

Tradition Five

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

"SHOEMAKER stick to thy last!"...better do one thing supremely well than many badly. That is the central theme of this Tradition. Around it our Society gathers in unity. The very life of our fellowship requires the preservation of this principle.

Alcoholics Anonymous can be likened to a group of physicians who might find a cure for cancer, and upon whose concerted work would depend the answer for sufferers of this disease. True, each physician in such a group might have his own speciality. Every doctor concerned would at times wish he could devote himself to his chosen field rather than work only with the group. But once these men had hit upon a cure, once it became apparent that only by their united effort could this be accomplished, then all of them would feel bound to devote themselves solely to the relief of cancer. In the radiance of such a miraculous discovery, any doctor would set his other ambitions aside, at whatever the personal cost.

Just as firmly bound by obligation are the members of Alcoholics Anonymous, who have demonstrated that they can help problem drinkers as others seldom can. The unique ability of each A.A. to identify himself with, and bring recovery to, the newcomer in no way depends upon his learning, eloquence, or on any special individual skills. The only thing that matters is that he is an alcoholic who has found a key to sobriety. These legacies of suffering and of recovery are easily passed among alcoholics, one to the other. This is our gift from God, and its bestowal upon others like us is the one aim that today animates A.A.'s all around the globe.

There is another reason for this singleness of purpose. It is the great paradox of A.A. that we know we can seldom keep the precious gift of sobriety unless we give it away. If a group of doctors possessed a cancer cure, they might be conscious-stricken if they failed their mission through self-seeking. Yet such a failure wouldn't jeopardize their personal survival. For us, if we neglect those who are still sick, there is unremitting danger to our own lives and sanity. Under these compulsions of self-preservation, duty, and love, it is not strange that our Society has concluded that it has but one high mission--to carry the A.A. message to those who don't know there's a way out.

Highlighting the wisdom of A.A.'s single purpose, a member tells this story:

"Restless one day, I felt I'd better do some Twelfth Step work. Maybe I should take out some insurance against a slip. But first I'd have to find a drunk to work on.

"So I hopped the subway to Towns Hospital, where I asked Dr. Silkworth if he had a prospect. 'Nothing too promising,' the doc said. 'There's just one chap on the third floor who might be a possibility. But he's an awfully tough Irishman. I never saw a man so obstinate. He shouts that if his partner would treat him better, and his wife would leave him alone, he soon solve his alcohol problem. He's had a bad case of the D.T.'s, he's pretty foggy, and he's very suspicious of everybody. Doesn't sound too good, does it?' But working with him may do something for you, so why don't you have a go at it?"

"I was soon sitting beside a big hulk of a man. Decidedly unfriendly, he stared at me out of eyes that were slits in a swollen red face. I had to agree with the doctor--he certainly didn't look good. But I told him my own story. What a wonderful Fellowship we had, how well we understood each other. I bore down hard on the hopelessness of a drunk's dilemma. I insisted that few drunks could ever get well on

their own steam, but that in our groups we could do together what we could not do separately. He interrupted to scoff at this and asserted he'd fix his wife, his partner, and his alcoholism by himself. Sarcastically he asked, "How much does your scheme cost?"

"I was thankful I could tell him, 'Nothing at all.'

"His next question: "What are you getting out of it?"

"Of course, my answer was 'My own sobriety and a mighty happy life.'

"Still dubious, he demanded, 'Do you really mean the only reason you are here is to try and help me and to help yourself?'

"'Yes,' I said. 'That's absolutely all there is to it. 'There's no angle.'

"Then, hesitantly, I ventured to talk about the spiritual side of our program. What a freeze that drunk gave me! I'd no sooner got the word 'spiritual' out of my mouth that he pounced. 'Oh!' he said. 'Now I get it! You're proselyting for some damn religious sect or other. Where do you get that "no angle" stuff? I belong to a great church that means everything to me. You've got your nerve to come in here talking religion!'

"Thank heaven I came up with the right answer for that one. It was based foursquare on the single purpose of A.A. 'You have faith,' I said. 'Perhaps far deeper faith than mine. No doubt you're better taught in religious matters than I. So I can't tell you anything about religion. I don't even want to try. I'll bet, too, that you could give me a letter-perfect definition of humility. But from what you've told me about yourself and your problems and how you propose to lick them, I think I know what's wrong.'

"'Okay,' he said. 'Give me the business.'

"'Well,' said I, 'I think you're just a conceited Irishman who thinks he can run the whole show.'

"This really shocked him. But as he calmed down, he began to listen while I tried to show him that humility was the main key to sobriety. Finally, he saw that I wasn't trying to change his religious views, that I wanted him to find the grace in his own religion that would aid his recovery. From there on we got along fine.

"Now," concludes the oldtimer, "suppose I'd been obliged to talk to this man on religious grounds? Suppose my answer had to be that A.A. needed a lot of money; that A.A. went in for education, hospitals, and rehabilitation? Suppose I'd suggested I'd take a hand in his domestic and business affairs? Where would we have wound up? No place, of course."

Years later this tough Irish customer liked to say, "My sponsor sold me one idea, and that was sobriety. At the time, I couldn't have bought anything else."