

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.

What have we accomplished?

I don't know!

I would love to know what people have “learned” from this experience, even if you haven't attended regularly.

Using the adage, “Take what you want and leave the rest,” what do you take from this experience and what do you think should be left behind?

The Twelfth Tradition can be compared to A.A.'s Twelfth Step: Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these Traditions, A.A. Groups try to carry their message and they practice the principles of the Steps and Traditions in all their affairs. This is the application of “principles before personalities.”

Moved by the spirit of anonymity, we try to give up our natural desires for personal distinction as A.A. members both among fellow alcoholics and before the general public. As we lay aside these very human aspirations, we believe that each of us takes part in the weaving of a protective mantle which covers our whole Society and under which we may grow and work in unity.

We are sure that humility, expressed by anonymity, is the greatest safeguard that Alcoholics Anonymous can ever have.

12 & 12, pp. 190 - 191



Tradition 12

Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our traditions, ever reminding us to place principles before personalities.

The Original Point (Long Form): *Our A.A. experience has taught us that:*

And finally, we of Alcoholics Anonymous believe that the principle of anonymity has an immense spiritual significance. It reminds us that we are to place principles before personalities; that we are actually to practice a genuine humility. This to the end that our great blessings may never spoil us; that we shall forever live in thankful contemplation of Him who presides over us all.

(Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions, 184, 192)

Tradition 12 – Bill’s Essay pp. 187 – 191

The spiritual substance of anonymity is sacrifice.

...the **sacrificial spirit**—well symbolized by **anonymity**— is the **foundation** of [the Traditions].

But in the beginning, **anonymity was** not born of confidence; it was the **child of our early fears**.

As the A.A. groups multiplied, so did anonymity problems.

Enthusiastic over the spectacular recovery of a brother alcoholic, we’d sometimes discuss those intimate and harrowing **aspects of his case meant for his sponsor’s ear alone**.

Tradition 12 – Bill’s Essay pp. 187 – 191

When such stories got into circulation outside of A.A., the **loss of confidence in our anonymity promise** was severe. **It frequently turned people from us.**

With characteristic intemperance, however, some of our newcomers cared not at all for secrecy. **They had changed from A.A. members into A.A. show-offs.**

This phenomenon of contrast really set us thinking. Squarely before us was the question **“How anonymous should an A.A. member be?”**

Our growth made it plain that **we couldn’t be a secret society**, but it was equally plain that we **couldn’t be a vaudeville circuit**, either.

The charting of a safe path between these extremes took a long time.

Tradition 12 – Bill’s Essay pp. 187 – 191

...the average newcomer wanted his family to know immediately what he was trying to do.

...wanted to tell others who had tried to help him

...felt it right to explain his new way of life to his employer and business associates.

When opportunities to be helpful came along, he found he could talk easily about A.A. to almost anyone.

These **quiet disclosures** helped him to lose his fear of the alcoholic stigma, and spread the news of A.A.’s existence in his community.

Though not in the strict letter of anonymity, such communications were well within its spirit.

But it became apparent that the word-of-mouth method was too limited. Our work, as such, needed to be publicized.

Tradition 12 – Bill’s Essay pp. 187 – 191

...many groups began to hold **meetings which were open** to interested friends and the public, ...

...groups began to receive requests for A.A. speakers to appear before civic organizations, church groups, and medical societies. **Provided anonymity was maintained on these platforms, and reporters present were cautioned against the use of names or pictures, the result was fine.**

Then came our **first few excursions into major publicity**, which were breathtaking. Cleveland’s *Plain Dealer* articles....Mr. Rockefeller’s dinner....*Saturday Evening Post* piece.

As this tide offering top public approval swept in, we realized that it could do us **incalculable good or great harm.**

Tradition 12 – Bill’s Essay pp. 187 – 191

We simply couldn’t afford to take the chance of letting **self-appointed members** present themselves as messiahs representing A.A. before the whole public.

At this altitude (press, radio, films, and television), anonymity—**100 percent anonymity—was the only possible answer.**

Here principles would have to come before personalities, without exception.

These experiences taught us that **anonymity is real humility** at work.

Tradition 12 – Bill’s Essay pp. 187 – 191

Moved by the spirit of anonymity, we try to give up our natural desires for personal distinction as A.A. members both among fellow alcoholics and before the general public.

We are sure that humility, expressed by anonymity, is the greatest safeguard that Alcoholics Anonymous can ever have.

Equality, vulnerability,
and freedom in the
spiritual principle of
anonymity

Appropriate and inappropriate anonymity breaks

The Original Form of the Eleventh Tradition “Our names and pictures as A.A. members ought not be broadcast, filmed, or publicly printed.”

The Original Form of the Twelfth Tradition “We are to place principles before personalities; that we are actually to practice a genuine humility.”

Bill clearly defined “inappropriate” anonymity breaks in the Eleventh Tradition. So what are “appropriate” anonymity breaks?

In the January 1955 *Grapevine*, “Nor is there any special danger when we speak at group or semi-public AA meetings, provided press reports reveal first names only. (*Language of the Heart*, 216)

The A.A. Group pamphlet indicates that *at the group level*, it is appropriate for members to use their last names as long as they respect others' anonymity according to their own wishes. (p. 9)

Implicit in this suggestion, is the need for members to inventory their practices on anonymity with their group ideally through an *informed* group conscience.

- Study the Traditions with the group.

- Include related General Service Office literature

- Add historical background

While the practice of anonymity is up to each individual, this particular group inventory provides an opportunity for A.A. members to be better *informed* before making any decisions about their personal anonymity.

Anonymity is frequently associated with the oft-heard mantra in meetings,

“Who you see here, what you hear here, let it stay here.”

While this is certainly vital, the principle of anonymity has a spiritual depth that only surfaced after A.A.’s early days.

Today’s A.A. members are fortunate to be able to draw on the experience of the early Fellowship.

Spiritual principles were not foremost in early A.A. members’ minds when guarding their anonymity.



The origin of the name Alcoholics Anonymous

Early A.A.'s were not enthusiastic about the evangelistic, thus non-anonymous, practices encouraged by their Oxford Group guides.

Active alcoholics were indifferent to, if not resentful of, religious pressure and sober alcoholics were not eager to declare their alcoholism publicly.

By necessity, the principles of *attraction and anonymity* were a solution for both the A.A. member and the prospect. (Kurtz, 51)

Pinning down the origin of the name “Alcoholics Anonymous” was difficult requiring researchers to sift through faulty recollections and A.A. lore.

Bill couldn't remember who had suggested “Alcoholics Anonymous,” which at the very least ruled him out as the one who coined the name.

Jim B. had attributed the name to a man named Joe W. However, Joe W. didn't join the Fellowship until later in December 1938, well after the name was already in use. (Schaberg, 172)

Schaberg's research revealed that around June of 1938, while Bill was working on his first draft of "There is a Solution," Hank P. wrote a mock title page for the book.

On Hank's hand-written page are the first use of the words "Alcoholics Anonymous" with notes that the name would also apply to the Fellowship and the foundation that would be publishing that book. (Schaberg, 172)

One can surely surmise that Bill, Hank, and others had previously batted the name around informally, but Hank at least was the first to put "Alcoholics Anonymous" on paper.

Debate on the name of “the book” continued into early 1939.

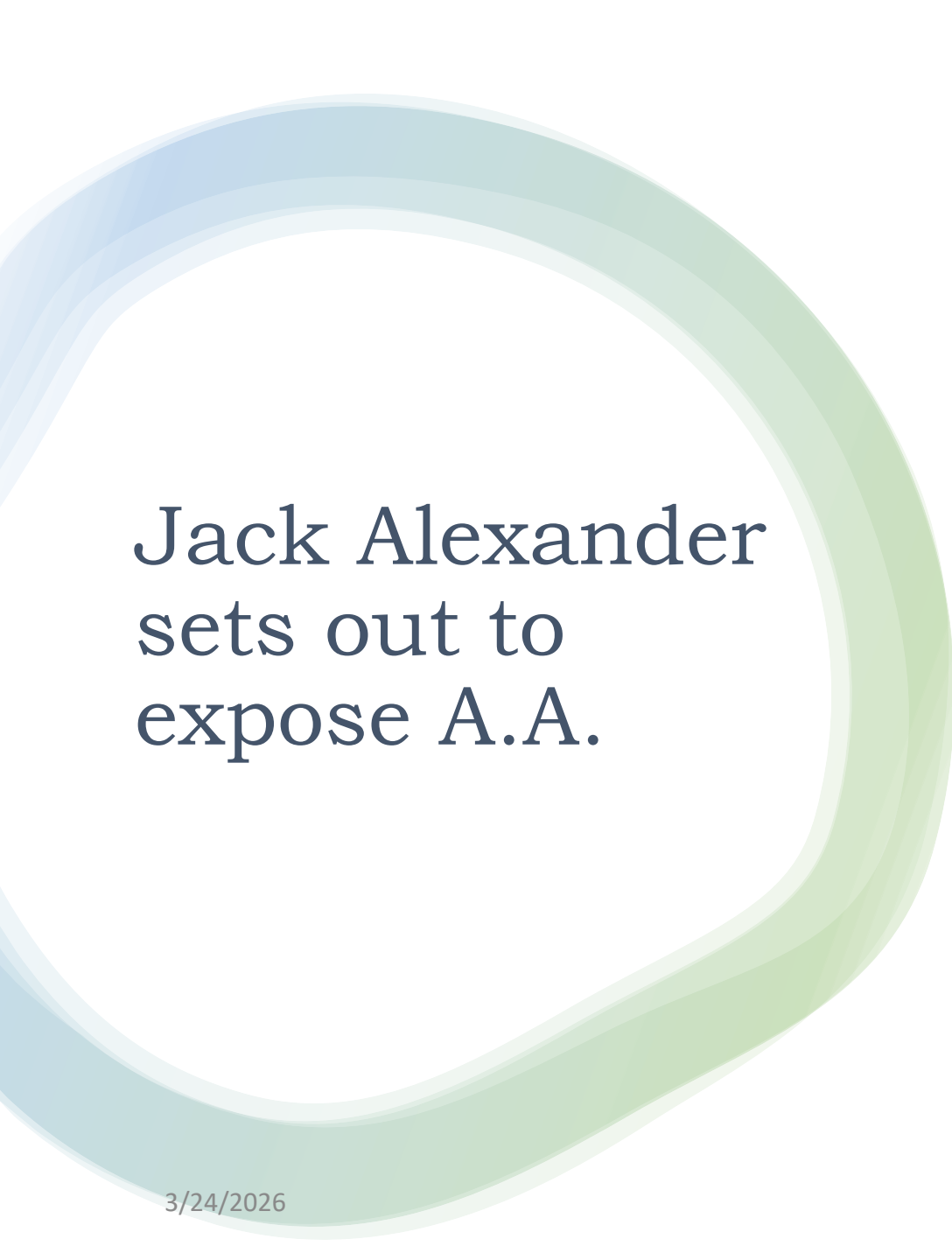
Fitz M. researched titles at the Library of Congress which eliminated other titles including *The Way Out*

On the other hand, there were no books entitled *Alcoholics Anonymous*.

The debate was over. (Schaberg, 531-532)

As beautifully stated in *Pass It On* (p. 307) , in light of A.A.'s history and in the title of the Big Book, the term

“Alcoholics Anonymous” had always referred to the members, never to the message



Jack Alexander sets out to expose A.A.

Judge Curtis Bok recruited Jack Alexander

The curious and suspicious reporter went to Philadelphia

Jack went to New York to meet the leader of the cult

Given his reputation for ferreting out frauds, Alexander was surprised that Bill warmly welcomed him.

Bill “struck Alexander as either incredibly naïve or a bit stupid.” (Kurtz, 101)

Bill readily admitted his problems with alcohol and ongoing struggles with grandiosity.

He admitted the group welcomed publicity

Bill minimized his role and drew attention toward other members of the Fellowship.

Glowing overview of A.A. in the March 1, 1941 issue of the *Saturday Evening Post*.

Increase in the Fellowship from 2000 to 8000 members in eight months.

Alcoholics Anonymous became a household name.

Alexander remained close friends with Bill for the rest of his life.

The cynical journalist eventually became one of A.A.'s Trustees.

Jack Alexander and Bill's long friendship bears out the rewards of attraction.

From that relationship, the principle of anonymity, still in the embryonic stage, started to evolve.

However, without well-articulated guidelines on anonymity, it was painfully slow to mature.

Undoing damage already done

Rollie H. broke his anonymity about a year before the Jack Alexander article

Marty M.'s anonymity breaks

Headquarters and the Trustees were in the unenviable position of having to reverse this tide of departures from A.A.'s principles.

Out of the ashes of multiple missteps grew an understanding of *attraction and anonymity*.

To illustrate that era, Bill included a simple and elegant story in *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*.

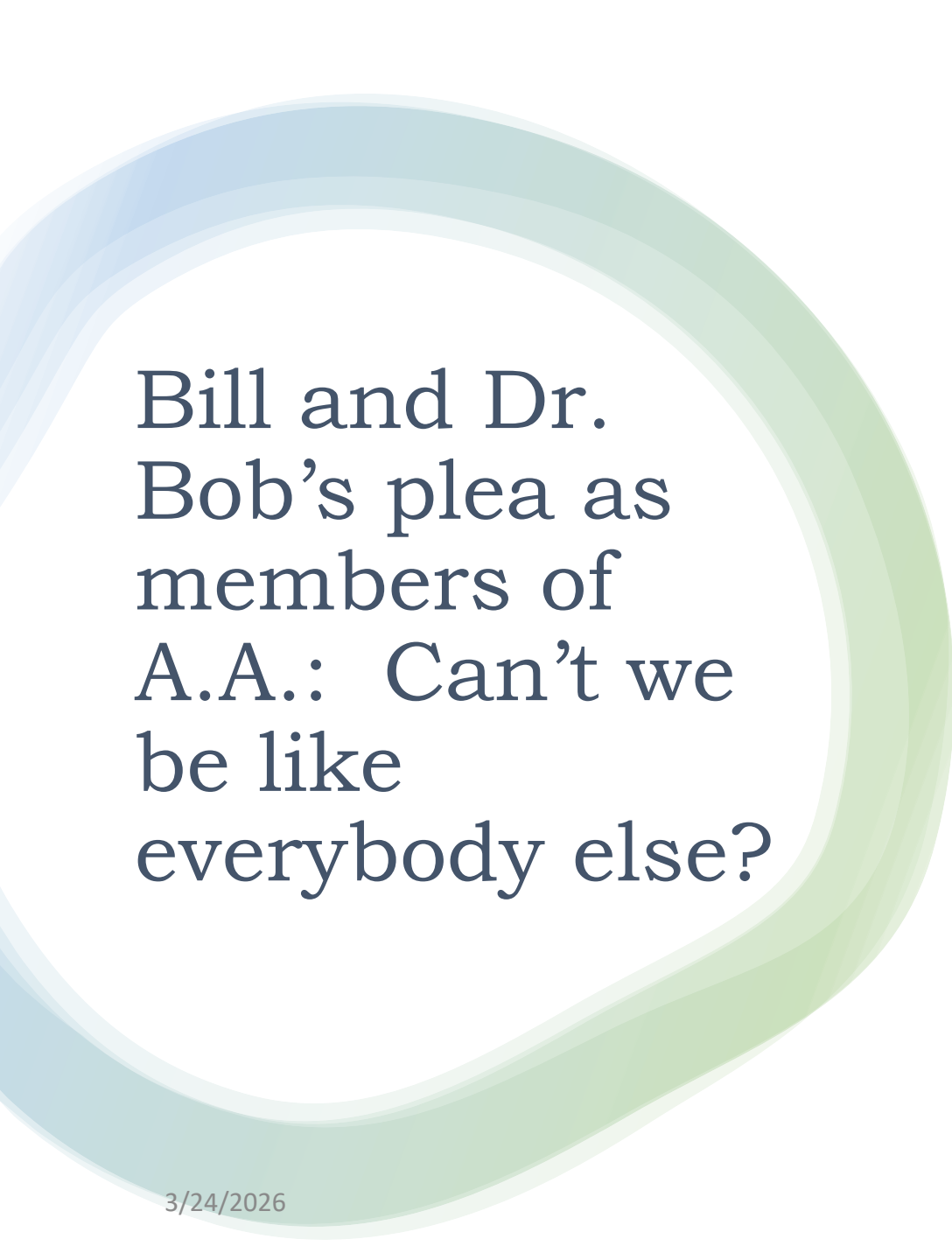
A.A. is no one's song and dance routine

Alcoholics Anonymous has a principle called anonymity—no public big shots allowed.

We know that A.A. can't be run like show business, no matter what the short-term benefits may be.

A.A. saved my life and my career. Therefore, the future welfare of Alcoholics Anonymous is more important to me than any publicity that I could get as an A.A. member. *(Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age, 135)*

You know, Bill, I often see drunks in my audience and wonder how I can help them. If only I could tell them from the stage that I am in A.A. But that would only be temporary, wouldn't it? In the long run, we'd all be ruined if everybody did it. *(Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age, 135)*



Bill and Dr.
Bob's plea as
members of
A.A.: Can't we
be like
everybody else?

Dr. Bob and I are now going to confess a deep yearning. As private citizens of AA, we shall often wish to come and go among you like other people, without any special attention. And while we would like always to keep the wonderful satisfaction of having been among the originators, we hope you will begin to *think of us as early AAs only, not as "founders (emphasis added)."*

So, can't we join AA, too? (*Language of the Heart*, 111)

Given their unprecedented roles in A.A.'s origins, there was no doubt about the extraordinarily visible profiles of Bill and Dr. Bob.

Most A.A.s knew Bill and Dr. Bob's last names, what they looked like, and where they lived.

Regardless, both men had one other request made in the spirit of anonymity.

And the request was made in Bill's usual self-effacing way.

After we're gone, can't we be like everybody else?

Dr. Bob was essentially a far more humble person than I. In some ways he was a sort of spiritual “natural,” and this anonymity business came rather easily to him. He could not understand why some people should want so much publicity. In the years before he died, his personal example respecting anonymity did much to help me keep my own lid on.

Dr. Bob grinned broadly and said, “God bless ‘em. They mean well. But for heaven’s sake, Bill, let’s you and I get buried just like other folks.

(Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age, 136)

Grateful A.A.s from around the world leave their sobriety tokens and other items at the sites.

It is the only evidence that shows that these two men and their wives were a pivotal part of the movement that changed the world for suffering alcoholics.

The staff and volunteers at the General Service Office try never to use Bill and Dr. Bob's last names.

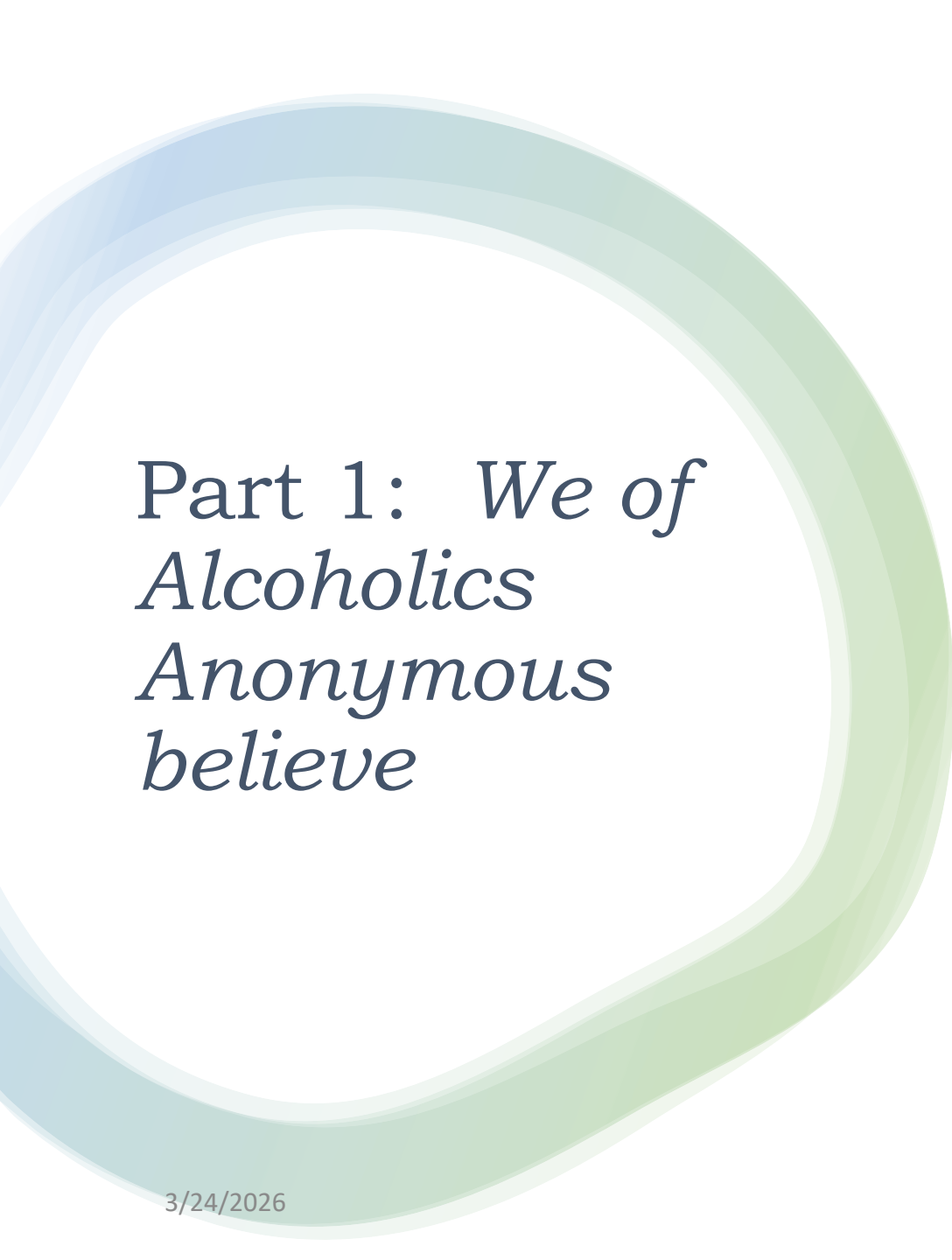
Perhaps, in their honor and according to their wishes, A.A. members should do the same.

The Original Form of Tradition Twelve: In Seven Parts

The Original Forms of Tradition Two and Tradition Twelve call for a reflective intention to practice their principles.

The seven phrases in the Original Form of the Twelfth Tradition contain my own reflections and, of course, include some of Bill's writings.

Pursue this or a similar exercise of your own creation. One can easily meditate on the Original Form alone, but it is far more rewarding with another person or a group.



Part 1: *We of
Alcoholics
Anonymous
believe*

In *How It Works*, “Here are the steps ***we*** took, which are suggested as a program of recovery.”

In the *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, the Third Step ends with:

God, grant *me* the serenity to accept the things *I* cannot change, courage to change the things *I* can, and wisdom to know the difference.

While the Twelfth Step ends with:

God, grant *us* the serenity to accept the things *we* cannot change, courage to change the things *we* can, and wisdom to know the difference.

Whether intentional or not, it is sublime that Bill ended his essays on the Steps with the “*We*” form of the Serenity Prayer and began the Traditions with “*our common welfare*” and “*Unity.*”

Such is the spirit of the Original Form of the Twelfth Tradition, when it says

“**We** of Alcoholics Anonymous believe....”

That does not mean A.A. members agree on how to practice anonymity.

January 1946 *Grapevine*, *A Tradition Born of Our Anonymity*.

“Extremely sensitive” about anonymity

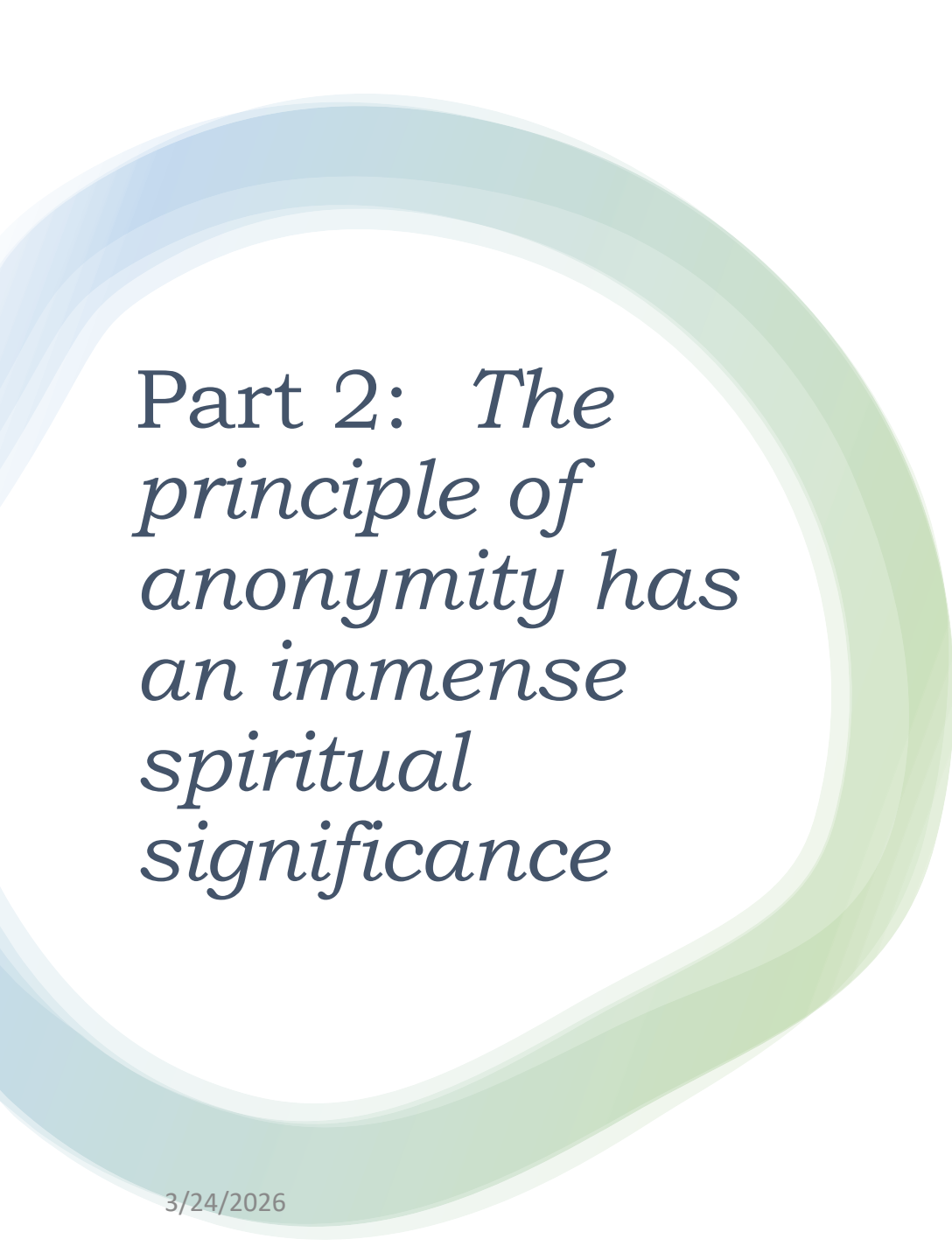
“Declares that anonymity is a lot of childish nonsense.”

“In between these extremes, the shades of opinion are legion.” (Language of the Heart, 14)

Each individual will then have to decide where he ought to draw the line – how far he ought to carry the principle in his own affairs, how far he may go in dropping his own anonymity *without injury to Alcoholics Anonymous as a whole* (emphasis added). (*Language of the Heart*, 15)

“Injury to Alcoholics Anonymous as a whole” reflects the practice of the First Tradition.

A.A. members learn that the clamor of desires and ambitions within must be silenced whenever these could damage the group.

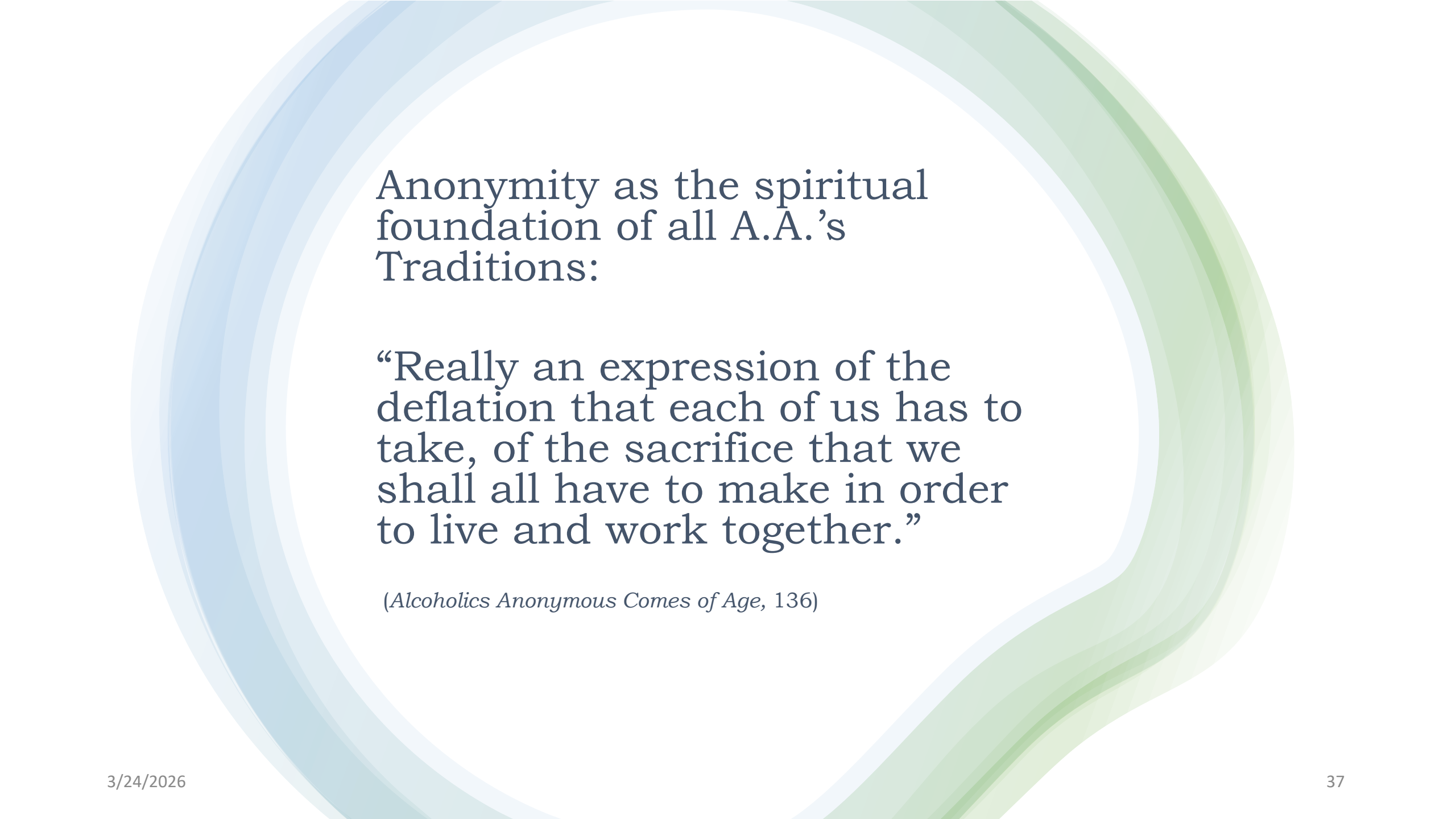


Part 2: *The principle of anonymity has an immense spiritual significance*

Bill repeatedly referred ***to sacrifice as the spiritual substance of anonymity.***
(*Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, 132)

Each Tradition echoes the need for setting aside individual desires for the common good.

Thus, reflecting on each Tradition in ***the context of self-sacrifice*** is of itself a good exercise for groups and individual members of A.A.



Anonymity as the spiritual
foundation of all A.A.'s
Traditions:

“Really an expression of the
deflation that each of us has to
take, of the sacrifice that we
shall all have to make in order
to live and work together.”

(Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age, 136)

Part 3: *We are
to place
principles before
personalities*

Early A.A.'s quickly learned that there was (and is) a causal relationship between receiving public adulation and reinflation of the ego.

Professional athletes, television and film celebrities, artists, business leaders, and more - Some sing the praises of A.A. while others are less than complimentary.

All in all, pronouncements such as these are probably no worse or no better than any that have occurred since A.A.'s early years.

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It is up to each individual to decide “where to draw the line.”

When something like this happens, maybe the person hasn't the slightest idea that they are busting the best protective gadget our Fellowship will ever have. As to the immense spiritual implications of anonymity, maybe they just don't know.” (*Pass It On,* 309)

Maybe it begins with practicing principles before personalities.

A.A. members frequently apply “principles before personalities” to other program/work/family scenarios, which certainly is all to the good.

While useful in other aspects of sober living, **principles before personalities** is rooted in the spiritual practice of anonymity.

Personality definitely trumps principle when an A.A. breaks another member’s anonymity.

Whether the breach involves a celebrity or a non-celebrity, the principle of anonymity requires the practice of restraint.

For two or three years I guess I was A.A.'s number one anonymity breaker. . . . What a bang it gave me when I read those two-column spreads about 'Bill the Broker,' full name and picture, the guy who was saving drunks by the thousands! (*Pass It On*, 237)

Bill never hesitated to portray himself as the errant child when he thought it would serve to underscore a principle.

According to *Pass It On*, Bill tried to “illustrate how baser human emotions such as competitiveness and envy can be disguised as motives of altruism and desire for the highest good.” (*Pass It On*, 238)

Early on, Bill had realized that the limelight – something that most A.A. members, himself included, craved – was an experience that most had little tolerance for.

To lose one's bid for the limelight could be as disastrous as to win it. . . .

It was much better, then, to rely on principles and ideas, which were constant, stable, and dependable, than on the unstable and quixotic ups and downs of personal relationships.

(Pass It On, 307)

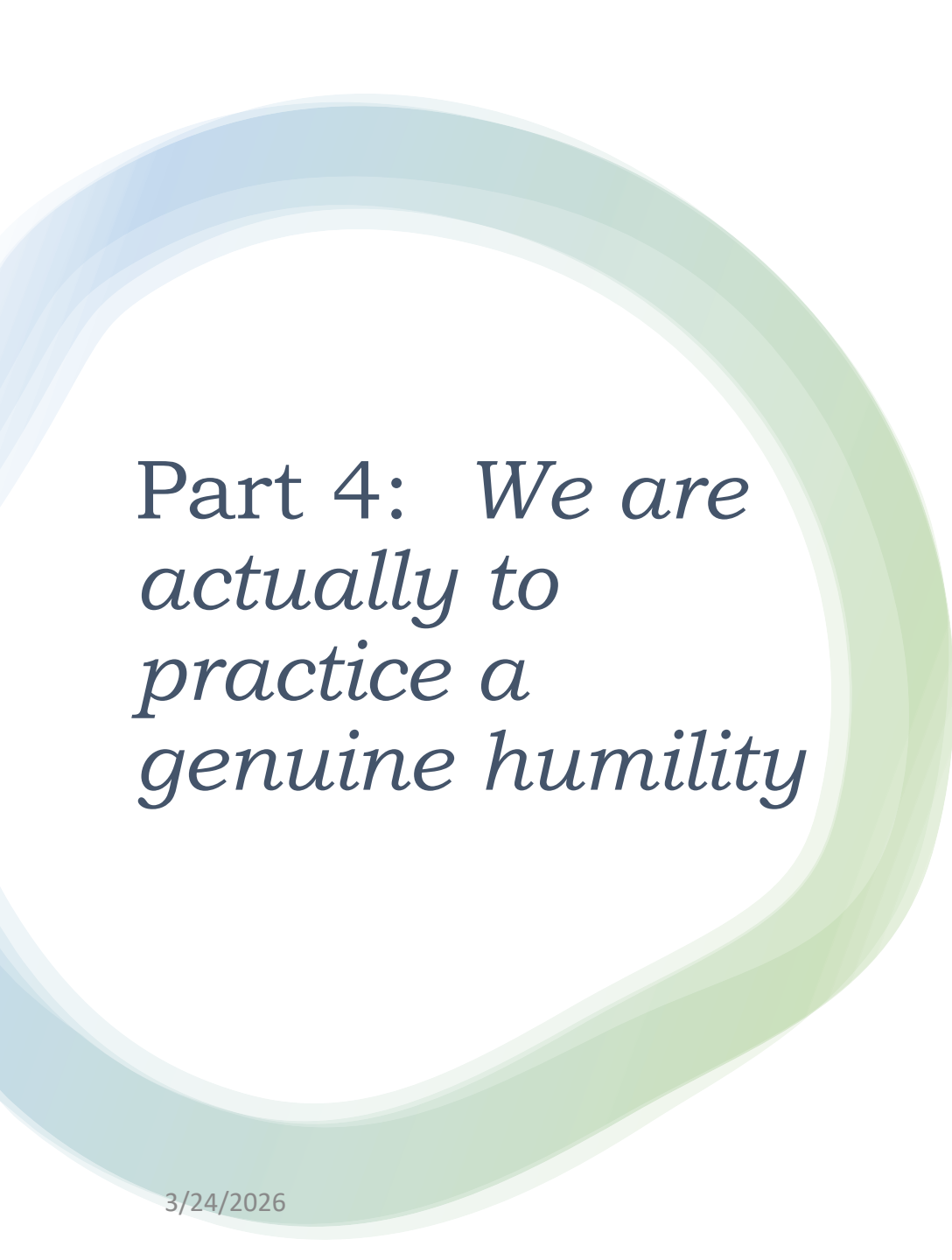
Bill's Tradition Twelve essay makes it very simple.

If we choose, we might explain our new way of life to our employer, friends, etc.

When we have an opportunity to be helpful, we might disclose that we are in A.A. to almost anyone(!!!)

Bill called these **quiet disclosures!**

...we try to give up our natural desires for **personal distinction** as A.A. members both among fellow alcoholics and before the general public.



Part 4: *We are actually to practice a genuine humility*

Bill turned down Yale's honorary Doctorate of Laws in 1954

Bill explained why he had to deny “an opportunity of this dimension” indicating the Traditions were the Fellowship's only means of self-government and, thus, essential to A.A.'s survival. (*Pass It On*, 311)

When receiving “awards,” A.A.'s compromise the principles of sacrifice and service freely given and in turn jeopardize their own recovery.

Though I survived that grim misadventure, I well understand that the dread neurotic germ of the power contagion has survived in me also.

It is only dormant, and it can again multiply and rend me – and A.A., too.


Tens of thousands of my fellow A.A.'s are temperamentally just like me. Fortunately, they know it, and I know it.

(Pass It On, 312-313)

The Yale committee members were so moved by Bill's heartfelt letter, that their response included the following:

After hearing your magnificent letter, [the committee members] all wish more than ever they could award you the degree – though it probably in our opinion isn't half good enough for you


(Pass It On, 313 -314)



Part 5: *That our
great blessings
may never spoil
us*

Bill made four points on anonymity reminds members to enjoy their blessings but to never forget what it was like.

- Bill's first point is the blessing of empathy toward newcomers and their families through anonymity.
- Bill's second point is that A.A. members are gifted with learning to be trusted servants, not leaders.
- Bill's third point is that A.A. members are blessed with anonymity as a principle of sincerity and service that wins the respect of the press, ergo the respect of the public.
- Bill's last point speaks to the gifts A.A. members share with everyone when practicing these principles as a way of life.



Part 6: *That we shall forever live in thankful contemplation*

The 1950 International Convention in Cleveland:

On Sunday morning – the last day of the Convention – I found those Twelve Traditions still on my mind. Each of them I saw is an exercise in humility that can guard us in everyday A.A. affairs and protect us from ourselves.

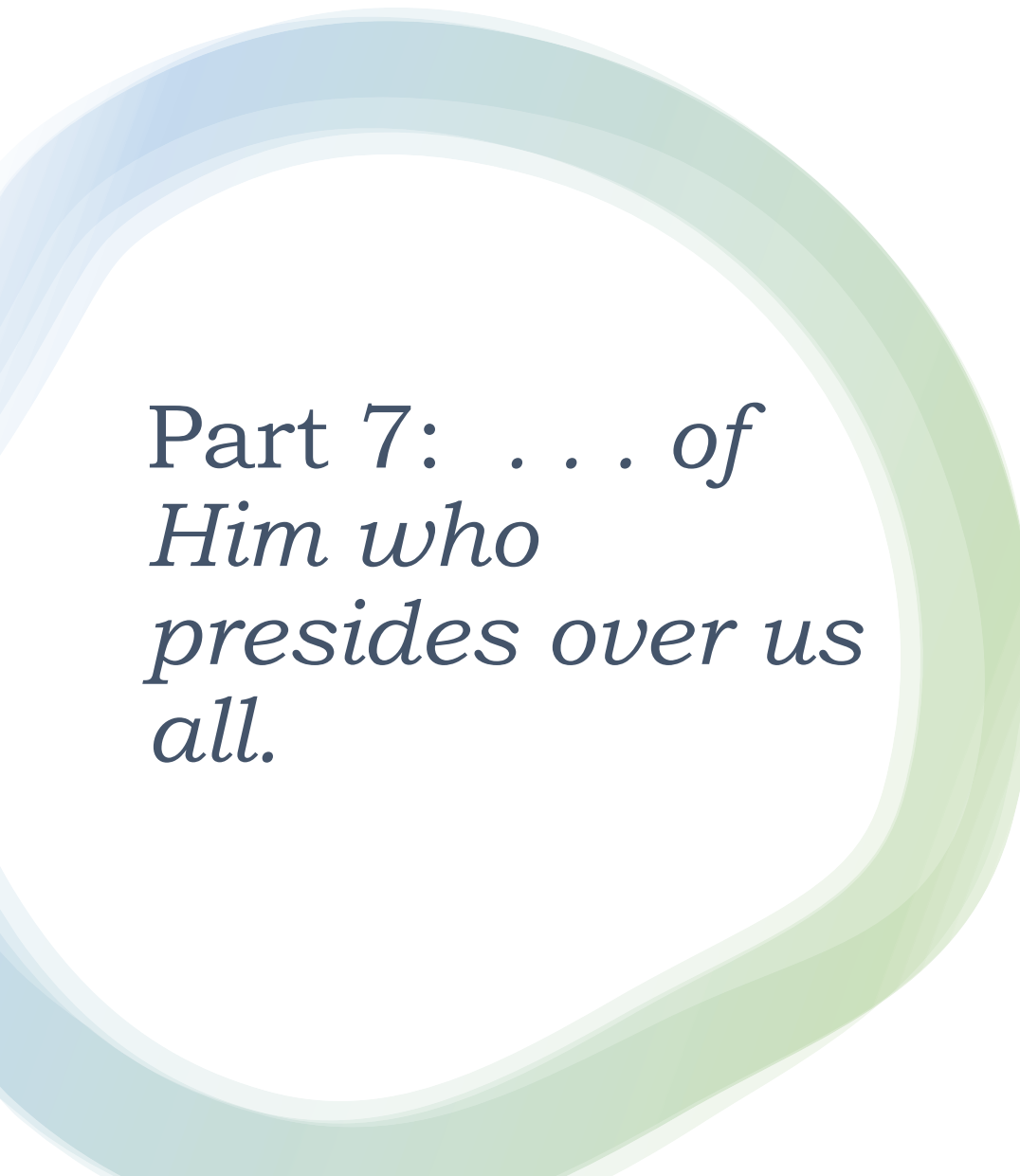
“It really means personal and group sacrifice for the benefit of all A.A.”
(Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age, 43)

Then, in a surprising comment from the author of the Traditions, Bill fervently declared:

Right then I resolved to learn our Twelve Traditions by heart, just as I had learned the Twelve Steps.

If every A.A. did the same and really soaked up these principles we drunks could hang together forever.

(Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age, 43)



Part 7: . . . of
*Him who
presides over us
all.*

In my own interpretation and in the context of this study of the Twelve Traditions, *of Him who presides over us all* is an expression of the Second Tradition.

“For our group purpose there is but one ultimate authority—a loving God as he may express Himself in our group conscience.” (*Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, 132)

After all, it is a “We” program.

Fortunately, there is a solution when members want to change their own behavior with respect to anonymity.

The Sixth Step is somewhat parallel to the Eleventh Tradition in that members examine what not to do particularly when driven by lesser motives.

The Twelfth Tradition is parallel to the Seventh Step in that it is on a spiritual foundation of humility, that members choose to do the next right thing - practice principles before personalities.

I cited individuals who broke their anonymity in public venues such as the web and other media.

Being one of the great rationalizers of this program, I reasoned that this information was already public and could be used as an “educational” example.

I had a “Marty Moment” - Perhaps there is a better way.

My amends was and is not to perpetuate any anonymity break no matter who started it.

I decided to let it end with me.

Anonymity – equality, vulnerability, and freedom

Kurtz's praise of the principle of anonymity

Within Alcoholics Anonymous, the promise of anonymity made possible the acceptance of oneself as limited.

Mutual honesty about shared vulnerability followed from acceptance of self and others as other-than-perfect.

From this sense of sharing, this sense of participation in ultimate reality in and through others, sprang a profound realization of alcoholic equality. (Kurtz, 197)

And from this awareness of equality flowed a liberating sense of true freedom.

Among others who openly acknowledged their not-God-ness, there was neither need nor inclination for any alcoholic to play God. (Kurtz, 197 -198)

Anonymity testified to this shared equality and its consequent freedom. . . .

The members of Alcoholics Anonymous, however, saw beyond [anonymity as a weakness to shame and fear]. In testifying to their acceptance of equality in vulnerability, anonymity reminded them of their freedom to be themselves. (Kurtz, 198)

On What Slender



"On what slender threads do life and fortune hang . . ." is from Alexandre Dumas's *The Count of Monte Cristo*.

Bill's 1954 talk about A.A.'s early beginnings

"On what slender threads our destiny hangs. . . "

And so it seems, that the Traditions are our slender threads.

- **The End....or maybe a new beginning!**

Comments and questions?

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