

# Tradition Three

*"The only requirement for A.A. membership  
is a desire to stop drinking."*

THIS Tradition is packed with meaning. For A.A. is really saying to every serious drinker, "You are an A.A. member if you say so. You can declare yourself in; nobody can keep you out. No matter who you are, no matter how low you've gone, no matter how grave your emotional complications—even your crimes—we still can't deny you A.A. We don't want to keep you out. We aren't a bit afraid you'll harm us, never mind how twisted or violent you may be. We just want to be sure that you get the same great chance for sobriety that we've had. So you're an A.A. member the minute you declare yourself."

To establish this principle of membership took years of harrowing experience. In our early time, nothing seemed so fragile, so easily breakable as an A.A. group. Hardly an alcoholic we approached paid any attention; most of those who did join us were like flickering candles in a windstorm. Time after time, their uncertain flames blew out and couldn't be relighted. Our unspoken, constant thought was "Which of us may be the next?"

A member gives us a vivid glimpse of those days. "At one time," he says, "every A.A. group had many membership rules. Everybody was scared witless that something or somebody would capsize the boat and dump us all back into the drink. Our Foundation office\* asked each group to send in its list of 'protective' regulations. The total list was a mile long. If all those rules had been in effect everywhere, nobody could have possibly joined A.A. at all, so great was the sum of our anxiety and fear.

"We were resolved to admit nobody to A.A. but that hypothetical class of people we termed 'pure alcoholics.' Except for their guzzling, and the unfortunate results thereof, they could have no other complications. So beggars, tramps, asylum inmates, prisoners, queers, plain crackpots, and fallen women were definitely out. Yes sir, we'd cater only to pure and respectable alcoholics! Any others would surely destroy us. Besides, if we took in those odd ones, what would decent people say about us? We built a fine-mesh fence right around A.A.

"Maybe this sounds comical now. Maybe you think we oldtimers were pretty intolerant. But I can tell you there was nothing funny about the situation then. We were grim because we felt our lives and homes were threatened, and that was no laughing matter. Intolerant, you say? Well, we were frightened. Naturally, we began to act like most everybody does when afraid. After all, isn't fear the true basis of intolerance? Yes, we were intolerant."

How could we then guess that all those fears were to prove groundless? How could we know that thousands of these sometimes frightening people were to make astonishing recoveries and become our greatest workers and inti-

\*In 1954, the name of the Alcoholic Foundation, Inc., was changed to the General Service Board of Alcoholics Anonymous, Inc., and the Foundation office is now the General Service Office. mate friends? Was it credible that A.A. was to have a divorce rate far lower than average? Could we then foresee that troublesome people were to become our principal teachers of patience and tolerance? Could any then imagine a society which would include every conceivable kind of character, and cut across every barrier of race, creed, politics, and language with ease?

Why did A.A. finally drop all its membership regulations? Why did we leave it to each newcomer to decide himself whether he was an alcoholic and whether he should join us? Why did we dare to say,

contrary to the experience of society and government everywhere, that we would neither punish nor deprive any A.A. of membership, that we must never compel anyone to pay anything, believe anything, or conform to anything?

The answer, now seen in Tradition Three, was simplicity itself. At last experience taught us that to take away any alcoholic's full chance was sometimes to pronounce his death sentence, and often to condemn him to endless misery. Who dared to be judge, jury, and executioner of his own sick brother?

As group after group saw these possibilities, they finally abandoned all membership regulations. One dramatic experience after another clinched this determination until it became our universal tradition. Here are two examples:

On the A.A. calendar it was Year Two. In that time nothing could be seen but two struggling, nameless groups of alcoholics trying to hold their faces up to the light.

A newcomer appeared at one of these groups, knocked on the door and asked to be let in. He talked frankly with that group's oldest member. He soon proved that his was a desperate case, and that above all he wanted to get well. "But," he asked, "will you let me join your group: Since I am the victim of another addiction even worse stigmatized than alcoholism, you may not want me among you. Or will you?"

There was the dilemma. What should the group do? The oldest member summoned two others, and in confidence laid the explosive facts in their laps. Said he, "Well, what about it? If we turn this man away, he'll soon die. If we allow him in, only God knows what trouble he'll brew. What shall the answer be—yes or no?"

At first the elders could look only at the objections. "We deal," they said, "with alcoholics only. Shouldn't we sacrifice this one for the sake of the many?" So went the discussion while the newcomer's fate hung in the balance. Then one of the three spoke in a very different voice. "What we are really afraid of," he said, "is our reputation. We are much more afraid of what people might say than the trouble this strange alcoholic might bring. As we've been talking, five short words have been running through my mind. Something keeps repeating to me, 'What would the Master do?'" Not another word was said. What more indeed could be said?

Overjoyed, the newcomer plunged into Twelfth Step work. Tirelessly he laid A.A.'s message before scores of people. Since this was a very early group, those scores have since multiplied themselves into thousands. Never did he trouble anyone with his other difficulty. A.A. had taken its first step in the formation of Tradition Three.

Not long after the man with the double stigma knocked for admission, A.A.'s other group received into its membership a salesman we shall call Ed. A power driver, this one, and brash as any salesman could possibly be. He had at least an idea a minute on how to improve A.A. These ideas he sold to fellow members with the same burning enthusiasm with which he distributed automobile polish. But he had one idea that wasn't so salable. Ed was an atheist. His pet obsession was that A.A. could get along better without its "God nonsense." He browbeat everybody, and everybody expected that he'd soon get drunk—for at the time, you see, A.A. was on the pious side. There must be a heavy penalty, it was thought, for blasphemy. Distressingly enough, Ed proceeded to stay sober.

At length the time came for him to speak in a meeting. We shivered, for we knew what was coming. He paid a fine tribute to the Fellowship; he told how his family had been reunited; he extolled the virtue of honesty; he recalled the joys of Twelfth Step work; and then he lowered the boom. Cried Ed, "I can't stand this God stuff! It's a lot of malarkey for weak folks. This group doesn't need it, and I won't have it! To hell with it!"

A great wave of outraged resentment engulfed the meeting, sweeping every member to a single resolve: "out he goes!"

The elder led Ed aside. They said firmly, "You can't talk like this around here. You'll have to quit it or get out." With great sarcasm Ed came back at them. "Now do tell! Is that so?" He reached over to a bookshelf and took up a sheaf of papers. On top of them lay the foreword to the book "Alcoholics Anonymous," then under preparation. He read aloud, "The only requirement for A.A. membership is a desire to stop drinking." Relentlessly, Ed went on, "When you guys wrote that sentence, did you mean it, or didn't you?"

Dismayed, the elders looked at one another, for they knew he had them cold. So Ed stayed.

Ed not only stayed, he stayed sober-month after month. The longer he kept dry, the louder he talked against God. The group was in anguish so deep that all fraternal charity had vanished. "When, oh when," groaned members to one another, "will that guy get drunk?"

Quite a while later, Ed got a sales job which took him out of town. At the end of a few days, the news came in. He'd sent a telegram for money, and everybody knew what that meant! Then he got on the phone. In those days, we'd go anywhere on a Twelfth Step job, no matter how unpromising. But this time nobody stirred. "Leave him alone! Let him try it by himself for once; maybe he'll learn a lesson!"

About two weeks later, Ed stole by night into an A.A. member's house, and unknown to the family, went to bed. Daylight found the master of the house and another friend drinking their morning coffee. A noise was heard on the stairs. To their consternation, Ed appeared. A quizzical smile on his lips, he said, "have you fellows had your morning meditation?" They quickly sensed that he was quite in earnest. In fragments, his story came out.

In a neighboring state, Ed had holed up in a cheap hotel. After all his pleas for help had been rebuffed, these words rang in his fevered mind: "They have deserted me. I have been deserted by my own kind. This is the end ... nothing is left." As he tossed on his bed, his hand brushed the bureau near by, touching a book. Opening the book, he read. It was a Gideon Bible. Ed never confided anymore of what he saw and felt in that hotel room. It was the year 1938. He hasn't had a drink since.

Nowadays, when oldtimers who know Ed foregather, they exclaim, "What if we had actually succeeded in throwing Ed out for blasphemy? What would have happened to him and all the others he later helped?"

So the hand of Providence early gave us a sign that need alcoholic is a member of our Society when he says so.