

## 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 accomplished so far?

After examining Bill's essays from a historical perspective on Traditions 1 through 9, I am convinced that the *Twelve Points to Assure Our Future* were pedaled to the groups as the guidelines that his proposed Conference of delegates from A.A. groups would follow.

In Traditions 1 through 9, the structure of our Society has been hammered out!

Now, all we need are a few more principles to ensure our survival – Tradition 10 keeps us from destroying ourselves from within.

. . . All sections of this country and many of its occupations are represented, as well as many political, economic, social, and religious backgrounds. We are people who normally would not mix. (*Alcoholics Anonymous*, 17)

Never talk down to an alcoholic from any moral or spiritual hilltop; simply lay out the kit of spiritual tools for his inspection....Offer him friendship and fellowship. (*Alcoholics Anonymous*, 95)

Established on such a footing we became less and less interested in ourselves, our little plans and designs. (*Alcoholics Anonymous*, 63)



## Tradition 10

*Alcoholics Anonymous has no opinion on outside issues; hence the A.A. name ought never be drawn into public controversy.*

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

No A.A. group or member should ever, in such a way as to implicate A.A., express any opinion on outside controversial issues—particularly those of politics, alcohol reform, or sectarian religion. The Alcoholics Anonymous groups oppose no one. Concerning such matters they can express no views whatever.

*(Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions, 176, 192)*

## Tradition 10– Bill’s Essay pp. 179 – 182

Never since it began has Alcoholics Anonymous been divided by a major controversial issue. Nor has our Fellowship ever publicly taken sides on any question in an embattled world. **This, however, has been no earned virtue.**

**So long as we don’t argue these matters privately, it’s a cinch we never shall publicly.**

**As by some deep instinct, we A.A.’s have known from the very beginning that we must never no matter what the provocation, publicly take sides in any fight, even a worthy one.**

We live in the imminent possibility of a fresh holocaust to determine how men shall be governed, and how the products of nature and toil shall be divided among them. **That is the spiritual climate in which A.A. was born, and by God’s grace has nevertheless flourished.**

## Tradition 10– Bill’s Essay pp. 179 – 182

When it comes to **AA. as a whole . . . We do not enter into public controversy**, because we know that our Society will perish if it does.

We conceive the survival and spread of Alcoholics Anonymous to be something of far greater importance than the weight we could collectively throw back of any other cause. **Since recovery from alcoholism is life itself** to us, it is imperative that we preserve in full strength our means of survival.

Before we leveled off a bit, A.A. looked like **one prodigious squabble** than anything else, at least on the surface.

Disliking the attempt of some to manage a group, half its membership might angrily rush off to form another group more to their like. Elders, temporarily turned Pharisee, have sulked.

## Tradition 10– Bill’s Essay pp. 179 – 182

Despite their din, our puny rows never did A.A. a particle of harm. They were just part and parcel of **learning to work and live together**.

They were almost always concerned with **ways to make A.A. more effective**, how to do the most good for the most alcoholics.

The Washingtonian Society, ..., almost discovered the answer to alcoholism.

The Washingtonians permitted politicians and reformers, both alcoholic and nonalcoholic, to **use the society for their own purposes**. ...within a very few years they had completely lost their effectiveness in helping alcoholics.

As we surveyed the wreck of that movement, **early A.A. members resolved to keep our Society out of public controversy**.

Outside opinions  
contaminate the  
solution

## The Original Form's explicit charge to A.A. members

The Sixth Tradition states *A.A. ought never endorse, finance, or lend the A.A. name to any related facility or outside enterprise, lest problems of money, property, and prestige divert us from our primary purpose.* (155)

The Tenth Tradition states *Alcoholics Anonymous has no opinion on outside issues; hence the A.A. name ought never be drawn into public controversy.* (176)

Similar in spirit, both Traditions ask A.A. groups and individual members to avoid using the name of A.A. while supporting or not supporting outside entities or causes.

There are nuanced ways of associating A.A. with outside causes:

*No A.A. group or member should ever, in such a way as to implicate A.A., express any opinion on outside controversial issues. (192)*

Requires members to be sensitive to *where and when* they are expressing their personal opinions

Even when A.A. is praised or maligned, the practice of this Tradition is to have no opinion on outside opinions of A.A.



## A.A. members had an opinion on World War II

By December 1941, the membership mushroomed to 8,000 members and

The Japanese Imperial Fleet attacked Pearl Harbor thrusting the formerly isolationist United States into war.

Thus, the United States was at war when the “big test of A.A.’s unity began in earnest

Bill tried repeatedly to enlist and was rejected; the Army also rejected his overtures to provide alcoholic counseling.

Bill’s only choice was to help alcoholics at home

Securing gas rations to be able to take alcoholics to meetings

Bobbie B. tirelessly wrote to soldiers overseas

*Grapevine* was started to share news from home

The publishing company shifted to cheaper paper

Groups were told that they “needed to be prepared for a bumper crop of drunks” when the war was over!

Other than Bill’s attempt to establish what was tantamount to an A.A. Office in the U.S. Army, his and Bobbie’s efforts were reasonably aligned with Twelfth Step work or, at least, making Twelfth Step work possible.

“An AA’s Pledge for National Defense and Self Preservation.”

A pledge affirming their loyalty to the United States and

Promise to be productive citizens actively engaged in politics.

“Alcoholics Anonymous pledged its support for the duration of the war.” (Kaufman Dissertation, 164 – 165)

Three hundred alcoholics served

With no Traditions, A.A. managed to avoid a formal stance on WWII




## Levels of practicing Tradition Ten

Tradition Eleven addressed A.A.'s policy of anonymity at the public level and

Tradition Twelve spoke to the spiritual principle of anonymity at a personal level.

Opinions on outside issues at the public level and

Opinions on outside issues at the personal level.



At the personal  
level: Opinions  
are a dubious  
luxury

. . . All sections of this country  
and many of its occupations  
are represented, as well as  
many political, economic,  
social, and religious  
backgrounds. We are people  
who normally would not mix.  
*(Alcoholics Anonymous, 17)*

“We don’t agree on much, but  
we do agree that we have a  
common solution to the problem  
of alcoholism.”

. . . surely there is none which more jealously guards the individual's right to think, talk, and act as he wishes.  
(*Twelve and Twelve*, 129)

*Think about the newcomer!*

“but a small part of a great whole; that no personal sacrifice is too great for preservation of the Fellowship.”

*Think about the newcomer!*

“the clamors of desires and ambitions within [them] *must be silenced* (emphasis added) whenever these could damage the group.” (*Twelve and Twelve*, 130)

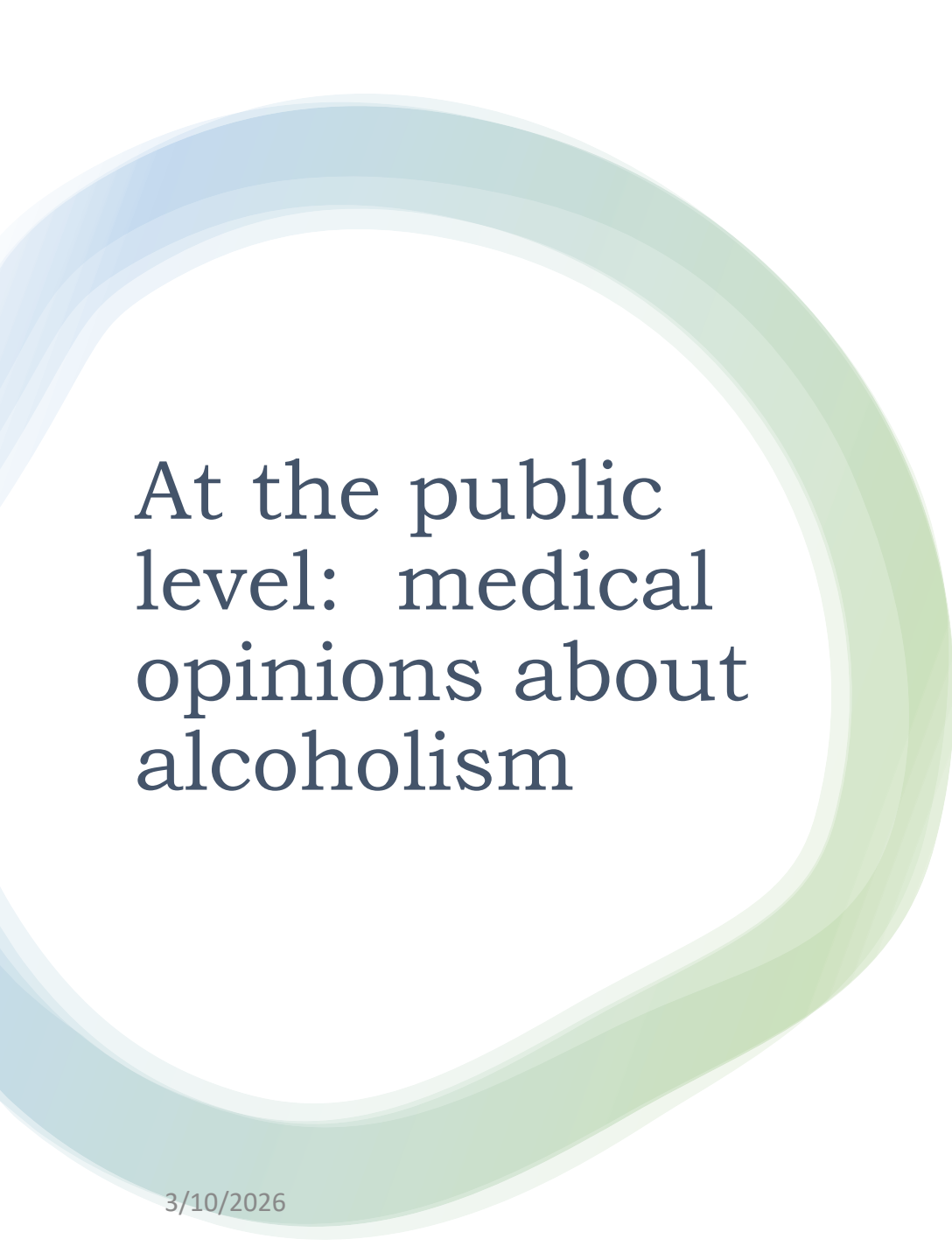
*Think about the newcomer!*

So that all who enter are assured of a place that addresses only problems as they relate to alcohol.

Bill tried to avoid outside issues when writing the book

Of necessity there will have to be discussion of matters medical, psychiatric, social, and religious. We are aware that these matters are, from their very nature, controversial. Nothing would please us so much as to write a book which would contain no basis for contention or argument. We shall do our utmost to achieve that ideal. (*Alcoholics Anonymous*, 19)

One could say that Bill was moderately successful in the medical field, but not very successful in the area of religion.



At the public  
level: medical  
opinions about  
alcoholism

Emmanual Movement started by Dr.  
Elwood Worcester

Courtney Baylor included alcoholics in  
the treatment

Techniques included hypnosis

Worcester had supporters who were  
medical professionals, but the movement  
could not withstand the fallout from  
Freud's criticisms. (McCarthy, *Journal of Studies  
on Alcohol* 45 (1): 59 – 68)

Dr. Silkworth professionally protective instincts were borne out by the AMA review in October 1939

“the recognition of the seriousness of addiction to alcohol,” and that the book “had no scientific merit or interest.” (*Schaberg*, 436)

Bill received multiple invitations as early as 1943 to speak at medical societies.

Bill had the medical profession’s attention with the astounding success of the Big Book, and he professed no credentials except that of being a recovered alcoholic.

Bill did not attempt to provide a clinical definition of alcoholism.

For this reason, a book ‘written by alcoholics’ who posed no medical theories about alcoholism prevailed even though the use of “physical allergy” and “mental obsession,” became obsolete. (*Kurtz*, 34)

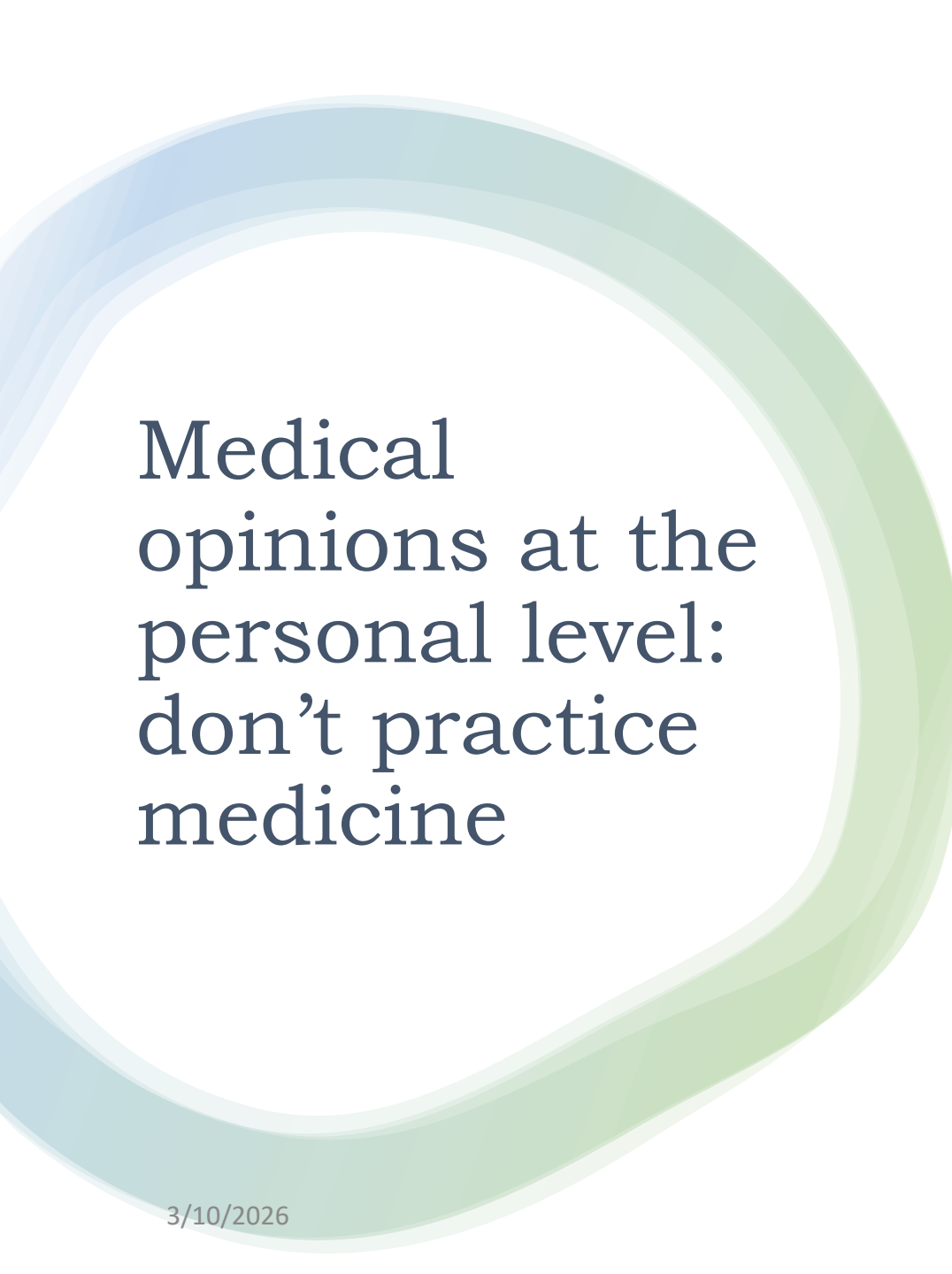
Bill skirted opinions on the medical view of alcoholism by eloquently describing the manifestations of alcoholism as informed by his own experience and by the experiences of other early members, and possibly

1931 publication, *The Common Sense of Drinking* by Richard Peabody, a former patient of Baylor and the Emmanuel Approach

“Alcoholics Anonymous thus offered a concept of the alcoholic rather than an understanding of alcoholism.” (*Kurtz, 34*)

Avoiding outside issues did not result in immediate benefits, but over time, it saved Alcoholics Anonymous from wholesale censure from the medical community.

Such is the reward when A.A. members avoid opinions on medically related topics.



Medical  
opinions at the  
personal level:  
don't practice  
medicine

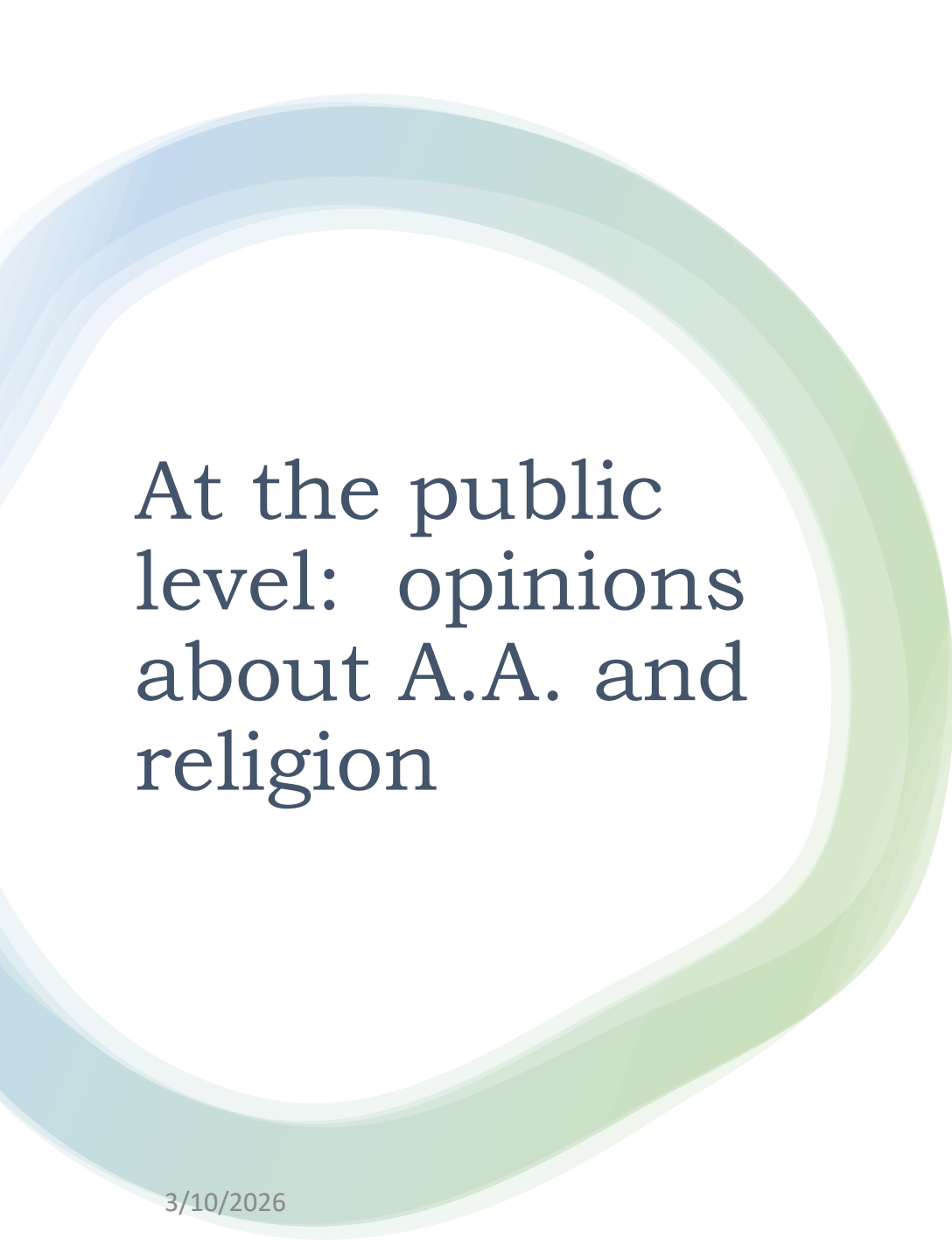
A.A. members do not ‘Make medical or psychological diagnoses or prognoses.’  
(*The A.A. Group*, 39)

*The A.A. Member -- Medications & Other  
Drugs, and*

*A.A. for Alcoholics with Mental Health  
Issues -- and their Sponsors.*

No A.A. member should “play doctor”;  
all medical advice and treatment should  
come from a qualified physician. (41)

Unfortunately, uninformed diagnoses by  
A.A. members have resulted in tragic  
consequences.



At the public  
level: opinions  
about A.A. and  
religion

The first Akron meetings and Bill's repeated religious references probably contributed to a tepid AMA review that also likened the program to the godlike guidance of the Oxford Group.

Dr. Tiebout, reinforced A.A.'s religiosity A.A. is “a therapeutic program which includes a definite religious element. . .”

Bill's religious leanings continued to be evident when he wrote the *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*.

A.A.'s early history, its basic literature, and public opinions about the religiosity of A.A. contributed to the misperception that it was a religious organization.

This misapprehension persists today with the added element of some A.A. members and groups promoting their own religion in meetings.

Thus, public opinions about the religiosity of A.A., particularly on the internet or social media, continue to vary wildly.

A New York State of Appeals court - *Griffin v. Coughlin*

A.A. “engages in religious activity and religious proselytization.”

The judges focused on the multiple Christian references throughout the Big Book and the *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*.

As a result: State prison officials could not force prisoners to attend its meetings. (*Journal of Church and State* 39 (3): 431)

## Kansas - *Stafford v. Harrison*

A.A. could not be designated as a religion:

The definition of a “Higher Power” is expressly left to the individual in AA texts and that the terms “spiritual experience” and “spiritual awakening” are broadly defined to include a spectrum of experiences that transform individual behavior.  
*(Journal of Church and State 39 (3): 447)*

Judgements about the religiosity of A.A. depends on who is interpreting our literature.

. . . denigrate the Alcoholics Anonymous approach to fighting addiction. Nor, the decision said, should the prison system scrap drug- and alcohol-abuse treatment programs if they are offered voluntarily.

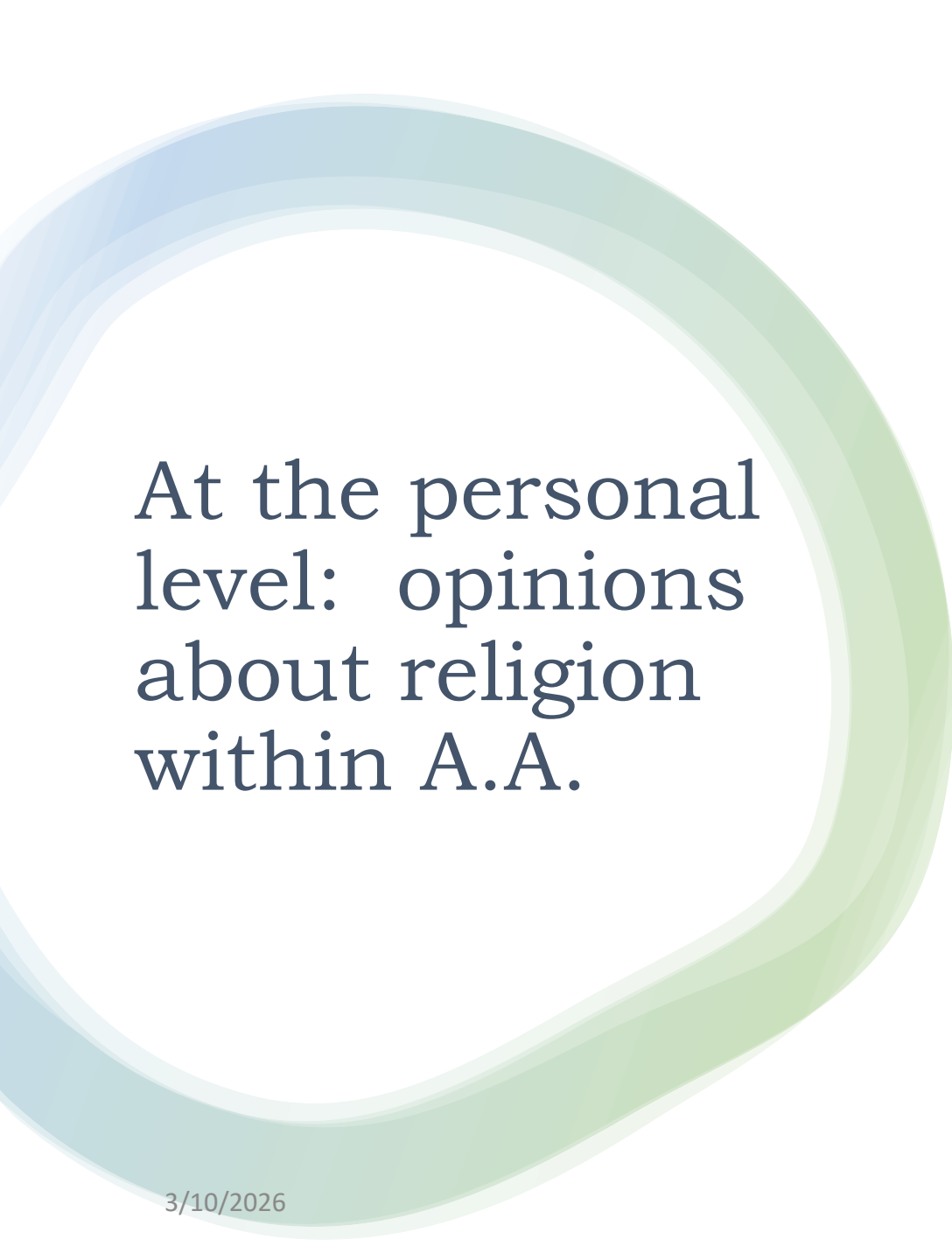
Alcoholics Anonymous would not say whether it saw itself as a religious organization. An A.A. spokeswoman said A.A.

“has always refrained from commenting on outside issues.” (Barron, James. 1996. *New York Times*, June 12 )

A.A.'s Big Book and *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* provide fertile ground for a wide range of opinions and judgments about A.A.'s affiliation or non-affiliation with religion.

Per the Tenth Tradition, A.A. has no opinion on these opinions.

*The "God" Word: Agnostic and Atheist Members in A.A.*, which clearly states that it is not a religious organization.



At the personal  
level: opinions  
about religion  
within A.A.

A group “ought not affiliate itself with anything or anybody else” and there would be real danger should we commence to call some groups . . . “Catholic” or “Protestant.” (147)

The Tenth Tradition reminds individual members to share only their own spiritual experience without implicating A.A.

*Think about the newcomer!*

Avoid opinions, positive, negative, or denigratingly humorous, about religious or nonreligious beliefs.



Alcoholics  
Anonymous grapples  
with personal  
opinions about drugs

In autumn of 1945, Bill's concern increased when *The A.A. Grapevine* published "Evidence on the Sleeping Pill Menace" and "Those 'Goof Balls.'"

By that time, Bill was formulating the *Twelve Points* and had enough experience to know that other addictions would only dilute the program's primary purpose.

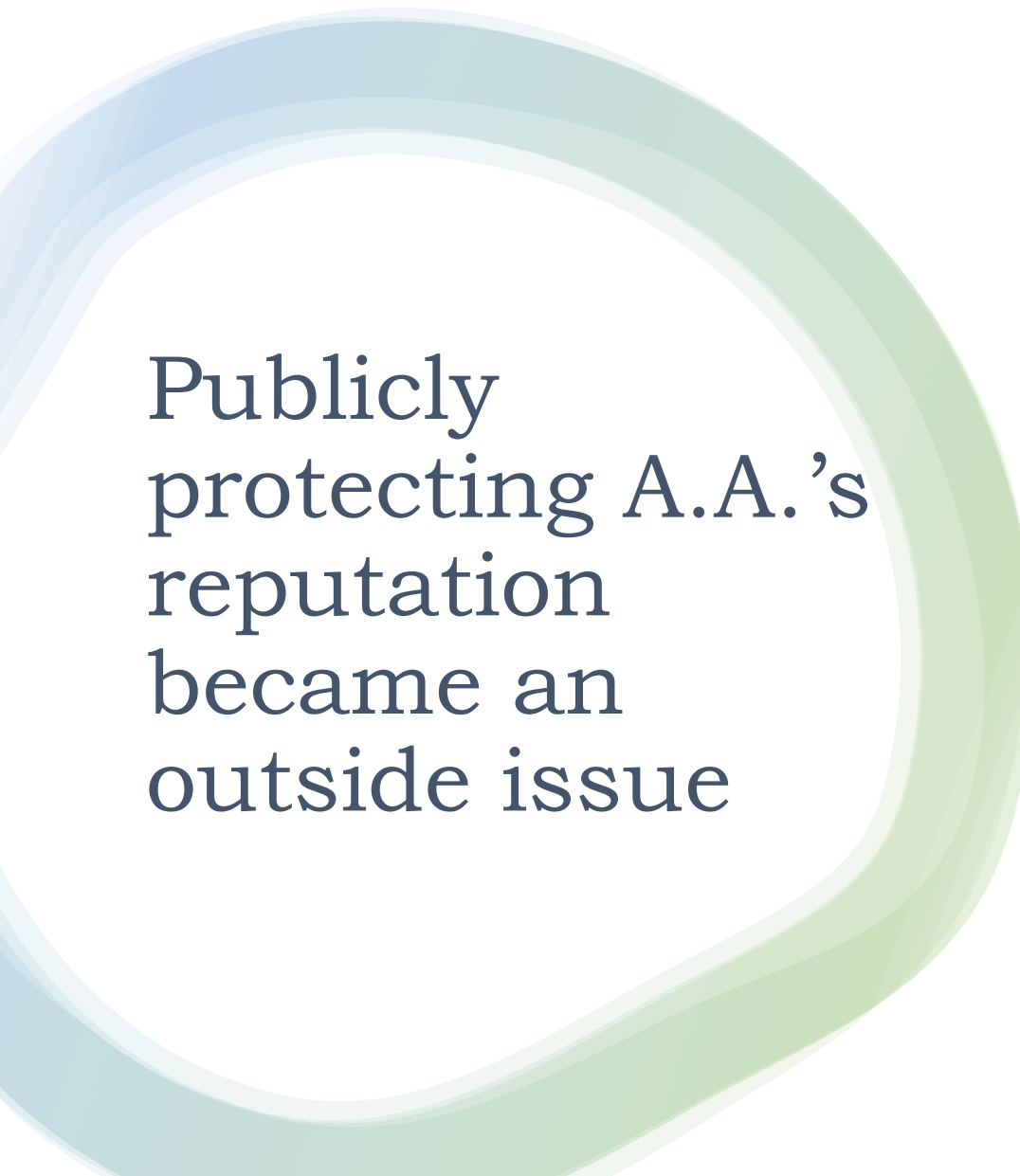
. . . Alcoholics Anonymous itself, faithful to its traditions, remained aloof. Generously, the fellowship shared its ideas and literature with any who found them helpful. (*Kurtz*, 115 – 116)

# Public and personal opinions and the Washingtonians

[Bill] concluded his article with the exhortation: “May we always be willing to learn from experience!” (*Kurtz, 117*)

“A.A.’s ability to learn from the experience of others as well as from its own development was tested . . . .” (*Kurtz, 117*)

While the members of the Fellowship experienced some stumbles with the Tenth Tradition, the Trustees, Headquarters, and Bill also put it to the test.



Publicly  
protecting A.A.'s  
reputation  
became an  
outside issue

The fear of how these endeavors could negatively affect A.A. prompted the Trustees to seek legal recourse. However, the “mass of technicalities, red tape, and charters” quickly disrupted their plans.

*Mr. and Miss Anonymous*  
Headquarters then threatened an injunction, which caused the company to revise its script.

*Something to Live For*  
Joan Fontaine, Ray Milland, and  
Teresa Wright.

The Trustees and Headquarters were overly distressed about the movie.

Bill believed if groups were accountable for A.A.'s decisions, then the Fellowship would be responsible for its stumbles and successes.

Today, A.A. groups **are** responsible for A.A.'s. missteps!

Can A.A. unity usher the Fellowship through any difficulties of relating to the world outside and to each other?

## **The Delegates' group conscience protects A.A. from public incorporation**

In the cause to save A.A.'s name from misuse, Bernard Smith came up with the idea of obtaining a Congressional Charter for Alcoholics Anonymous, which would put it on par with the Red Cross.

It seemed like a good idea at the time!

Conference Advisory Actions, in 1953

1. The evils which caused the question to arise have largely abated.

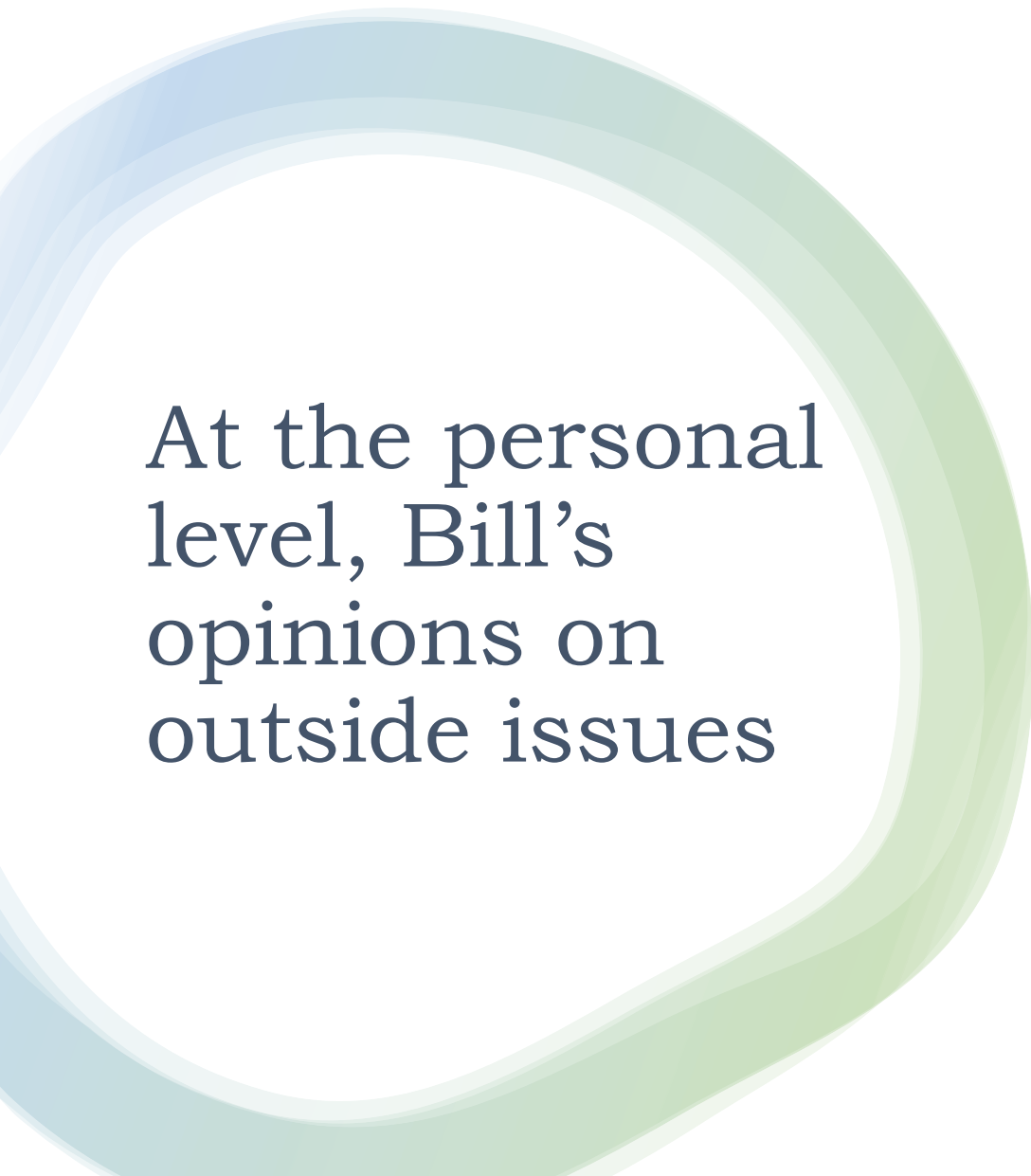
2. A Congressional incorporation would create by law a power to govern which would be contrary to, and violative of, our Traditions.
3. *It would implement the spiritual force of A.A. with a legal power, which we believe would tend to weaken its spiritual strength (emphasis added).*
4. When we ask for legal rights, enforceable in Courts of law, we by the same act subject ourselves to possible legal regulation.
5. We might well become endlessly entangled in litigation which, together with the incidental expense and publicity, could seriously threaten our very existence.

6. Incorporation of A.A. could conceivably become the opening wedge that might engender politics and a struggle for power within our own ranks.
7. Continuously since its beginning, and today, A.A. has been a fellowship and not an organization. Incorporation necessarily makes it an organization.
8. *We believe that “spiritual faith” and a “way of life” cannot be incorporated (emphasis added).*
9. *A.A. can and will survive so long as it remains a spiritual faith and a way of life open to all men and women who suffer from alcoholism (emphasis added). (Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age, 127)*

For Bill, this was a perfect example of why the Conference structure was essential to A.A.'s survival:

The Conference thought we ought to forget about the questionable advantages of legality and controversy and rely upon group and public opinion for our ultimate protection. After long debate, we at the Headquarters saw that the conscience of Alcoholics Anonymous, acting through the delegates, was wiser than we were. (*Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, 126-127)

It was through the wisdom of the Conference that attraction prevailed over force.

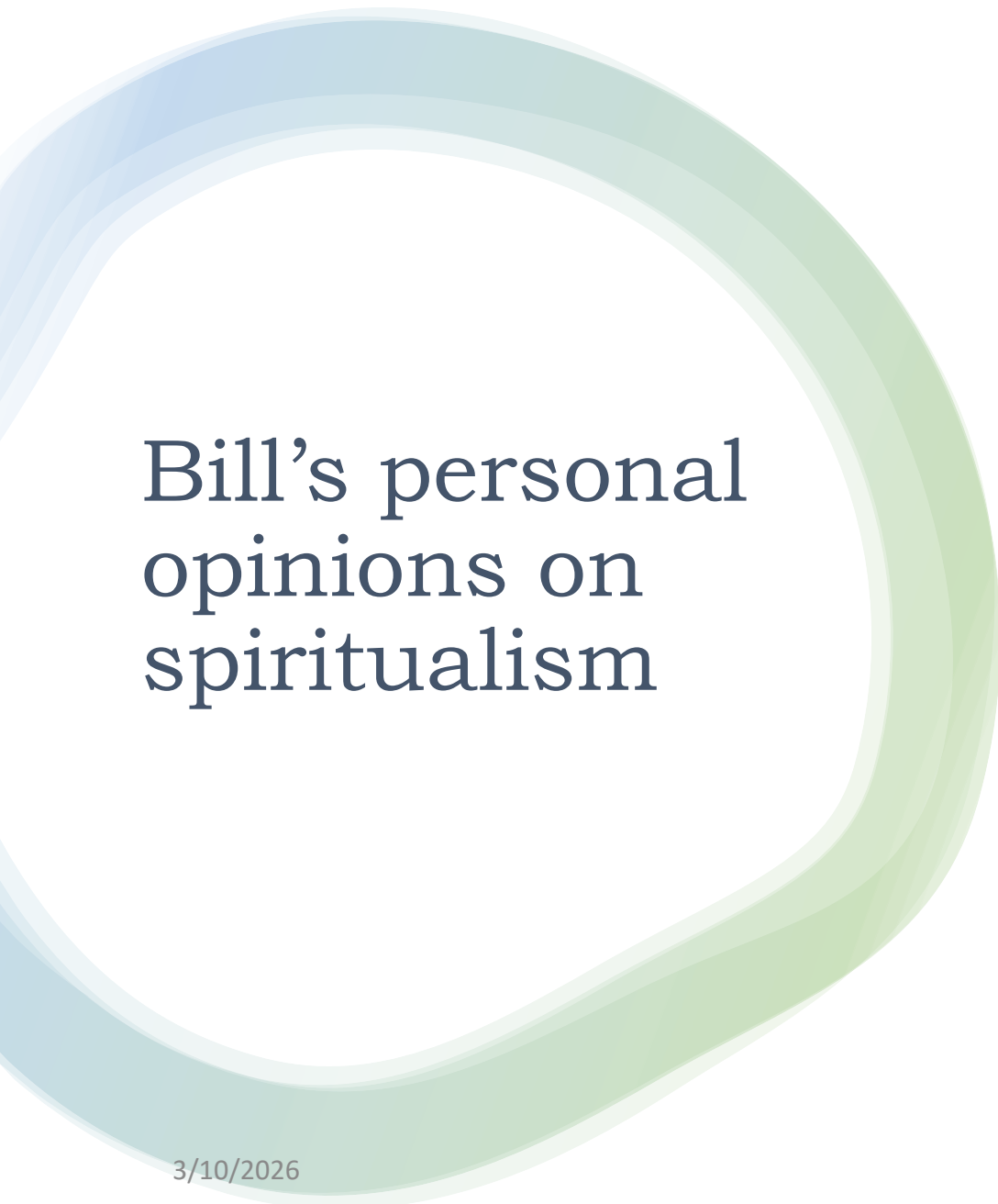


At the personal  
level, Bill's  
opinions on  
outside issues

. . . [Bill's] main efforts outside A.A. in the final fifteen years of his life were attempts to remove the mental or psychological and physical obstacles that impeded some persons from openness to the spiritual.  
(*Kurtz*, 137)

Among Bill's many pursuits were three that generated some historical distortions in their telling and retelling:

Spiritualism,  
LSD, and  
Vitamins B-3 and niacin.



## Bill's personal opinions on spiritualism

[Bill's] conviction that he had incontrovertible personal evidence of individual human conscious life lasting beyond physical death profoundly influenced Bill's adult faith, at least from the mid 1940s.

...

[Bill] experimented with and eventually claimed some power over spiritualistic phenomena.  
*(Kurtz, 136)*

Bill only “guardedly” shared his insights with a few close friends, believing “that the faith required for salvation from alcoholism had to be just that –faith. . . .”



## Bill's personal opinions on LSD

In 1954, Dr. Hoffer and Dr. Osmond Claimed their work with LSD and schizophrenia might help alcoholics with delirium tremens.

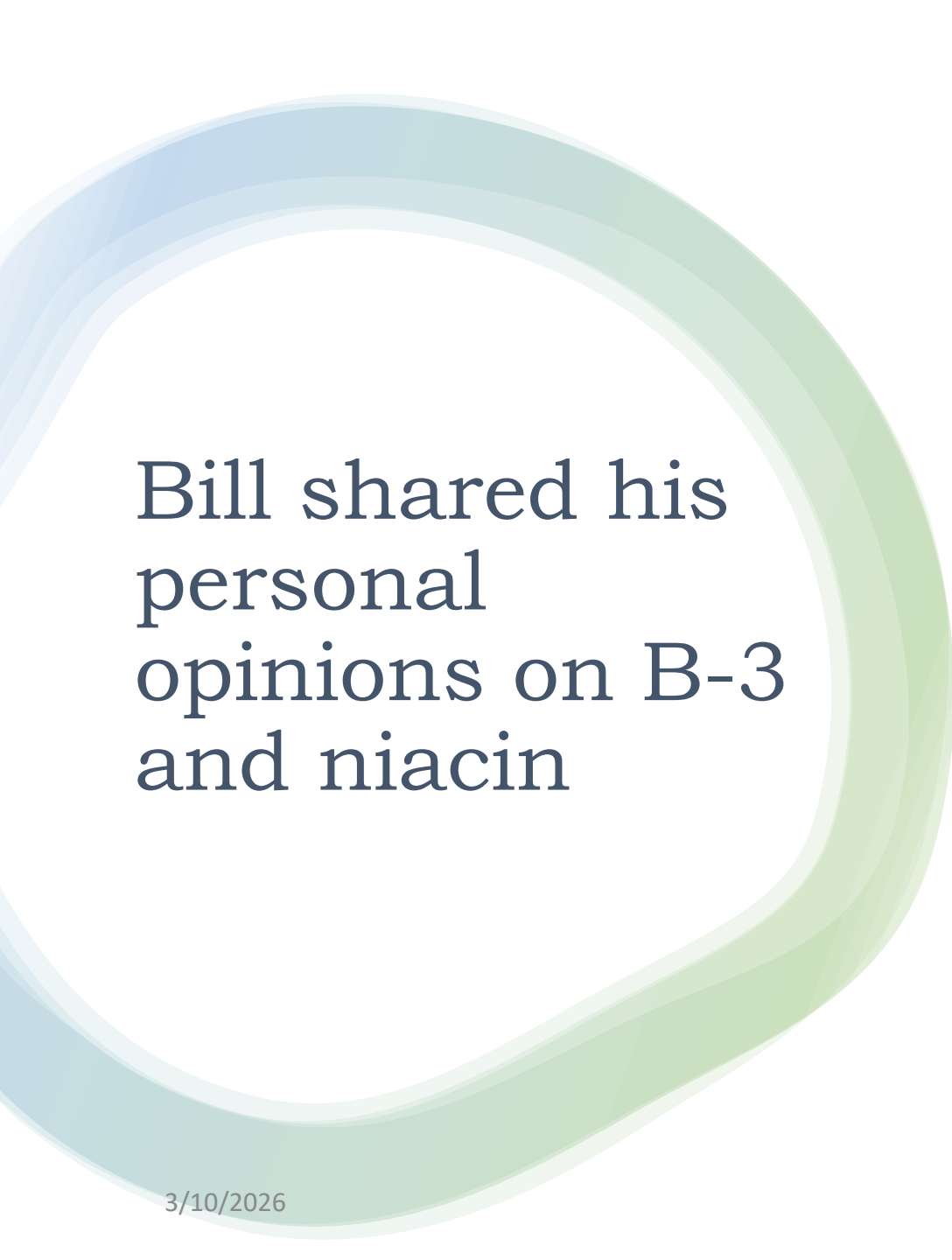
August 1956 - Bill took the drug under the guidance and presence of a psychiatrist at the Los Angeles Veterans Administration Hospital in August 1956.

Bill was driven by his belief in spiritualism and by a desire to find similar experiences that would help struggling alcoholics find a God of their own understanding. (*Pass It On*, 368 – 375)

Bill bitterly resented being told by the Fellowship how to live his life when he was making every effort to back away from the leadership of A.A.

The LSD experiment's ensuing controversy overlapped with Bill's ongoing argument with Tiebout about Bill's own immaturity.

Bill reluctantly withdrew from the LSD experiments in 1959, acknowledging that he could never escape his status as a founder of A.A. (*Pass It On*, 368 – 375)



## Bill shared his personal opinions on B-3 and niacin

Bill tried vitamins B-3 and niacin and was convinced they were a breakthrough treatment for depression and could help dually diagnosed alcoholics.

Bill enthusiastically began working with researchers and wrote about B-3 and niacin using A.A. letterhead in the General Service Office.

To make matters worse, he started freely sharing the vitamins with the staff in G.S.O. and with alcoholics in meetings. (*Pass It On*, 388 – 391)

Recommendation - Bill separate his non-A.A. matters from A.A. by using his own letterhead and his own address

Bill not involve G.S.O. employees in activities not related to A.A.

The 1967 Conference supported the Board's recommendation and Bill complied.

Oddly, Bill broke his own Traditions, but the Traditions and his hard-fought-for Conference and General Service structure saved A.A. from Bill. (Pass It On', 390 – 391)

## **At the very public level: Congressional testimony by A.A.s**

Bill spoke about the history of A.A. before the U.S. Senate Special Subcommittee on Alcoholism and Narcotics of the Committee on Labor and Public Welfare in July 1969.

In 1988, nonalcoholic Trustee, Dr. Joan Jackson, testified before the Committee on Governmental Affairs.

We do not take a position on this question.

AA would not consider it to be appropriate for it to comment on the studies cited by [doctor's name].

As stated above, Alcoholics Anonymous does not have an opinion on other forms of treatment for alcoholism or about their effectiveness.

## Tenth Tradition - “What AA does not do.” (A. A. Group, 39)

1. Recruit members or furnish initial motivation for alcoholics to recover.
2. Keep membership records or case histories.
3. Follow up or try to control its members.
4. Make medical or psychological diagnoses or prognoses.
5. Provide hospitalization, drugs, or medical or psychiatric treatment.
6. Provide housing, food, clothing, jobs, money or other such services.

7. Provide domestic or vocational counseling.
8. Engage in or sponsor research.
9. Affiliate with social agencies (though many members and service offices do cooperate with them).
10. Offer religious services.
11. Engage in any controversy about alcohol or other matters.
12. Accept money for its services or contributions from non-A.A. sources.
13. Provide letters of reference to parole boards, attorneys, court officials, schools, businesses, social agencies, or any other institution.

## In summary

Bill referred to A.A.'s experiences with outside opinions as only short-term disruptions that in essence had nothing to do one alcoholic talking to another alcoholic.

Never since it began has Alcoholics Anonymous been divided by a major controversial issue. (*Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, 176)

Every Tradition was born out of controversy within the Fellowship, mostly of its own making, and always accompanied by the roar of angry members!

But as Bill said,

Despite their din, our puny rows never did A.A. a particle of harm. They were just part and parcel of learning to work and live together. (*Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, 178)

I hope that this journey through the Traditions has demonstrated that what Bill said is true:

. . . .that they were almost always concerned with ways to make A.A. more effective, how to do the most good for the most alcoholics. (*Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, 178)

## Coming up: the Eleventh Tradition

Given that we see the importance of avoiding public controversy, it is not surprising that the next Tradition discusses anonymity at the level of press, radio, and film.

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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