

1. Greetings

2. I will go quickly through the slide presentation for the Tradition starting with a summary of Bill's essay (from the 12 & 12). Don't worry... if I go too fast, it will be available on my website at www.onwhatslenderthreads.com. My objective will be to hit the highpoints, so that we have plenty of time for discussion.

3. Discussions and questions. Everyone is invited to share anything that they have learned about that Tradition. I get so much knowledge from participants!

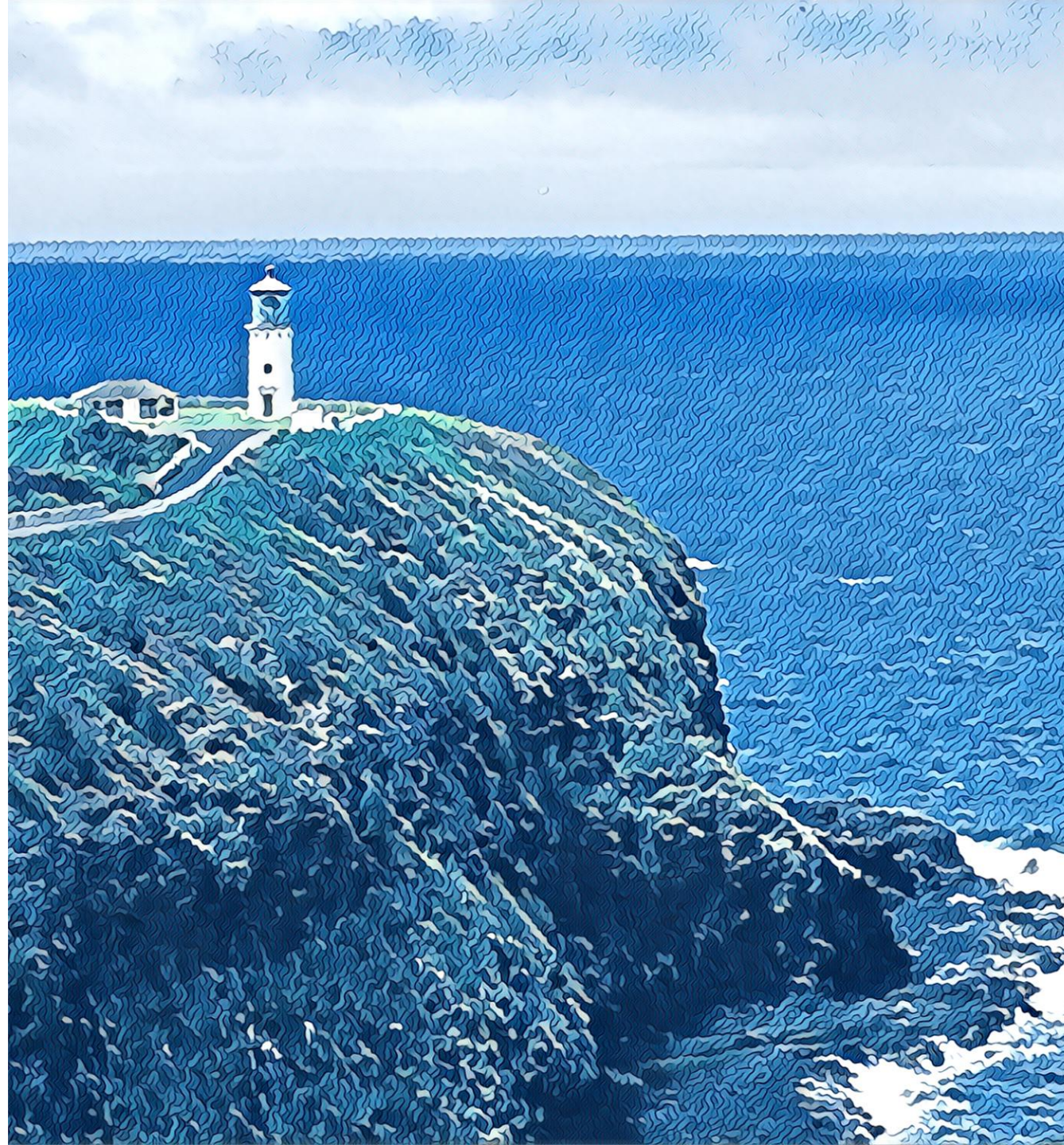
Disclaimers about this workshop

- *On What Slender Threads: A.A.'s Twelve Traditions from a Historical Perspective*. No need to purchase the book.
- Audios and slides are posted on www.onwhatslenderthreads.com under “Workshop Resources”
- Made possible by General Service Office literature, published research of historians, and wonderful friends in A.A. world-wide.
- Any inferences in this study are strictly my own and in no way reflect the opinion of Alcoholics Anonymous
- In keeping with the Eleventh and Twelfth Traditions, I try to avoid using the last names of any alcoholics including Bill W. and Dr. Bob.

We may not need a General Service Conference to ensure our own recovery. We do need it to ensure the recovery of the alcoholic who still stumbles in the darkness one short block from this room. We need it to ensure the recovery of a child being born tonight, destined for alcoholism. We need it to provide, in keeping with our Twelfth Step, a permanent haven for all alcoholics who, in the ages ahead, can find in A.A. that rebirth that brought us back to life.

Bernard B. Smith, 1954

The A.A. Service Manual, p. 40



Tradition 1

Our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends upon A.A. unity.

The Long Form: *Our A.A. experience has taught us that:*

Each member of Alcoholics Anonymous is but a small part of a great whole. A.A. must continue to live or most of us will surely die. Hence our common welfare comes first. But individual welfare follows close afterward.

Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions., 129, 189

Tradition 1 – Bill’s Essay pp. 129 - 131

The unity of Alcoholics Anonymous is the most cherished quality our **Society** has.

We stay whole or **A.A.** dies.

The heart of A.A. would cease to beat; **our world arteries would no longer carry** the life-giving grace of God; His gift to us would be spent aimlessly.

. . . surely there is none which more jealously guards the individual’s right to think, talk, and act as he wishes. . . .

Our Twelve Steps to recovery are suggestions; the Twelve Traditions which guarantee A.A.’s unity contain not a single “Don’t.” **They repeatedly say “We ought. . .” but never “You must!”**

To **many minds** all this liberty for the individual spells **sheer anarchy**.

Tradition 1 – Bill’s Essay pp. 129 - 131

How can such a crowd of anarchists function at all?

How can they possibly place their **common welfare** first?

What in Heaven’s name **holds them together**?

. . . key to this strange **paradox**. The A.A. member has to conform to **principles of recovery**. His life depends upon obedience to spiritual principles.

Moreover, he finds **he cannot keep this priceless gift unless he gives it away**. Neither he nor anybody else can survive unless he carries the A.A. message.

The moment this Twelfth Step work forms a group, another discovery is made—that most individuals cannot recover unless there *is* a group.

He is but a small part of a great whole

That no personal sacrifice is too great for the preservation of the Fellowship.

The clamor of desires and ambitions within him must be silenced whenever these could damage the group.

Tradition 1 – Bill’s Essay pp. 129 – 131

So at the outset, how best to **live and work together as groups** became the prime question.

As we had once struggled and prayed for individual recovery, just so earnestly did we commence to quest for **the principles through which A.A. itself might survive.**

On the anvils of experience, the structure of our Society was hammered out.

Eddie Rickenbacker and company . . . Each needed to **consider the others**, and in abiding faith they knew they must find, in measure to **transcend all the defects of their frail craft**, every test of **uncertainty, pain, fear, and despair, and even the death of one.**

Thus has it been with A.A. By **faith and by works** we have been able to build upon the lessons of an incredible experience.

They live today in the Twelve Traditions of Alcoholics Anonymous, . . .

Unity? What unity?

How could A.A. survive the *Test of Time*?

“Code of Conduct” that would outlive its founders

Complete agreement by all to abide by that code

A.A.’s “code of conduct,” the Traditions, have been instrumental to the Fellowship’s survival

Even without *all* A.A. members’ compliance and

Without *complete* agreement to its principles.

So far.

October 1949 Grapevine article - 80,000 A.A. members

“ . . . we may if we are worthy, surely expect an equal unity for A.A. as a whole.” (*The Language of the Heart*, 116)

Bill's expectation for unity was at best aspirational given the chaos of A.A.'s early and adolescent years.

But what was Bill's idea of unity?

The first attempts for unity: group consciences

Late 1937, Bill sought the Akron squad's support to find better ways to spread the message of recovery

A heated discussion and a vote resulted in support
Albeit half-hearted

April 1938, Bill presents his case to the squad for a book
No vote called because he knew he would lose
But sometimes the group can be wrong

May 1938, Bill starts writing

A glaring lack of unity in the recovery program

Depending on who was carrying the message, there were multiple variations that could be summarized with three steps:

1. Admit you're licked.
2. Surrender your life to God
3. Act accordingly (i.e. pray, meditate, help others)

(Schaberg, 457)

Amidst chaos and disappointment and without unity, Bill writes “How It Works”

Bill, Hank, and Fitz are scrambling to raise money

Trustees on the Alcoholic Foundation (managers of the Rockefeller donation) aren't looking for more outside funding

An act of desperation - the stock idea, but no one was buying

It is November 1938, and still, Bill hasn't articulated the recovery program

Then came yet another heartbreak – Ebby T. relapsed again

Still no unity once the program is in writing

≈ none of the recovered alcoholics of that day had worked the *Twelve Steps* of Alcoholics Anonymous.

April 10, 1939; Cornwall Press printed 4,650 books

If there was very little unity before, the near-completion of the book left a wake of dissension and disagreement.

Bill D. (alcoholic number 3) and Earl T. (the cofounder of the Chicago groups)

A slow and discouraging start selling the Big Book

May 1939; Bill and Lois must move out of her childhood home

August – September 1939; Hank P. relapsed

Bill had less than five years and the first few months after printing the Big Book were miserable

When the tide changed, it was a tsunami

Late 1939 into 1940, a series of publications helped get the word out (*Liberty* magazine and *Cleveland Plain Dealer* articles)

80-ish members in four years to

2000-ish members in two years!

Hard drinkers were getting sober but no sudden spiritual upheaval
Appendix on the Spiritual Experience

Eight months later, 8000-ish members! (Jack Alexander)

A real Niagara [Falls] then broke loose, and we were deluged with letters and with alcoholics by the thousands.

This sudden growth ushered in a period of awful uncertainty. The big test of A.A.'s unity began in earnest. (*Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age.*, 87)

Was there A.A. unity? Not really. Not yet.

From counting members to counting groups

Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age

Mort J. – How it worked

Los Angeles – A.A. missionaries fail miserably

Boston – Founders can't stay sober (but can still help)

By 1944, Bill had contended with 10,000 alcoholics many of whom were in 360 groups, most of whom knew far better than he how A.A. groups should operate. (*Pass It On*, 304)

Their worries and problems seemed endless.
Committees quarreled,
new clubs had unheard of headaches,
orators held forth,
groups split wide open.
Some members turned professional, selling A.A.
therapy for money to new prospects.
Sometimes whole groups got drunk, and
local public relations went haywire.

Such was the beginning of a truly frightening
experience that lasted a long time.

(Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age, 192 – 193)

“Leaders” were (are?) a barrier to unity in the Fellowship

The “big test of A.A.’s unity” was challenging because recovered alcoholics who had started groups had their own ideas of what the program of recovery should be.

Like all books, the Big Book was subject to interpretation.

The interpretation that prevailed was usually delivered and reinforced by the person who started the group.

For example, Clarence S. and Ray W.

Leaders –

Pride and fear and anger – these are the prime enemies of our common welfare. (*Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, 98)

Relapses

Out of bounds romance

“the desires for power, for domination, for glory, and for money.”

The idea of unity would not come quickly to the Fellowship

So under these conditions, how could (and how can) A.A. survive the *Test of Time*?

Thankfully, Bill did not hesitate to take on the impossible dream of A.A.'s unity and common welfare.

In the April 1946 issue of Grapevine Magazine, Bill began the series on *The Twelve Points to Assure Our Future*, which he said were

“codified into a set of principles [that] could offer tested solutions to all our problems of living and working together and of relating our society to the world outside.” (*Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, 203)

With hundreds of groups already functioning, Bill anticipated the need for selling the *Points* to the Fellowship.

Conference of representatives from A.A. groups – his anchor for A.A. unity.

The reception by the existing groups was at best disinterest, if not outright rejection.

Established groups would take longer to recognize the value of the *Points* for solving their problems.

Bill had hoped the *Points* would serve as a study guide to help groups pass the “big test of A.A.’s unity.”

For almost five years after Bill penned the Twelve Points, the Fellowship and the Trustees would struggle with the Conference’s potential to serve as A.A.’s measure of Unity.

After that, the Fellowship would need over 10 years to be willing to take full responsibility for Alcoholics Anonymous. We will explore this rocky journey as we discuss the rest of the Traditions.

First Tradition Essay: Unity and Common Welfare – How it works!

“

Bill’s reminder in the First Tradition essay: “So at the outset, how best to live and work together as *groups* became the prime question.” *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, 130.

How does it work in Bill's essay?

Bill did not say “as a group” but “as *groups*.”

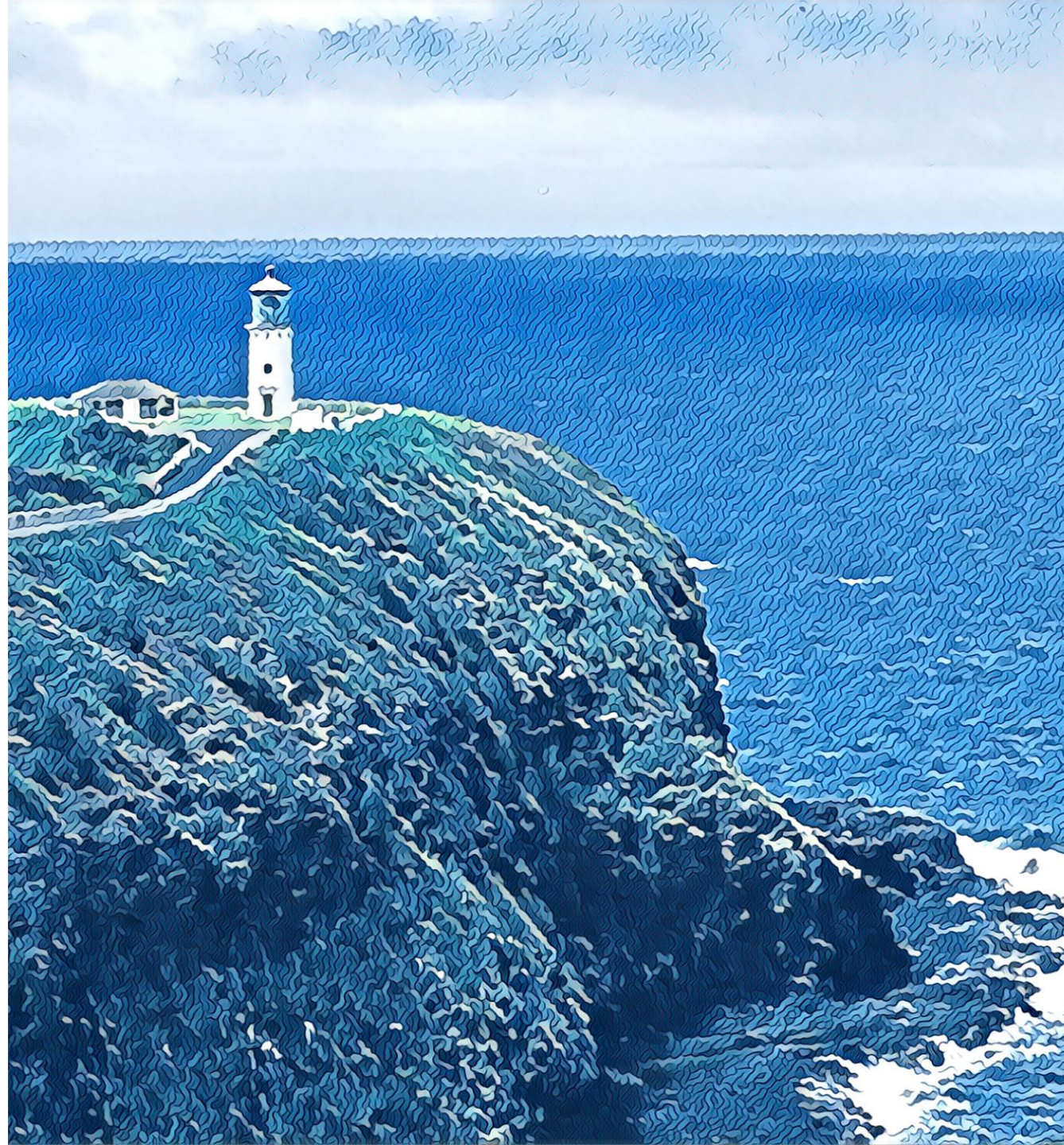
Working the First Tradition includes a commitment to be part of general service for all AA groups - *worldwide*.

Groups participate by having an active General Service Representative.

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In order to have any hope for Unity, we have to be able to solve our problems together. How is that possible with self-serving alcoholics?

Coming up next week: the Second Tradition

Comments and questions?

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