

**“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 5**

*Each group has but one primary purpose—to carry its message to the alcoholic who still suffers.*

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

Each Alcoholics Anonymous group ought to be a spiritual entity  
*having but one primary purpose—that of carrying its message to the  
alcoholic who still suffers.*

A.A. General Service Office.. 1952. *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*. 1991. New York City: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc., 150, 190

Don't just sit there!  
Carry the message!



# The primary purpose is to carry the message

A frequent misquote of the Fifth Tradition is, “Our primary purpose is to help the alcoholic who still struggles.”

The Fifth Tradition says “Each group has but one primary purpose—to carry its message to the alcoholic who still suffers”

Which aligns with the Twelfth Step’s charge that “we tried to carry this message”

Which seems to align with a fundamental concept in “How It Works.”

“That probably no human power could have relieved our alcoholism.”  
(*Alcoholics Anonymous*, 60)

This is not a surprise to friends and family in A.A.’s companion program, Al Anon.

Certainly, Bill was not concerned with semantics during his first six months of sobriety!

He attempted to ‘help’ other alcoholics, but with no positive results other than the fact that he stayed sober.

Bill finally met Dr. Bob and then there were two alcoholics desperately trying to stay sober by working with others.

“We had to. . . .We were under awful compulsion, and we found that we had to do something for somebody or actually perish ourselves.” (*Dr. Bob and the Goodoldtimers*, 69)

Hands-on experience quickly taught them that their prospects genuinely had to want to stay sober.

All Bill and Dr. Bob could do was carry the message.

Who better than alcoholics can take a simple idea and make it complicated!



Over the next few years, many excited members believed they could improve the A.A. program with their financial, educational, or other schemes for carrying the message.

As a whole, alcoholics, including Bill and Dr. Bob, were ambitious, inspired, and smart.

With such innovative talent behind potentially creative A.A. projects, how and why did the Fellowship circle back to its humble beginnings – when the primary purpose depended on one alcoholic carrying the message to another?

# Early dreams for helping struggling alcoholics during the “flying blind” period

October 1937, forty-one recovered alcoholics!!!

Hospitals and institutions in that day were not nearly as successful, so it was not a stretch for a grandiose alcoholic to believe he could outdo professionals in that field.

All he needed was money (alcoholics’ battle cry)!

Bill went back to New York to raise the money for paid missionaries and for writing a book, but his vision was to carry the message through A.A. hospitals and sanitariums. (Schaberg, 26).

Frank Amos

Plan # 1 \$100,000

Plan # 2 \$30,000

But won't money ruin this thing?

Plan # 3 \$5000 spread over two years to for Dr. Bob

Rockefeller's approved \$5000 donation in March 1938.

Dr. Bob's hospital "that would have served as a first big step in the expansion of their movement—was dead and it would never be seriously considered again." (Schaberg, 87)

Sort of . . .

In October 1938, Fitz M.'s contact with a Washington, D.C. judge who was intrigued with the Fellowship resurrected Bill's ambitious vision for a chain of A.A. hospitals.

It would be several more years before Bill finally and completely gave it up.

It is understandable why Bill thought A.A. sanitariums would help more alcoholics than the word-of-mouth approach of the early Fellowship.

However, naive and inexperienced, he had no way of knowing such complex institutions required a deadly combination for alcoholics – money, property, and power.

Another distraction: A program that is a cure for all ills?

April 1948 Grapevine article,

Fortunately, most of us are convinced that these are perilous speculations, alluring ingredients of that new heady wine we are now being offered, each bottle marked “Success!”

Of this subtle vintage may we never drink too deeply. May we never forget that we live by the grace of God – on borrowed time; that anonymity is better than acclaim; that for us as a movement poverty is better than wealth. (*Language of the Heart*, 82 -83).

Finally, Bill ended his allegory with the soul of the Fifth Tradition:

And may we reflect with ever deepening conviction, that we shall never be at our best except when we hew only to the primary spiritual aim of AA. That of carrying its message to the alcoholic who still suffers alcoholism.

*(Language of the Heart, 83)*



Apparently, by 1955, Bill had witnessed still more alcoholics giving in to the misapprehension of being able to solve other problems through A.A.

“Let us resist the proud assumption that since God has enabled us to do well in one area we are destined to be a channel of saving grace for everybody.” (AA Group, 7)

We’ll learn in Tradition 10 that even Bill strayed from A.A.’s primary purpose.

# Statement of unconditional surrender to one primary purpose

We think we should do one thing well rather than many things to which we are not called. That is the central idea of this Tradition. *Our society gathers in unity around this concept* (emphasis added). (*Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, 106)

Bill reemphasized unity not only for the group, but for A.A. as a whole when he said:

We shall direct our energies where they count most. Most emphatically, then, A.A. has but one single purpose: *to carry its message to the alcoholic who still suffers*. That is our basic objective, our real reason for existence. (*Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, 107)

Going back to our “carry the message” roots: One alcoholic talking to another

Dr. Silkworth urged Bill to give prospects “the medical business and give it to them hard,”

How do you give a medical doctor “the medical business”?

As providence would have it, Bill didn’t see a medical doctor. He saw an alcoholic just like himself.

Dr. Bob listened well beyond the originally and reluctantly promised 15 minutes. (Kurtz, 29)

. . . here was someone who did understand, or perhaps at least could. This stranger from New York didn't ask questions and didn't preach; he offered no "you must's" or even "let us's." He had simply told the dreary but fascinating facts about himself, about his own drinking. And now, as [Bill] moved to stand up to end the conversation, he was actually thanking Dr. [Bob] for listening. "I called Henrietta because I needed another alcoholic. I needed you, Bob, probably a lot more than you'll ever need me. So, thanks a lot for hearing me out. I know now that I'm not going to take a drink, and I'm grateful to you. (Kurtz, 29)

Wait a minute! He's leaving?!?!

While he had been listening to Bill's story, Bob had occasionally nodded his head, muttering, "yes, that's like me, that's just like me."

Now he could bear the strain no longer. He'd listened to Bill's story, and now, by God, this "rum hound from New York" was going to listen to his.

For the first time in his life, Dr. Bob [S] began to open his heart. (Kurtz, 29)

In the context of the Fifth Tradition, the story of when Bill met Dr. Bob is important as it reminds alcoholics that the

“ex-problem drinker, who is properly armed with facts about himself, can generally win the entire confidence of another alcoholic in a few hours.” (*Alcoholics Anonymous*, 18)

This story is A.A.’s first successful instance of carrying the message.

Back then, carrying the message was arduous and frequently discouraging.

“Gratitude in Action” (Dave B., one of the founders of A.A. in Canada in 1944), (*Alcoholics Anonymous*, 193-199)

“The Man Who Mastered Fear” (Archie T. who started A.A. in Detroit), (*Alcoholics Anonymous*, 246-257)

“He Sold Himself Short” (Earl T. who started A.A. in Chicago), (*Alcoholics Anonymous*, 258-267)

Because of A.A.’s early pioneers, individuals carrying the message transitioned to groups carrying the message.



# How can groups reach and carry the message to newcomers?

Outline the program of action, explaining how you made a self-appraisal, how you straightened out your past and why you are now endeavoring to be helpful to him. It is important for him to realize that your attempt to pass this on to him plays a vital part in your own recovery. Actually, he may be helping you more than you are helping him. Make it plain he is under no obligation to you, that you hope only that he will try to help other alcoholics when he escapes his own difficulties. (*Alcoholics Anonymous*, 94)

Never talk down to an alcoholic from any moral or spiritual hilltop; simply lay out the kit of spiritual tools for his inspection. Show him how they worked with you. *Offer him friendship and fellowship* (emphasis added). Tell him that if he wants to get well you will do anything to help....If he is to find God, the desire must come from within. (*Alcoholics Anonymous* , 95)

A.A. groups that want to conduct a self-examination vis-a-vis the Fifth Tradition should consult the *A.A. Group Pamphlet*.

1. What is the basic purpose of our group?
2. What more can our group do to carry the message?
3. Is our group attracting alcoholics from different backgrounds? Are we seeing a good cross-section of our community, including those with accessibility issues?
4. Do new members stick with us, or does the turn-over seem excessive? If so, why? What can we as a group do to retain members? (*AA Group*, 29)

Promising newcomers safety and privacy is paramount and assured through A.A.'s principle of anonymity.

At the personal level, anonymity assures privacy for all members, a safeguard often of special importance to newcomers who may hesitate to seek help in A.A. if they have any reason to believe their alcoholism may be exposed publicly. (*AA Group*, 8)

The group conscience itself can be the arena where personalities may override principles.

Invoking the Second Tradition and relying on an ultimate authority, the group can examine the conduct in its group consciences and business meetings.

Practicing the principles of recovery in group consciences and business meetings is how members continue to carry the message together *and to each other*.

Does the group's conduct help or repel struggling alcoholics?

For example, a crosstalk policy can be helpful or it can be harmful.

G.S.O. staff made a very firm disclaimer:

The so-called guidelines did *not* emanate from the General Service Office.

Then added for emphasis:

[Groups are free to have “crosstalk” guidelines]....But please do not say that such guidelines came from the General Service Office. (1994 Box 459, 2)

Incidentally, invoking autonomy in the Fourth Tradition, some groups make crosstalk part of their meeting conduct.

In short, a policy of crosstalk may help to moderate disruptive comments but could be counterproductive if a group enforces it rigidly or belligerently.



# Exactly who are alcoholics who still suffer?

Marty's story in the Big Book, 'Women Suffer Too,' held nothing back in terms of sharing with others the dominance of alcoholism in her life.

. . . I feel myself a useful member of the human race at last. I have something to contribute to humanity, since I am peculiarly qualified, as a fellow-sufferer . . . .

Marty understated her positive influence as she spent over forty years working to educate the public about alcoholism.  
(*Alcoholics Anonymous*, 200-207)

After twenty years of sobriety, Marty relapsed.

This relapse of Marty's has remained a closely held secret among AAs who were aware of it at the time. Some of them didn't even know that others knew. (Brown & Brown, 263)

Why such secrecy?

“Who we see here, what we hear here, let it stay here,”  
would not be respected?

Why was she reluctant to seek the comfort of her group?

Was she uncertain that she would be able to share her  
despair safely and anonymously?

Whatever her reasons, secrecy prevented her from getting  
comfort from the very people who were “peculiarly  
qualified,” the Fellowship of A.A.

Marty said it took her many years to understand she bore a rock-bottom, indivisible, personal responsibility for AA's great gift of life so freely given—to realize that how she conducted herself mattered to the future of AA.  
(Brown & Brown, 267)

Who has not heard of someone with 9 months, 3 years, 7, 10, 15 or more years relapse?

Are members paying attention when *anyone* stops going to meetings?

Does A.A.'s primary purpose apply only to newcomers?

# Singleness of purpose and the A.A. group as a spiritual entity

In the Fifth Tradition essay Bill used variations of “singleness of purpose” three times and did not use “primary” at all.

There is another reason for this singleness of purpose [Bill goes on to say we can’t keep it unless we give it away.] (page 151)

Highlighting the wisdom of A.A.’s single purpose, a member tells this story: [Bill tells the story of the conceited Irishman] (page 151)

Thank heaven I came up with the right answer for that one. It was based foursquare on the single purpose of A.A. [Bill answers the Irishman’s accusation about being a religious sect.] (page 153)

The singleness of purpose is emphatically stated as “one primary purpose” in the Long Form of the Fifth Tradition:

Each Alcoholics Anonymous group ought to be a **spiritual entity** *having but one primary purpose*—that of carrying its message to the alcoholic who still suffers.

The Long Form charges the group, as a *spiritual entity*, to invoke the Second Tradition when it decides how it will carry the message.

That is, an ultimate authority as expressed in an informed group conscience will guide the group’s conduct in how it carries the message.

In summary: A.A.'s *single purpose* and unity

October 1949, Bill joined the First Tradition with the Fifth Tradition in his article, "As We Approach Maturity."

....we are sure there must be a million alcoholics who would join Alcoholics Anonymous tomorrow if only they knew what we do.

We keenly realize that any fundamental disunity among us could instantly disillusion tens of thousands who would again turn their faces to the wall. (*Language of the Heart*, 116)



Finally, Bill reminded members that there is no better way to carry the message than with an attitude of gratitude!

So long as *we remain grateful for what has be fallen us* (emphasis added), and for so long as this Tradition of high and single purpose is indelibly emblazoned on our hearts, our destiny will be assured. (*Language of the Heart*, 116)

# Coming up: the Sixth Tradition

Through A.A.'s first five Traditions, members and groups learn how to better relate to each other. Now we can explore the Tradition that helps the Fellowship to relate to the world outside of A.A. – the Sixth Tradition.

Comments and questions?  
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