

Would those who protested including the two men in the meeting at least agree that they had a right to A.A. just the same as everyone else?

“that Negroes should be invited to attend open or closed meetings *as visitors* (emphasis added).”

Silent observers . . .

Early 1945 St. Louis and Chicago started the earliest black groups followed closely by Washington, D.C.'s black group founded by Jim S., whose story, “Jim's Story,” is in in the Second, Third, and Fourth Editions of the Big Book. (Heroes of Early Black A.A.)

“Along with you, I feel very deeply about this race business. . .

All men should have an equal opportunity to recover from alcoholism – that is the shining ideal. . . .

But, unhappily, my own experience suggests that it may not be achieved in our lifetimes. . . .”

It falls grievously short of our ideal – but practically speaking, what can be done about it? I don’t know – I’m still looking hard for the answer.” (‘Pass It On,’ 316)

Bill seized every opportunity he could to avoid the ‘silent observer’ option.

“Now,” said Bill, “did you say he was a drunk?”

“Oh yes,” Barry replied. “There’s no question about that. He’s certainly a drunk.”

“Well, I think that’s all we can ask,” said Bill.

The group welcomed the man. Even though they never saw him again,

Barry said this moment in A.A. created a precedent for the Third Tradition.

The “double stigma” – gay and alcoholic

The newcomer with an affliction even more stigmatized than alcoholism!

What would the Master do?

*Could any then imagine a society which would include every conceivable kind of character, and cut across every barrier of race, creed, politics, and language **with ease**? (12 & 12, p. 141)*

1973 and 1974 – Our Conference struggled with the idea of listing Gay meetings in GSO’s World Directory!

A worthy alcoholic?

All people who have a desire to stop drinking are worthy including chronic relapsers, young people, people who drank only a little, homeless, and people with other issues.

Acceptance! Do not judge anyone else's desire to stop drinking!

Not just acceptance! Appreciation for all who enter!

“Our A.A. door stands wide open, and if he passes through it and commences to do anything at all about his problem, he is considered a member of Alcoholics Anonymous. He signs nothing, agrees to nothing, promises nothing. We demand nothing. He joins us on his own say-so.”

“Nowadays, in most groups, he doesn't even have to admit he is an alcoholic. He can join A.A. on the mere suspicion that he may be one, that he may already show the fatal symptoms of our malady.”

A.A. Tradition: How it Developed, 13.

“If a member persists in coming to meetings drunk he may be led outside; we may ask someone to take him away. But in most groups he can come back next day, if sober.”

However, Bill’s most important point of all invokes the “We” part of A.A.’s Traditions: common welfare and A.A. unity:

“We do not wish to deny anyone his chance to recover from alcoholism.”

A.A. Tradition: How it Developed, 13 - 14.

How do you become an A.A. group member?

. . . group membership requires no formal application. Just as we are members of A.A. if we say we are, so are we members of a group if we say we are.

Let it begin with me: acceptance, love, and
tolerance for all who enter

I'll always remember Fred . . .

How are A.A. groups doing today?

Our membership ought to include all who suffer from alcoholism. Hence we may refuse none who wish to recover. Nor ought A.A. membership ever depend upon money or conformity. Any two or three alcoholics gathered together for sobriety may call themselves an A.A. group, provided that, as a group, they have no other affiliation. (12 & 12, 189)

*Is A.A. a society that includes every conceivable kind of character, and cuts across every barrier of race, creed, politics, and language **with ease**? (12 & 12, p. 141)*

Coming up: the Fourth Tradition

When we study the Fourth Tradition, we will learn that Bill was dismayed when he discovered some groups used the autonomy of the group as an excuse to keep struggling alcoholics out.

Quite the opposite, the Fourth Tradition was intended to reach as many alcoholics as possible.

Comments and questions?

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