

**“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.

## **Tradition 4**

*Each group should be autonomous except in matters affecting other groups or A.A. as a whole.*

**The Long Form:** *Our A.A. experience has taught us that:*  
With respect to its own affairs, each A.A. group should be responsible to no other authority than its own conscience. But when its plans concern the welfare of neighboring groups also, those groups ought to be consulted. And no group, regional committee, or individual should ever take any action that might greatly affect A.A. as a whole without conferring with the trustees of the General Service Board. On such issues our common welfare is paramount.

*(Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions, 146, 189)*

You can't tell us what  
to do!

# What the Fourth Tradition is and what it isn't

The Fourth Tradition is not license to overrule any other Tradition.

It is like the Fourth Step:

A group should take a fearless and honest inventory that includes the question,

“Would our plans break any other Tradition?”

Autonomy allows groups to be innovative.



Having a written program of recovery was not  
enough to ensure unity

As the number of groups grew, “the specters of disunity  
and collapse grew to frightening proportions.” (AACA, 87)

And there was little or nothing Bill could do about it!

In Japan – one group had 10 steps and a fee!

Such deviations proved ruinous for groups and had little  
impact on A.A.

“Today it is only amusing. We know that they will soon be infiltrated by common sense and experience. They will find that nobody can professionalize A.A.s Twelfth Step and the elder who means well and does badly will mend his ways.”

A consideration for all groups when shaping their customs and practices:

“He will finally see that alcoholism is a quest for survival in which the good is sometimes the enemy of the best, and that only the best can bring the true good.”

*(Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age, 82)*



How could Bill craft guidelines for a group of alcoholics who were already prone to anarchy.

Ironically, the answer was to encourage autonomy.

To an ‘outsider,’ this Tradition may seem to be contradictory to A.A. unity.

To Bill, the problem was not whether groups should be autonomous; it was whether one could have a ***philosophy of autonomy and, at the same time, unity in A.A.***

Applying Tradition Four in conjunction with the other Traditions was only a partial solution.

The real solution was in Bill’s dream for alcoholics or “children of chaos” to take responsibility for A.A. (*Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, 146).

# Group autonomy for alcoholics was a fait accompli

“The groups said to us, “We like what you are doing. Sometimes your suggestions and advice are good. But whether to take you or leave you alone is going to be our decision. Out in the groups, we are going to run our own show (emphasis added). We are not going to have a personal government in New York, or anywhere else. Services, yes. But government, no.” (*Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, 103).

“If I understand correctly, your problem sounds similar to . . . On that occasion, these good people, now years sober, can only relate to you what we seem to have learned from past experience. Perhaps you and your group will choose to follow this, but whether you do or not, please let us know how it comes out.” (*Kurtz*, 113)

This is a rule-of-thumb that might be useful when a group conscience decision doesn't go your way:

Good teachers teach. Brilliant teachers let students make mistakes.

A declaration that there was only one path to a spiritual experience would have turned many away from the program.

Similarly, mandating how groups must conduct their activities would have destroyed any chance for unity in A.A.

Bill's invitation to experiment provided some evidence of his own humility and open-mindedness.

# Autonomy grew from successes and failures

The “boomerang incident”

During the “flying blind” period, they were all experimenting with the recovery program!

Tapering-off process (recall Dr. Bob’s bottle of beer going into surgery) (Dr. Bob and the Good Oldtimers, 75)

“Combination of tomato juice and sauerkraut and Karo syrup” (Dr. Bob and the Good Oldtimers, 74)

Hand-picking Twelfth steppers – “finagle around” to find the “best guy” at the “right psychological time.” (Dr. Bob and the Good Oldtimers, 113)

Shooting an arrow at the side of a barn, running up and drawing a circle around it, and calling it a bulls-eye!

Dark but empathetic humor

My name is ..... I'm an alcoholic.

Beginners meetings

Sponsorship

Having alcoholics stay in homes

Alcoholic women forced on the alcoholics' wives

Personal interpretations of the Big Book

Abrasive personalities (Irwin's "breaking all rules of caution and discreet approach to newcomers" (*Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, 25))

Just make sure your experiment doesn't come back to hurt someone



“But this ultra-liberty is not so risky as it looks. In the end the innovators would have to adopt A.A. principles—at least some of them—in order to remain sober at all.

If, on the other hand, they found something better than A.A., or if they were able to improve on our methods, then in all probability we would adopt what they discovered for general use everywhere.

This sort of liberty also prevents A.A. from becoming a frozen set of dogmatic principles that could not be changed even when obviously wrong. Healthy trial and error always have their day and place in A.A.” (*Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, 105)

‘Healthy trial and error’ and sometimes ‘unhealthy trial and error’ contributed to *The Twelve Points to Assure Our Future*.

“Implicit throughout A.A.’s Traditions is the confession that our fellowship has its sins. We confess that we have character defects as a society and that these defects threaten us continually. Our Traditions are a guide to better ways of working and living, and they are also an antidote for our various maladies.” (*Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, 96).

In terms of autonomy, is innovation dangerous?

It is if it affects other groups or A.A. as a whole.

This is most likely to happen if groups disregard any one or more of the other Traditions when experimenting with an innovation.

It is also very likely to happen if groups act out on their collective character defects, usually born out of fear.

Examining motives for special groups in A.A.

Groups used autonomy to support discrimination.

To turn anyone away from the help the Fellowship had to offer was tantamount to pronouncing a death sentence.

Creating a special group was encouraged for outcasts

It was no wonder the first A.A. groups for women started as early as 1942 and for Blacks in 1945. (*The History of Gay People in Alcoholics Anonymous*, 90)

Eventually, the reasons for starting special groups changed

Reality of societal constraints gave way to comfort and commonality

Young alcoholics sought out other young alcoholics starting in 1946

Post-Traditions special groups continued to increase  
International Doctors in A.A. was created in 1949 and  
Birds of a Feather (for pilots) formed in 1975. (*History of Gay Alcoholics*, 90 – 91).

That it is the consensus of the conference that no [A.A.] group, anywhere, of any kind, should ever turn a newcomer away from his or her first meeting.” And that was passed unanimously. (*History of Gay People in AA*, 22)

Some A.A.s come together as A.A. groups – for men, women, young people, doctors, gays and others. If the members are all alcoholics, and *if they open the door to all alcoholics who seek help* (emphasis added), regardless of profession, gender or other distinction, and meet all other aspects defining an A.A. group, they may call themselves an A.A. group. (*AA Group*, 12)

“Some may think that we have carried the principle of group autonomy to extremes.... [Autonomy] means that these two or three alcoholics could try for sobriety in any way they liked.

*They could disagree with any or all of A.A.'s principles and still call themselves and A.A. group (emphasis added).” (AACA, 105)*

Akron and Cleveland A.A. Literature Sales



This historical literature was written by Evan W. at the request of Dr. Bob. He felt that the newly written Big Book was too difficult for the blue-collar worker to read. Evan was a former writer for the newspaper and wrote *A Manual for Alcoholics Anonymous* in 1941, followed by *A Second Reader for Alcoholics Anonymous*. These pamphlets were completed by 1950 and reflected the early mindset of Akron's earliest members.

This literature is pre-conference and is still serving members of AA around the world. Published and distributed by the Akron Area Intergroup primarily for its historical value; but also to serve the purpose for which it is originally written – to help us all better understand the program of Alcoholics Anonymous.

*Second Reader for Alcoholics Anonymous* (p. 11)

There is NO MYSTERY in the Spiritual side of A.A. As a matter of fact, the good active member is practicing Christianity at all times whether or not he knows it.

*Spiritual Milestones in Alcoholics Anonymous* (p. 3):

The unselfish helping of others is the practice of love, upon which Christian philosophy is based. Remember at all times Our Lord's two commandments. "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all they heart, and with all they soul and with all thy mind. And thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.

A group ought not do anything which would greatly injure A.A. as a whole, nor ought it affiliate itself with anything or anybody else. There would be real danger should we commence to call some groups “wet,” others “dry,” still others “Republican” or “Communist,” *and yet others “Catholic” or “Protestant.”* p 147

A.A.’s from around the world attend Akron’s Founders Day in June which is closely equivalent to attending an A.A. International Convention.

There is certainly no denying Akron and Cleveland’s role in the success and rapid growth of Alcoholics Anonymous.

A.A.’s complex beginnings and the preservation of this history may be a case of how our Traditions achieved Bill’s dream – group autonomy and unity of the Fellowship.

# The motivation not to abuse the principle of autonomy: Alcoholism

So there is authority enough, love enough, and punishment enough, all without any human being clutching the handles of power. Such is A.A.'s backstop against dissolution, and its final guarantee of survival under any conditions. For us, it is to do or die. (AACCA, 106)

For many years after the Traditions were adopted by the Conference, the majority non-alcoholic Trustees held the “handles of power” in A.A.

# Can “children of chaos” grow up?

Even in recovery, alcoholics would never be able to adhere to the Traditions and be fully responsible.

At least, not enough to lead A.A.

This obstacle stood in the way of Bill’s last hope for unity, which was for A.A. groups to take full responsibility for A.A.’s future.

Bill would struggle for years trying to convince the naysayers that alcoholics could be responsible for A.A.

His most difficult opponent would be one of his dearest non-alcoholic friends, Dr. Harry Tiebout.

The Fourth Tradition's emphasis on “affecting other groups or A.A. as a whole”

With respect to its own affairs, each A.A. group should be responsible to no other authority than its own conscience.

But when its plans concern the welfare of neighboring groups also, those groups ought to be consulted.

And no group, regional committee, or individual should ever take any action that might greatly affect A.A. as a whole without conferring with the trustees of the General Service Board. (*Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, 189)

Keep in mind that the group is not asking the General Service Board for permission!

Groups are free to do what they think is best for carrying the message.

Consulting the General Service Board is an opportunity to tap into the vast experience, strength, and hope of past A.A. groups.

With careful research, the group can conduct an *informed* group conscience.



Finally, in the spirit of the First Tradition and for our group purpose:

On such issues our common welfare is paramount. (12 & 12, 189)

# Coming up: the Fifth Tradition

The Fourth Tradition needs all of the other Traditions as an anchor to prevent drifting on a sea of anarchy.

It is the Fifth Tradition that steers the ship.

Comments and questions?

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