

## **GROUPS & TRADITIONS IN PRISON**

Many people, over the decades, have ventured to place in words the meaning of AA tradition. Similar to the steps, we are left with our own “interpretation”. The definitions of the words are easy to find with a dictionary. The interpretation I refer to is the underlying spiritual value that each of these expressions has in our own personal experience. Our personal experience will also influence the groups that we contribute to. I am acutely aware of the responsibility bestowed on each of us for the opportunity to provide example for those who are new, casually passing through or more important are in desperate need of what we have to offer. I am also aware that some of these desperate souls may or may not realize the importance of the possible fatal situation that they may be in. They might also not be aware of the absolute joy and the possibility of a life beyond the spectrum of their current reference that is available to them. This is why the perspective I like to pursue toward groups and group conscience is the likely perception of the man or woman sitting in the meeting who is still suffering, regardless of whether he/she is new or, like me, around AA for a long time, not hearing any message of hope.

This is merely my personal venture. I am positive that other people have different experiences than I do and I think this is the way it should be. I do not claim to be an expert. I do claim, however, to be consistently active, open-minded to the probability that I am delusional, aware that I am still growing and will always be growing and that this is merely my perception of the spiritual value of traditions, a group and of group conscience at this point in my journey.

I do, however, want to throw out a disclaimer. Occasionally my assessment as to what others seem to be doing, or saying, might come across as condescending or self-righteous. I promise that my passion for God and helping others is strong, my desire to not allow politeness to compromise the truth as I see it, and my love for my brother or sister who is suffering spiritually the way I use to is the only reason why I allow myself to express my feelings in a way that might sound judgmental. I am very aware that I could just simply be wrong. However, this is the best I can offer. Enjoy or discard. I have love in my heart for you regardless as to whether or not we agree.

Obviously, there are some limitations that need to be addressed for a meeting in a prison. I have never started a meeting in a prison, however, my experience with starting meetings in multiple locations and situations has proven to me that if we stay close to principle, remarkable things can happen. I’m sure different institutions have different rules. However, the principles I believe need to be kept forefront in our minds as we initiate a meeting and maintain the growth of a meeting. These principles are conceptually addressed in our traditions. Each tradition is addressed in this writing. The first tradition states the dilemma. The second tradition states the solution. The rest of the traditions show us how to attain the solution, as stated in the second tradition.

## TRADITION 1

**Reference** The first tradition short form: Our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends on A.A. unity.

**Reference** The first tradition long form: Each member of Alcoholics Anonymous is but a small part of a great whole. A.A. must continue to live or most of us will surely die. Hence our common welfare comes first. But individual welfare follows close afterwards.

As previously mentioned, this tradition states our dilemma. Without others in my life, there is no chance of my survival...physically, mentally or spiritually. A good example of this is the effectiveness of solitary confinement in the prison system. We instinctively know to resist the threat, let alone the actuality of going to “the hole”. It’s a very effective way of punishing people and scaring them in to compliance. We are simply not designed to be alone.

The traditions are based on undeniable experience that our unity is vital. These principles are not someone’s brainstorm theory...they were “hammered out on the anvils of experience”. They evolved from what has worked, and what has not worked, not only in the early years of A.A., but also from our learned experience from the Oxford Groups and the Washingtonian Temperance Society...both are organizations that were started similar to AA and both met their demise. I am positive that the members of both of these societies did not believe that their societies would ever die...but they did. First they died spiritually...then in every other way.

As far as my personal recovery, left to my own devices, I am personally “dead in the water”...there is no personal recovery for me. I need others to keep me in check and I need to be helping others in order to grow. We all have differences in experiences and perceptions, as well as differences in degrees of desperation and willingness. This does not matter. We still need each other to survive. Tradition One is a statement of this fact. That without our common welfare (Unity) there is no personal recovery for me, so our unity, or common welfare, has to come first.

## TRADITION 2

**Reference** The second tradition short form: For our group purpose there is but one ultimate authority - a loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience. Our leaders are but trusted servants; they do not govern.

**Reference** The second tradition long form: For our group purpose there is but one ultimate authority-a loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience.

The second tradition states the solution which is all about group conscience, *informed* group conscience however, which we suspect is how God guides us. We do, on occasion, need to elect “trusted servants”, not “leaders”, to accomplish some tasks, but they are always responsible to report to the group.

How is the Group Conscience attained?

My suggestion:

- a. Put the motion on the table
- b. Have discussion to get informed as possible.
- c. Take a vote
- d. Allow the minority to share
- e. Ask if anyone in the majority wants to change their vote
- f. If no, then you have your group conscience...If yes, then you need to re-vote
- g. Again, ask if anyone in the minority wants to share
- h. Ask if anyone in the majority wants to change their vote
- i. Continue doing this until no one in the majority wants to change their vote after listening to the minority.
- j. Sounds weird, but it works really well. Theoretically this could go back and forth forever, but it will never go past two cycles before everyone agrees to disagree...remembering that group conscience is not written in stone...it can always be changed tomorrow if it appears to be ineffective.

In the spirit of the second tradition, the group should place emphasis on the word “informed” as it is explained in the published literature concerning the traditions (in 12 & 12, A.A. Comes of Age and several pamphlets describing A.A.’s Twelve Traditions). Informed group conscience is desired over simple group conscience. Two or more people can be in complete agreement and be sharing the same delusional.

A group should adopt the following guidelines for two reasons: (1) to minimize the chances of the group conscience meeting distracting us from our primary purpose of being available to the man/woman who is still suffering, and (2) to minimize attracting people who are not committed to the primary purpose of the group, who would join/vote/steer group conscience decisions without being informed.

## Guidelines:

1. All efforts to be as informed as possible are always preferred.
2. Avoid group conscience meetings immediately following the meeting, except in extreme circumstances and only when they are guaranteed to be so short as to not affect the group member's ability to talk with the newcomer after the meeting.
3. Schedule regular group conscience meetings once every six months at a location other than the meeting location, at a day & time other than meeting night.
4. When the group conscience meetings are scheduled, efforts should be made to choose a starting time that will enhance the ability of group members to attend. As much advance notice as possible will be provided.

## TRADITION 3

**Reference:** The third tradition short form: The only requirement for AA membership is a desire to stop drinking.

**Reference:** The third tradition long form: Our membership should include all who suffer from alcoholism. Hence, we may refuse none who wish to recover. Nor ought AA membership ever depend upon money or conformity. Any two of three alcoholics gathered together for sobriety may call themselves an AA group, provided that, as a group, they have no other affiliation.

I do believe that putting “a desire to stop drinking” in the short form was probably wise since most people do not understand “real alcoholism”, particularly when they're new. However, once a newcomer has been indoctrinated to alcoholism as a spiritual condition...a spiritual malady that we endure while we are sober, the “desire to stop drinking” seems to cause those who are ill-informed to adopt a belief that if you're not a “straight white male that drank during the war” you're not welcome in AA.

When the traditions were compressed from the long form to the short form, some integrity was lost. Most people in AA believe that alcoholism is a drinking problem. This is acceptable for some but will kill those the Big Book refers to as the “real alcoholic”...the person who suffers from an untreated spiritual malady. In the groups that I support, you're a member if you say you're a member. However, being a member does not automatically authorize you to take our podium and hold us hostage. An effective group has a message identified and attempts to allow only those who have personal messages similar to the group's message to share. If someone does not have experience with the solution as identified by the group's message, they should sit quiet or find a meeting where there are like-minded people.

Respecting the right of others to membership ultimately enhances our overall unity.

## TRADITION 4

**Reference:** The fourth tradition short form: Each group should be autonomous except in matters affecting other groups or A.A. as a whole.

**Reference:** The fourth tradition long form: 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.

As individuals in the world, we are all part of a large whole...a Creation. Within this Creation, however, we are individual autonomous “meat puppets” of self-will...usually fear-driven, but in our case, trying to be love-driven. Provided my individual actions do not affect negatively other people or society as a whole, usually no one seems to have a problem with me and therefore our unity is enhanced.

Our groups are no different. We are groups of people that have come together for a purpose. Provided the activities of the group do not affect negatively other groups or the fellowship/society as a whole, usually no one seems to have a problem with our group and therefore our unity is enhanced.

We, as a group, can see the effects our group is having in very different ways. Often times, people will have issues with a group's actions...often due to them, or us, being uninformed or inexperienced. This becomes a challenging issue when the uninformed/inexperienced person believes that he/she is informed/experienced and therefore has a closed-mind. However, each group, just like each individual, answers to God...not to any human power. Keep an open-mind. Listen to the experience of others, but bow to God alone...we don't bow to human powers.

Have you ever noticed that AA has no police activity? Has this ever caused you to ask “why”? It seems to me that the reason why AA does not require police is because if an individual does not adhere to spiritual principle, the individual will pay spiritual consequence. If the spiritual consequence is not painful enough and if he/she is the “real alcoholic”...the bottle will become very attractive...he/she will seek relief with the bottle long before any police activity can get to them.

This same spiritual consequence will happen to the group if the group does not adhere to spiritual principle. The group will die spiritually first and then in every other way. Therefore, rather than worry about misinformed or uninformed people who are taking pot-shots at your group, you merely need to look to see if your group is attractive to those who are dealing with a similar dilemma and have a similar solution. This will be further addressed in the seventh tradition.

## TRADITION 5

**Reference** The fifth tradition short form: Each group has but one primary purpose - to carry its message to the alcoholic who still suffers.

**Reference** The fifth tradition long form: 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 group conscience should place emphasis on the word “its” in the fifth tradition. I believe that each effective group of Alcoholics Anonymous has “its” own message. By defining this message and agreeing that carrying this message is “its” (the group’s) primary purpose, all further dilemmas or motions raised in group conscience need merely to pass one test...Will this enhance the group’s primary purpose or distract the group from it?

I am of the opinion that an effective group will define “its” message as: *Hope is available through God dependence and service to others. This message is carried most effectively by one alcoholic sharing with another, using the Big Book for guidance and inspiration.*

What is a group? My belief is that a group “should be” two or more people who have a similar message to carry, or a similar approach to carrying a message...I realize that is not the case in most groups today, but it sure makes life easier when all group members come from the same type of recovery approach.

What is the purpose of having a home group? It is where I have a vote in AA as a whole. In the case of a group in a prison, this most likely does not need to be addressed. However, it is also a place where someone looking for me, even years down the road, can pretty much assume they can find me there. I try never to miss my home group, if possible.

## TRADITION 6

**Reference** The sixth tradition short form: An A.A. group 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.

**Reference** The sixth tradition long form: Problems of money, property, and authority may easily divert us from our primary spiritual aim. We think, therefore, that any considerable property of genuine use to A.A. should be separately incorporated and managed, thus dividing the material from the spiritual. An A.A. group, as such, should never go into business. Secondary aids to A.A., such as clubs or hospitals which require much property or administration, ought to be incorporated and so set apart that, if necessary, they can be freely discarded by the groups. Hence such facilities ought not to use the A.A. name. Their management should be the sole responsibility of those people who financially support them. For clubs, A.A. managers are usually preferred. But hospitals, as well as other places of recuperation, ought to be well outside A.A.-and medically supervised. While an A.A. group may cooperate with anyone, such cooperation ought never go so far as affiliation or endorsement, actual or implied. An A.A. group can bind itself to no one.

AA's membership is made up of people who are many and varied. They have different degrees of willingness, desperation and experience. They are all equal members of AA. However, endorsement issues, placing the AA name on certain things, issues of money, property and prestige can be very sensitive and often cause disunity. Avoiding these issues will enhance our unity as a society. Within the group structure, these same issues can cause disharmony amongst group members and should be avoided. They divert us from our primary purpose, which you can only see if your group has its primary purpose identified as discussed in Tradition Five.

## TRADITION 7

**Reference:** The seventh tradition short form: Every A.A. group ought to be fully self-supporting, declining outside contributions.

**Reference:** The seventh tradition long form: The A.A. groups themselves ought to be fully supported by the voluntary contributions of their own members. We think that each group should soon achieve this ideal; that any public solicitation of funds using the name of Alcoholics Anonymous is highly dangerous, whether by groups, clubs, hospitals, or other outside agencies; that acceptance of large gifts from any source, or of contributions carrying any obligation whatever, is unwise. Then too, we view with much concern those A.A. treasuries which continue, beyond prudent reserves, to accumulate funds for no stated A.A. purpose. Experience has often warned us that nothing can so surely destroy our spiritual heritage as futile disputes over property, money, and authority.

Most AA members are of the belief that the seventh tradition is about fiscal responsibility or paying our bills. Although this is an important aspect of this tradition, the tradition itself has a much deeper spiritual purpose.

The spiritual benefit of this tradition is the fact that if a group is not being supported than our resources could be better used somewhere else. Bill Wilson stated that if AA ever ceases to support itself, then it has outlived its purpose. The group being self-supporting is our one and only true measuring stick as to our effectiveness. If we accept outside contributions, this contribution will destroy this measuring stick. Added to this problem is the fact that when you accept a man's money, you will be required to accept his bad ideas.

For a meeting in a prison, I doubt there will be a collection of funds. Attendance can be used as a close second for determining if you're group is truly serving a purpose. An institution that forces people to attend will destroy this type of measuring stick, however.

## TRADITION 8

**Reference:** The eighth tradition short form: Alcoholics Anonymous should remain forever non-professional, but our service centers may employ special workers.

**Reference:** The eighth tradition long form: Alcoholics Anonymous should remain forever non-professional. We define professionalism as the occupation of counseling alcoholics for fees or hire. But we may employ alcoholics where they are going to perform those services for which we may otherwise have to engage non-alcoholics. Such special services may be well recompensed. But our usual A.A. "12th Step" work is never to be paid for.

For a meeting in a prison, I don't see this tradition being a factor. The only possible factor I can foresee is if a prison counselor forces people to come to the meeting or forces people to share. These types of activities might have some effectiveness in therapy and psychiatry but are actually detrimental in spiritual endeavors. They will also destroy our unity.



## TRADITION 9

**Reference:** The ninth tradition short form: A.A., as such, ought never be organized; but we may create service boards or committee directly responsible to those they serve.

**Reference:** The ninth tradition long form: Each A.A. group needs the least possible organization. Rotating leadership is the best. The small group may elect its Secretary, the large group its Rotating Committee, and the groups of a large Metropolitan area their Central or Intergroup Committee, which often employs a full-time Secretary. The trustees of the General Service Board are, in effect, our A.A. General Service Committee. They are the custodians of our A.A. Tradition and the receivers of voluntary A.A. contributions by which we maintain our A.A. General Service Office at New York. They are authorized by the groups to handle our over-all public relations and they guarantee the integrity of our principle newspaper, "The A.A. Grapevine." All such representatives are to be guided in the spirit of service, for true leaders in A.A. are but trusted and experienced servants of the whole. They derive no real authority from their titles; they do not govern. Universal respect is the key to their usefulness.

AA's structure is an upside-down triangle. The top of the structure is the members...they are in charge of the society. It works "down" to the GSR (Group Service Representative), then to the DCM (District Chair Member), then to the Area Delegate, then finally to AA World Services.

There are other service entities and positions. Groups have a secretary, a chairperson, a treasurer, literature people, institution representatives and Intergroup/Central Service representatives. The Intergroups/Central Service Offices are separate from the normal service structure triangle...they handle the affairs of metropolitan areas. Regardless as to whether we are discussing positions in the service structure or within the group, the people holding these positions are responsible to report to the members. They should rotate the positions to avoid anyone getting too comfortable. If they stay in these positions too long, they seem to become "seats of power". Move people through these positions. It will enhance our unity and maximize the chances that we won't get distracted from our primary purpose. Typically outgoing officers stay on as "alternates" for the next term. This practice ensures that the incoming officer will be informed and trained and that if the incoming officer is ever unavailable, someone with experience in the position can step in during the absence.

## TRADITION 10

**Reference:** The tenth tradition short form: Alcoholics Anonymous has no opinion on outside issues; hence the A.A. name ought never be drawn into public controversy.

**Reference:** The tenth tradition long form: 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.

AA has no opinions, however individual members have more opinions than we can count. The key is to find ways to express your opinions without leaving anyone the impression that this opinion is AA's opinion. No one speaks for AA. This allows us to enhance our unity, even amongst our differences. Public controversy will divide us.

## TRADITION 11

**Reference:** The eleventh tradition short form: 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.

**Reference:** The eleventh tradition long form: 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.

Similar to someone trying to help someone who doesn't want help, this could get ugly and defeat our primary purpose if we even hint at the idea that we are selling or promoting something. We let people know that we're available, but then wait until they express interest. The principle of anonymity is not as much about confidentiality then it is about making sure that we don't ever believe that we have the right or ability to speak for AA as a whole. I can only speak on my experience. Many AA's have different experiences than I do...not better than, not worse than...but other than. I don't speak for anyone except myself. This is the spiritual importance of anonymity. Eliminating my last name is not the issue. Even Dr. Bob stated...we don't want to be so anonymous that people cannot find us. However, when identifying myself as a member of Alcoholics Anonymous, I should go "above and beyond" to emphasize and ensure that I don't even imply that I represent AA. This will allow others to hear my heart with an open mind and allow me to hear theirs, thus enhancing our unity, even amongst our differences.

## TRADITION 12

**Reference:** The twelfth tradition short form: Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our Traditions, ever reminding us to place principles before personalities.

**Reference:** The twelfth tradition long form: 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.

Genuine humility, expressed through anonymity in the spiritual sense, can only be attained when I know deep within my soul, that I do not represent Alcoholics Anonymous...I only represent myself and my personal perceptions which are changing by the minute. Once I know this about myself, I then only need to be myself...my actions will express what is in my heart. If it's not in my heart, my actions will express that too. Anything short of genuine humility expressed through anonymity will cause friction and division amongst us...therefore deteriorating our unity.

My favorite definition of "Humility" is the awareness of the existence, and the importance, of others in my life. This cannot be faked.

## MISCELLANEOUS ISSUES

### Willing people vs. complicated people

Avoid complicated people at all cost. They will burn up all your energy and squash out the willingness of others. Surround yourself with ONLY people who are willing to take action consistently and keep this thing simple.

### Positions and Rotations

Elect a Secretary and any other necessary positions. Do not give people service positions because you think it will help them get willingness. Willingness only comes from desperation, pain or joy. You cannot transmit willingness...only hope.

The speaker that leads the meeting sets the tone for the speakers that follow, if any, but also sets the tone for the whole meeting, even if he/she is the only speaker. You will notice that when a meeting stays focused on “God Dependence” and “Service to Others”, there is an air in the room that cannot be explained, but cannot be denied. Most people will stay after the meeting talking, laughing and helping to clean up, without being asked. If you don’t have a meeting like that, most people will “scatter like roaches when the lights are turned on” as soon as the “Lord’s Prayer” is complete. When the air is high in the room and the energy is enthusiastic, this is the best time to talk with the new person who is still suffering. This would be the worst time to have a group conscience meeting...this is the time to approach the newcomer.

Some position and rotation suggestions for prison groups:

Set-up/Coffee/Supplies	Six Month Rotation
Greeters	All Members
Secretary/Chairperson	Six Month Rotation
Literature	Six Month Rotation
Clean-up	Six Month Rotation

### Criticism of other groups

Respect other groups and individuals but don’t concern yourself with what they think.

Whenever you or your group is criticized, ask yourself one question...do these people who are criticizing us have what we want? Are they getting the kind of results in recovery that we want to get? If the answer is yes, then consider their advice...if the answer is no, then respectfully thank them for their input. Listen to what they say so you know what not to do. When I can do this with other groups, it teaches me to not judge their groups as well. This also enhances our unity.

### Anniversaries

People that join a group—but do not have the same message as the group—should be asked to abstain from speaking at their own anniversary. This is not always popular, but you need to ask yourself whether it is more important to be popular or more important for your group to maintain its primary purpose: to carry its message. Sometimes it is best to just not celebrate any anniversaries at all.

### Carnival tactics

Raffles, Chips, Fluffy Readings, etc. – Avoid this stuff as much as you possibly can. It diverts us from our primary purpose. The spiritual solution is attractive enough...you don’t need to promote this in any other way.