

Tradition Six

"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."

THE moment we saw that we had an answer for alcoholism, it was reasonable (or so it seemed at the time) for us to feel that we might have the answer to a lot of other things. The A.A. groups, many thought, could go into business, might finance any enterprise whatever in the total field of alcoholism. In fact, we felt duty-bound to throw the whole weight of the A.A. name behind any meritorious cause.

Here are some of the things we dreamed. Hospitals didn't like alcoholics, so we thought we'd build a hospital chain of our own. People needed to be told what alcoholism was, so we'd educate the public, even rewrite school and medical textbooks. We'd gather up derelicts from skid rows, sort out those who could get well, and make it possible for the rest to earn their livelihood in a kind of quarantined confinement. Maybe these places would make large sums of money to carry on our other good works. We seriously thought of rewriting the laws of the land, and having it declared the alcoholics are sick people. No more would they be jailed; judges would parole them in our custody. We'd spill A.A. into the dark regions of dope addiction and criminality. We'd form groups of depressive and paranoid folks; the deeper the neurosis, the better we'd like it. It stood to reason that if alcoholism could be licked, so could any problem.

It occurred to us that we could take what we had into the factories and cause laborers and capitalists to love each other. Our uncompromising honesty might soon clean up politics. With one arm around the shoulder of religion and the other around the shoulder of medicine, we'd resolve their differences. Having learned to live so happily, we'd show everybody else how. Why, we thought, our Society of Alcoholics Anonymous might prove to be the spearhead of a new spiritual advance! We might transform the world.

Yes, we of A.A. did dream those dreams. How natural that was, since most alcoholics are bankrupt idealists. Nearly every one of us had wished to do great good, perform great deeds, and embody great ideals. We are all perfectionists who, failing perfection, have gone to the other extreme and settled for the bottle and the blackout. Providence, through A.A., had brought us within reach of our highest expectations. So why shouldn't we share our way of life with everyone?

Whereupon we tried A.A. hospitals--they all bogged down because you cannot put an A.A. group into business; too many busybody cooks spoil the broth. A.A. groups had their fling at education, and when they began to publicly whoop up the merits of this or that brand, people became confused. Did A.A. fix drunks or was it an educational project? Was A.A. spiritual or was it medical? Was it a reform movement? In consternation, we saw ourselves getting married to all kinds of enterprises, some good and some not so good. Watching alcoholics committed willy-nilly to prisons or asylums, we began to cry, "There oughtta be a law!" A.A.'s commenced to thump tables in legislative committee rooms and agitated for legal reform. That made good newspaper copy, but little else. We saw we'd soon be mired in politics. Even inside A.A. we found it imperative to remove the A.A. name from clubs and Twelfth Step houses.

These adventures implanted a deep-rooted conviction that in no circumstances could we endorse any related enterprise, no matter how good. We of Alcoholics Anonymous could not be all things to all men, nor should we try.

Years ago this principle of "no endorsement" was put to a vital test. Some of the great distilling companies proposed to go into the field of alcohol education. It would be a good thing, they believed, for the liquor trade to show a sense of public responsibility. They wanted to say that liquor should be enjoyed, not misused; hard drinkers ought to slow down, and problem drinkers--alcoholics--should not drink at all.

In one of their trade associations, the question arose of just how this campaign should be handled. Of course, they would use the resources of radio, press, and films to make their point. But what kind of person should head the job? They immediately thought of Alcoholics Anonymous. If they could find a good public relations man in our ranks, why wouldn't he be ideal? He'd certainly know the problem. His connection with A.A. would be valuable, because the Fellowship stood high in public favor and hadn't an enemy in the world.

Soon they'd spotted their man, an A.A. with the necessary experience. Straightaway he appeared at New York's A.A. headquarters, asking, "Is there anything in our tradition that suggests I shouldn't take a job like this one? The kind of education seems good to me, and is not too controversial. Do you headquarters folks see any bugs in it?"

At first glance, it did look like a good thing. Then doubt crept in. The association wanted to use our member's full name in all its advertising; he was to be described both as its director of publicity and as a member of Alcoholics Anonymous. Of course, there couldn't be the slightest objection if such an association hired an A.A. member solely because of his public relations ability and his knowledge of alcoholism. But that wasn't the whole story, for in this case not only was an A.A. member to break his anonymity at a public level, he was to link the name Alcoholics Anonymous to this particular educational project in the minds of millions. It would be bound to appear that A.A. was now backing education--liquor trade association style.

The minute we saw this compromising fact for what it was, we asked the prospective publicity director how he felt about it. "Great guns!" he said. "Of course I can't take the job. The ink wouldn't be dry on the first ad before an awful shriek would go up from the dry camp. They'd be out with lanterns looking for an honest A.A. to plump for their brand of education. A.A. would land exactly in the middle of the wet-dry controversy. Half the people in this country would think we'd signed up with the dries, the other half would think we'd joined the wets. What a mess!"

"Nevertheless, we pointed out, "you still have a legal right to take this job." "I know that," he said. "But this is no time for legalities. Alcoholics Anonymous saved my life, and it comes first. I certainly won't be the guy to land A.A. in big-time trouble, and this would really do it!"

Concerning endorsements, our friend had said it all. We saw as never before that we could not lend the A.A. name to any cause other than our own.