

Tradition Four: Group Autonomy

Let Them Sing

By Rick R.

It is hard to fathom how well AA has fared throughout its years of existence which began in 1935. Navigating the waters in those early days was a lot more treacherous than the average member of today's AA population would be aware of, since efforts of the founders have been proven to have weathered every storm that appeared on the horizon. The AA members of that time did, however, have the experience of understanding the mistakes of their predecessors, The Oxford Group, which had some success where it had recorded over one hundred thousand sober members before it ventured outside certain boundaries and got off the track when religion seemed to become more of an agenda than sobriety. Then there was a similar experience when it came to the Washingtonians that also let outside influences like politics and outside money issues take over the agenda.

These mistakes did not go unnoticed by the early members of the AA program and may have been the things that set the tone for being careful about sticking to our singleness of purpose requirement and structuring the tradition in a way that gives the individual groups as much leeway as possible as not to discourage diversity yet staying on course when it comes to rules that would omit any alcoholic that wants to get sober. Autonomy is simply a form of independence that gives each group the latitude to be creative in their own way, when it wants to appeal to certain factions of the alcoholic community at large so long as it does not cross over into making those painful mistakes that could lead us down that path that led to the dismantling of those groups that came before AA Today, in AA we have meetings that cater to specific segments of the AA population, such as: Men's Meetings, Women's Meetings, Open Meetings, Gay and Lesbian Meetings, Step Study, Big-Book Study, Spanish Speaking, and on and on. The common theme for all these meetings is to carry the message to the alcoholic who still suffers. Anyone who has a desire to stop drinking cannot be turned away if; indeed, that meeting wants to continue to be called an AA meeting.

I was serving in the U.S. Navy at the time when I got sober in late 1969 and shortly after my one-year sober celebration, I was on a plane heading to the Philippines to go aboard a fuel tanker and I spent the next four months hauling fuel out to the Tonkin Gulf and refueling the convoys of ships out there during the Vietnam War. During that four-month period I was unable to go to a single AA meeting. What happened during that time when I was cut off from the daily news concerning the AA program, without my knowledge, was the sad news that Bill W. had passed away. This happened shortly after I left the country and by the time I returned home it was no longer the topic of conversation and I heard nothing about it. Shortly after I returned home my wife and I attended an AA Convention in California and to my surprise, the main event at that convention was the Bill W. Memorial Meeting, and I had no idea when he had passed away, it could have been ten years earlier for all I knew. On the stage at that meeting there were ten chairs lined up and seated in those chairs were ten of the most prominent speakers of that time, and each of them were to tell a five-minute story of their own personal experience with Bill. The one story that I still remember from that meeting goes something like this.

On a request from some of his AA friends on the west coast, Bill was on a train going to California to speak at several well planned out meetings. The members of AA in a small Midwestern town heard that his train would be stopping in their town and asked if he would consider stopping over for a day and speaking at their meeting. He agreed to do it as he usually did in those days. When the train arrived in that town, members expected Bill to arrive with an entourage of people assisting him, and they had arranged a welcome with a band, a large crowd, and an all the town's dignitaries. When the train stopped, the only one that got off was Bill, as he walked down the ramp alone with one suitcase. He proceeded to the planned meeting place and as the meeting began, Bill was somewhat shocked when the members started the meeting with several church hymns. Nevertheless, he fulfilled his promise and gave his talk and was again disturbed when the meeting ended with several more hymns. After completing his stay, he boarded a train and continued his journey.

On the train, what kept bothering Bill was "What are they doing to AA with the hymns" and it did not seem right. Then Bill started thinking about the size and the population of that small town, and about the large number of alcoholics that attended that meeting and he concluded that, per capita, that was probably the largest meeting in the country and if they wanted to sing hymns, well that's their business, let them sing. I believe that tradition four leaves it up to the individual group's discretion to consider the different cultural influences that affect the makeup and the structure of the meeting format and I believe that Bill got it right so long as it does not change the spirit of our primary purpose, to carry the message to the alcoholic who still suffers and that no one with a desire to stop drinking can be turned away.