

## 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](http://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](http://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 learned so far ....

Bill hoped the Society of A.A. in Unity would help groups to live and work together to carry the message to unseen alcoholics world-wide.

To protect its unity, Bill knew that it was essential for A.A. groups to assume final responsibility and ultimate authority for the Society.

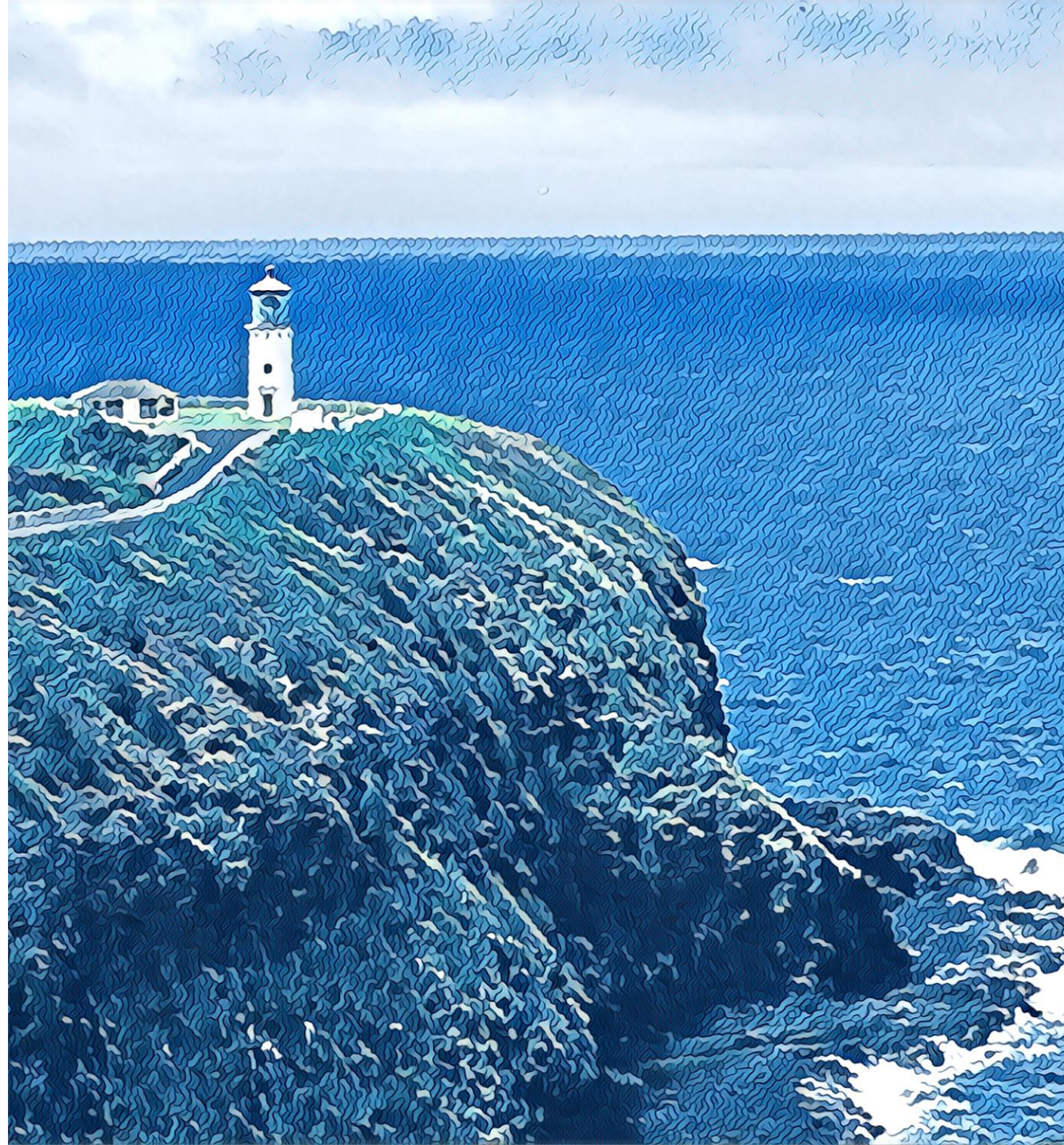
Anonymity in public venues was a small step toward protecting A.A. from those who would seek attention as self-appointed spokespersons for A.A.

This [11<sup>th</sup>] Tradition is a constant and practical reminder that personal ambition has no place in A.A.

In [Tradition 11], each member becomes an active guardian of our Fellowship. *12 & 12, 186*

To the million alcoholics who have not yet heard our AA story, we should ever say,

“Greetings and welcome. Be assured that we shall never weaken the lifelines which we float out to you. In our public relations, we shall, God willing, keep the faith.” *LoH, 92*



## Tradition 11

*Our public relations policy is based on attraction rather than promotion; we need always maintain personal anonymity at the level of press, radio, and films.*

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

Our relations with the general public should be characterized by personal anonymity. We think A.A. ought to avoid sensational advertising. Our names and pictures as A.A. members ought not be broadcast, filmed, or publicly printed. Our public relations should be guided by the principle of attraction rather than promotion. There is never need to praise ourselves. We feel it better to let our friends recommend us. (180, 192)

## Tradition 11– Bill’s Essay pp. 183 - 186

Without its legions of well-wishers, A.A. could never have grown as it has. Throughout the world, immense and favorable publicity of every description has been the principal means of bringing alcoholics into our Fellowship.

The inquiring voices are not all alcoholics or their families  
[Doctors, Clergymen, and Employers]

**Therefore, a great responsibility fell upon us to develop the best possible public relations policy for Alcoholics Anonymous.**

**We found that we had to rely upon the principle of *attraction* rather than promotion.**

## Tradition 11– Bill’s Essay pp. 183 - 186

People who symbolize causes and ideas fill a deep human need.

But we [A.A.s] do have to soberly face the fact that **being in the public eye is hazardous**, especially for us.

By temperament, nearly every one of us had been **an irrepressible promoter**, and the prospect of a society composed almost entirely of promoters was frightening. Considering this explosive factor, we knew we had to exercise self-restraint.

**[This restraint] resulted in more favorable publicity** of Alcoholics Anonymous than could possibly have been obtained through all the arts and abilities of A.A.’s best press agents.

Obviously, A.A. had to be publicized somehow, so we resorted to the idea that it would be far better to let our friends do this for us.

## Tradition 11– Bill’s Essay pp. 183 – 186

Here was something rare in the world—a society which said it wished to publicize its principles and its work, but not its individual members.

There was actually a time when the press of America thought the anonymity of A.A. was better for us than some of our own members did.

The Foundation\* wrote letters to practically every news outlet in North America, setting forth our public relations policy of attraction rather than promotion., and emphasizing personal anonymity as A.A.’s greatest protection.

Only a few A.A. members are left who deliberately break anonymity at the public level.

**This Tradition is a constant and practical reminder that personal ambition has no place in A.A. In it, each member becomes an active guardian of our Fellowship.**

Alcoholics  
Anonymous: where  
actions speak louder  
than names

# Anonymity and the Fellowship's early inconsistencies

At first, Bill naively underestimated the potential damage to the Fellowship caused by members' publicly breaking their anonymity.

It took time for Bill to learn that those same anonymity breaks might turn struggling alcoholics away.

Once there was a leak in the dam, a flood of anonymity breaks was bound to follow.

Then, what would the name, Alcoholics Anonymous mean?

There was no policy on anonymity beyond Bill's admonishment in the Foreword to the First Edition Big Book:

When writing or speaking publicly about alcoholism, we urge each of our Fellowship to omit his personal name, designating himself instead as "a member of Alcoholics Anonymous.

Very earnestly, we ask the press also, to observe this request, for otherwise we shall be greatly handicapped.

*(Alcoholics Anonymous, xiii)*

Predictably, given alcoholics' egos, members at best, followed those guidelines inconsistently. At worst, they were blatantly ignored. The unpredicted result was an unraveling of the essence of the program's identity: humility and self-sacrifice.

Bill spoke to *how* members practice the principle of anonymity in Tradition Eleven.

He spoke to *why* the principle is essential to recovery and to A.A.'s survival in Tradition Twelve.



## Early Anonymity

“Don’t drink!”

The second was in the Fellowship’s very own name, “Anonymous,” which was a two-faceted principle.

One was protection against economic consequences associated with public exposure as an alcoholic

The other was protection against members who simply could not stay sober. *(Kurtz, 104)*

First stressor on anonymity would come from Cleveland.

Early 1939, Dorothy S. (Clarence S.)  
First Unitarian Rev. Dr. Dilworth Lupton

No association of the Fellowship with the Oxford Group as evidenced by Catholics attending the Stillman Avenue group.

Rev. Lupton read the book and urged Dorothy to tell *The Cleveland Plain Dealer* that he was going to preach on A.A.  
(Kurtz, 84)

The growth of A.A. groups in Cleveland was so outstanding compared to Akron and New York that many people thought Cleveland was where A.A. began.

In the weeks that passed after *The Plain Dealer* series, one group split into three smaller groups because there was a disagreement amongst the members and Clarence over the unwelcomed publicity.

Clearly, there was contention within the Fellowship about anonymity.

The issue of anonymity at the public level would only intensify.  
(Kurtz, 85)

# The first high-profile anonymity break

1940 economy cried for a diversion – baseball  
Rollie H., Cleveland Indians star catcher  
Owner Alva Bradley contacted Dr. Bob  
\$200,000!!!! (which Dr. Bob declined)

Bob E. said, “Somehow [Rollie] got the program. He became one of the staunchest members we ever had, [setting] a terrific example for the children all over the country. (*Kurtz, 86*)

Rollie continued attending the Oxford Group meetings after Dr. Bob left, but eventually rejoined his Akron Squad friends.

April 16, 1940 Rollie announced that his erratic behavior had been due to “booze,” and that he had been dry for a year “with the help of and through Alcoholics Anonymous.”

While Rollie may have wanted to set the record straight about how he got sober, he more likely meant only to show his appreciation for and raise awareness about A.A.

Eighteen-year-old Cleveland pitcher named Robert Feller

The father of a Catholic priest got sober with Rollie’s help which gave the Fellowship access to a hospital. (*Not-God*, 85-86)

Rollie was on a roll!

There was very little concern when Bill allowed the picture-oriented *Saturday Evening Post* to include photos of alcoholics with Jack Alexander's story, a concession that was required by the magazine.

A perfect storm was roiling, for these very same events paved the way for "the next occasion on which Alcoholics Anonymous would face the necessity of re-thinking its understanding of its name." (*Kurtz, 87*)

That occasion would be Marty M.'s anonymity break.



## Bill's struggle with Marty M.'s anonymity break

Marty M.'s creation of the National Committee for Education on Alcoholism broke barriers for alcoholism in policy and research for years.

The timing of her recovery from alcoholism through to her work launching NCEA overlapped with Rollie's recovery and subsequent anonymity breaks.

Marty broke her anonymity in public venues with Bill, Dr. Bob, and Yale cheering her on.

Combined, affiliating with “related enterprises” and high-profile anonymity breaks appeared to benefit the Fellowship by attracting more alcoholics to the program

Marty was a high-impact ‘domino’ that led to a succession of other falling alcoholic ‘dominoes’ seeking the same privilege of breaking their anonymity “for the common good.”

Stubbornly, Bill continued his support for Marty:

I still feel that it was right for [Marty] to do exactly as she did. Though the risk of a precedent for other A.A.’s to drop their anonymity was serious, and may still be, the gains to A.A. and to the cause of education have apparently outweighed this consideration by far. (*Pass It On,* 310)

The weight started to shift too heavily in the other direction.

If one alcoholic could break anonymity to promote a special cause, many others would follow.

[In] this particular matter, I confess a great deal of fault myself. Several years ago, we did not realize the protective value of anonymity *to the A.A. movement as a whole* (emphasis added). When, for educational purposes, Marty broke hers, I consented to it. In the light of later events, that has proved to be a mistake. (*Pass It On,* 310 – 311)

## A “Marty Moment”

January 1955 Grapevine article, *Why Alcoholics Anonymous is Anonymous*, Bill paid tribute:

Seeing what happened, my friend, wonderful member that she is, tried to resume her anonymity. Because she had been so thoroughly publicized this has been a hard job. It has taken her years. But she has made the sacrifice, and I here want to record my deep thanks on behalf of us all. (*Language of the Heart*, 215)

Marty’s sacrifice was at great cost.

Such is a weight that no member of A.A. should have to bear alone.

## Early A.A.'s heavy hand on anonymity breaks

Once the importance of anonymity started to register, Headquarters struggled with reversing its erosion

During the early adolescence of A.A., members were frequently putting their own personal spin on the recovery program.

The “Twelve Lectures and Alcoholics Anonymous”

“To hell with the trustees, the world is waiting for my message. I’ve got the right of free speech and I’m going on the air whether you like it or not.” (*Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, 130)

Headquarters and Trustees threatened to recruit members to write the insurance company strongly worded protests

Trustees and Headquarters were in the unpleasant parental position of having to try to reverse similar trends

“promotion, professionalism, and anonymity-breaking [were] all in one package.”

With no Conference, it was up to the Trustees to protect A.A. Their experiences contributed to an important component of the Eleventh Tradition:

A.A.'s Trustees were empowered to conduct our over-all public relations, and the principle of attraction rather than promotion became established as the key to our relation with the world about us. (*Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, 130-131)

## Bill's 1948 anonymity apology

December 1948 Grapevine article,

### *A Request and an Apology:*

Everywhere the press has been uniformly cooperative on anonymity when it is explained as a vital protection to the Alcoholics Anonymous movement. May I therefore urgently request all AA groups to carefully cover my anonymity on any future appearances and I shall, of course, try to take far greater care myself.

Let us never let go of this vital principle.

*(Language of the Heart, 94)*

## Anonymity breaks continued

In less than 10 years after the publication of the Big Book, it was becoming fashionable to declare one's recovery as attributable to Alcoholics Anonymous.

After breaking her anonymity in 1946 and 1947, a celebrity wrote her autobiography in 1954 and had a movie made in 1955, both of which included her A.A. story.

Afterwards, on the heels of drinking, she sought support from the Fellowship by hiring a lawyer, also an A.A. member, to restore what she perceived to be her tattered reputation.

Well-known radio personality and an estimated twelve million listeners.

Of course, this looks like wonderful publicity to folks outside A.A. But to 99 A.A.'s out of 100, it is a danger signal. Most of us deeply realize that enough repetition of such blasts could alter the whole character of our Society.

...

Then drawing upon his own lesson from the Marty M. and NCEA debacle:

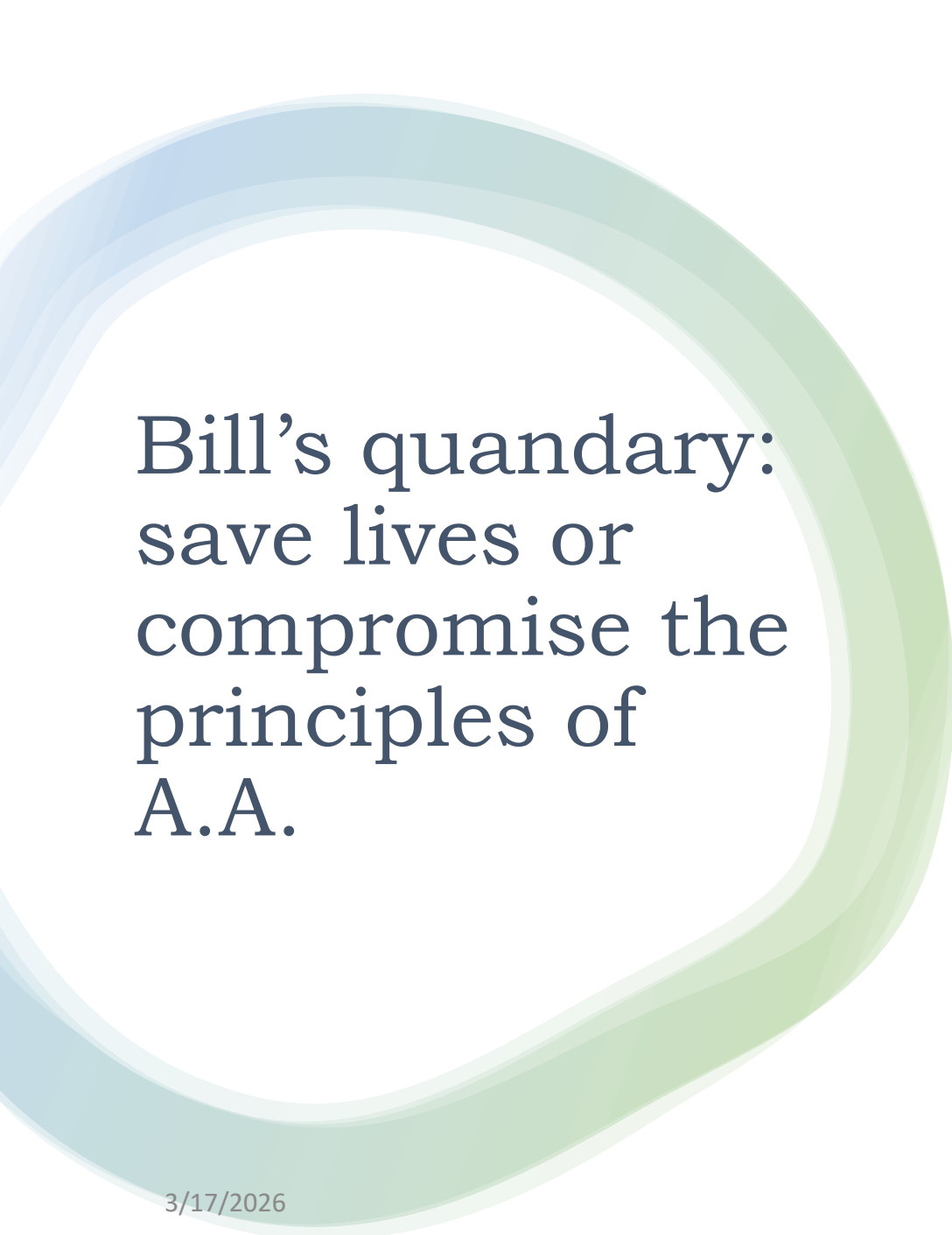
And more seriously, we would enable all those who choose to break anonymity at the general public level to hire out in other fields of work and draw the A.A. implied endorsement along with them. (*'Pass It On,'* 309)

Poignantly, Bill ended with:

[The radio announcer] hasn't the slightest idea that he is busting the best protective gadget our Fellowship will ever have. As to the immense spiritual implications of anonymity, poor old [name] just doesn't know." (*Pass It On,* 309)

Bill looked at these breaks with compassion and understanding.

. . . we alcoholics are the biggest rationalizers in the world, and . . . fortified with the excuse that we are doing great things for A.A., we can, through broken anonymity, resume our old and disastrous pursuit of personal power and prestige, public honors, and money – the same implacable urges that when frustrated once caused us to drink, the same forces that are today ripping the globe apart at its seams. (*Pass It On,* 309)



Bill's quandary:  
save lives or  
compromise the  
principles of  
A.A.

Can one individual's  
anonymity break save more  
lives than the Fellowship of  
Alcoholics Anonymous?

For Bill, the answer was **NO**  
but that answer did not  
come without heartache.

*Time Magazine* offered Bill the “Man of the Year” honor - the cover page picture would show only the back of his head.

- . . . when I turned that article down, I denied recovery to an awful lot of alcoholics – some of these may already be dead. And practically all the rest of them, we may suppose are still sick and suffering. Therefore, in a sense, my action has pronounced the death sentence on some drunks and condemned others to a much longer period of illness.

But I went well over on the conservative side, because the requirements of the piece would have tended to create a clear and colorful public image of me as a person. This would have created for the future, I am sure, a temptation in our power-driving people to get like pieces – presently with full names and pictures. For this reason, I estimated that it would be better for some to die and others to suffer, rather than to set such a perilous precedent. Therefore, I declined the publicity, and I must confess it wasn't easy. (*Pass It On,* 314)

Was Bill being overly dramatic?

In light of the multitude of very public anonymity breaks today, probably not.

How can the A.A. group help? One way is to study this tradition regularly

The Long Form of this Tradition offers explicit guidance with the first point setting the overall tenor of anonymity for all members of A.A.

**Our relations with the general public should be characterized by personal anonymity.** (*Twelve and Twelve*, 192)

“Characterized by personal anonymity” means that the general public should be **accustomed to** and **comfortable with** A.A. members not revealing their surnames.

We think A.A. ought to avoid sensational advertising.

Our names and pictures as A.A. members ought not be broadcast, filmed, or publicly printed.

Our public relations should be guided by the principle of attraction rather than promotion.

There is never need to praise ourselves. We feel it better to let our friends recommend us. (*Twelve and Twelve*, 192)

As clear as these guidelines are, the General Service Conference has provided additional suggestions to address changes in communications and media since the 1950s.

# Understanding *Anonymity* pamphlet

One point is counter to the myth that when A.A. members die, it is permissible to use their last names:

A.A. members generally think it unwise to break the anonymity of the member even after his or her death, but in each situation, the final decision must rest with the family. A.A. members, though, are in agreement that the anonymity of still living A.A. members should be respected in obituaries or in any type of printed remembrance or death notice. (12)

A second point relates to anonymity in the digital world.

# Personal anonymity online

Today's media has become interactive, rapid, and public in ways that even users do not fully understand.

In the *Understanding Anonymity* pamphlet.

When using digital media, A.A. members are responsible for their own anonymity and that of others. When we post, text, or blog, we should assume that we are publishing at the public level. When we break our anonymity in these forums, we may inadvertently break the anonymity of others.

*Anonymity Online and Digital Media* (F-197) posted by the General Service Office touches on multiple aspects of digital media and anonymity. This resource includes A.A. websites, social networking websites, email, internet, and videos and audios.

The Continental European Region of Alcoholics Anonymous responded with guidelines that include:

“Anonymity is so fragile, you can break it with one finger.”

## Bill's caution

All should consider carefully Bill's caution from the *AA Tradition: How it Developed*.

**Any who would drop their anonymity** must reflect that they may set a precedent which could eventually destroy a valuable principle. We must never let any immediate advantage shake us in our determination to keep intact such a really vital tradition. (47)

That is, we should always remember when we think it is a good idea to break our anonymity at the public level, *perhaps there is a better way*.

At the very least . . .

If there is a newcomer in the room, and you choose to share your last name, reassure them that their anonymity is safe and protected in Alcoholics Anonymous!

And then, invite the newcomer to study Traditions Eleven and Twelve!

## Coming up: the Twelfth Tradition

Public anonymity breaks cause harm to A.A.'s public relations. But there is a more compelling reason for anonymity.

It is a fundamental spiritual principle.

In terms of anonymity, the Eleventh Tradition tells A.A. members *what not to do*,

while the Twelfth Tradition tells A.A. members *what to do*.

Would you like a weekly reminder?  
Put your email in the chat and I'll  
add you to the list.

Comments and questions?

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