

**Proposal by Bill W.  
For  
Twelve Concepts For World Service  
10th General Service Conference - 1960**

This proposal, delivered by Bill W. at the closing of the 10th General Service Conference is of great historical significance as it was the first time that Bill had spoken to the Fellowship on the subject of the Twelve Concepts. The transcript has been verified against the original voice recording.

The last of the sand in the hourglass of our time together is about to run its course. And you have asked me, as of old, to conclude this conference, our tenth.

I always approach this hour with mixed feelings. As time has past, each year succeeding itself, I have found increasing gratitude beyond measure, because of the increasing sureness that AA is safe at last for God, so long as he may wish this society to endure. So I stand here among you and feel as you do a sense of security and gratitude such as we have never known before. There is not a little regret, too, that the other side of the coin - that we cannot turn back the clock and renew these hours. Soon they will become a part of our history.

The three legacies of AA - recovery, unity and service - in a sense represent three utter impossibilities, impossibilities that we know became possible, and possibilities that now have borne this unbelievable fruit. Old Fitz Mayo, one of the early AAs and I visited the Surgeon General of the United States in the third year of this society, told him of our beginnings. He was a gentle man, Dr. Lawrence Kolb, since become a great friend of AA, and he said: "I wish you well. Even the sobriety of such a few is almost a miracle. The government knows that this is one of the greatest health problems we have, one of the greatest moral problems, one of the greatest spiritual problems. But we here have considered recovery of alcoholics so impossible that we have given up and have instead concluded that rehabilitation of narcotic addicts would be the easier job to tackle."

Such was the devastating impossibility of our situation.

Now, what had been brought to bear upon this impossibility that it has become possible? First, the Grace of Him who presides over all of us. Next, the cruel lash of John Barleycorn who said, "This you must do, or die." Next, the intervention of God through friends, at first a few, and now legion, who opened to us, who in the early days were uncommitted, the whole field of human ideas, morality and religion, from which we could choose.

These have been the wellsprings of the forces and ideas and emotions and spirit which were first fused into our Twelve Steps for recovery. And some of us got well. But no sooner had a few got sober then the old forces began to come into play. In us rather frail people, they were fearsome: the old forces, the drives, money, acclaim, prestige.

Would these tear us apart? Besides, we came from every walk of life. Early, we had begun to be a cross section of all men and women, all differently conditioned, all so different and yet happily so alike in our kinship of suffering. Could we hold in unity? To those few who remain who lived in those earlier times when the Traditions were being forged in the school of hard experience on its thousands of anvils, we had our very, very dark moments.

It was sure recovery was in sight, but how could there be recovery for many? Or how could recovery endure if we were to fall into controversy and so into dissolution and decay? Well, the spirit of the Twelve Steps, which has brought us release, from one of the grimmest obsessions known - obviously, this spirit and these principles of retaining Grace had to be the fundamentals of our unity. But in order to become fundamental to our unity, these principles had to be spelled out as they applied to the most prominent and the most grievous of our problems.

So, out of experience, the need to apply the spirit of our steps to our lives of working and living together, these were the forces that generated the Traditions of Alcoholics Anonymous.

But, we had to have more than cohesion. Even for survival, we had to carry this message. We had to function. In fact, that had become evident in the Twelve Steps themselves for the last one enjoins us to carry the message. But just how would we carry this message? How would we communicate, we few, with those myriad's who still didn't know? And how would this communication be handled? And how could we do these things, how could we authorize these things in such a way that in this new hot focus of effort and ego we were not again to be shattered by the forces that had once ruined our lives?

This was the problem of the Third Legacy. From the vital Twelfth Step call right up through our society to its culmination today. And, again, many of us said: This can't be done. It's all very well for Bill and Bob and a few friends to set up a Board of Trustees and to provide us with some literature, and look after our public relations, and do all of those chores for us we can't do for ourselves. This is fine, but we can't go any further than that. This is a job for our elders. This is a job for our parents. In this direction only can there be simplicity and security.

And then we came to the day when it was seen that the parents were both fallible and perishable (although this seems to be a token they are not). And Dr. Bob's hour struck. And we suddenly realized that this ganglion, this vital nerve center of World Service, would lose its sensation the day the communication between an increasingly unknown Board of Trustees and you was broken. Fresh links would have to be forged. And at that time many of us said: This is impossible. This is too hard. Even in transacting the simplest business, providing the simplest of services, raising the minimum amounts of money, these excitements to us, in this society so bent on survival have been almost too much locally. Look at our club brawls. My God, if we have elections countrywide, and Delegates come down here, and look at the complexity - thousands of group representatives, hundreds of committeemen, scores of Delegates -

My God, when these descend on our parents, the Trustees, what is going to happen then? It won't be simplicity; it can't be. Our experience has spelled it out.

But there was the imperative, the must. And why was there an imperative? Because we had better have some confusion, we had better have some politicking, than to have an utter collapse of this center. That was the alternative. And that was the uncertain and tenuous ground on which this Conference was called into being.

I venture, in the minds of many, sometimes in mine, the Conference could be symbolized by a great prayer and a faint hope. This was the state of affairs in 1945 to 1950. And then came the day that some of us went up to Boston to watch an Assembly elect by two thirds vote or lot a Delegate. And prior to the Assembly, I consulted all the local politicians and those very wise Irishmen in Boston said, we're gonna make your prediction Bill, you know us temperamentally, but we're going to say that this thing is going to work. And it was the biggest piece of news and one of the mightiest assurances that I had up to this time that there could be any survival for these services.

Well, work it has, and we have survived another impossibility. Not only have we survived the impossibility, we have so far transcended it that I think that there can be no return in future years to the old uncertainties, come what perils there may.

Now, as we have seen in this quick review, the spirit of the Twelve Steps was applied in specific terms to our problems, to living, to working together. This developed the Traditions. In turn, the Traditions were applied to this problem of functioning at world levels in harmony and in unity.

And something which had seemed to grow like Topsy took on an increasing coherence. And through the process of trial and error, refinements began to be made until the day of the great radical change. Our question here in the old days was: Is the group conscience for Trustees and for founders? Or are they to be the parents of Alcoholics Anonymous forever? There is something a little repugnant - you know, They got it through us, why can't we go on telling them?

So the great problem, could the group conscience function at world levels? Well, it can and it does. Today we are still in this process of definition and of refinement in this matter of functioning. Unlike the Twelve Steps and the Twelve Traditions which no doubt will be undisturbed from here out, there will always be room in the functional area for refinements, improvements, adaptations. For God's sake, let us never freeze these things. On the other hand, let us look at yesterday and today, at our experience. Now, just as it was vital to codify in Twelve Steps the spiritual side of our program, to codify in twelve traditional principles the forces and ideas that would make for unity, and discourage disunity, so may it now be necessary to codify, those principles and relationships upon which our world service function rests, from the group right up through.

This is what I like to call structuring. People often say, What do you mean by structuring? What use is it? Why don't we just get together and do these things? Well, structure at this level means just what structure means in the Twelve Steps and in the Twelve Traditions. It is a stated set of principles and relationships by which we may understand each other, the tasks to be done and what the principles are for doing them. Therefore, why shouldn't we take the broad expanse of the Traditions and use their principles to spell out our special needs in relationships in this area of function for world service, indeed, at long last, I trust for all services whatever character?

Well, we've been in the process of doing this and two or three years ago it occurred to me that I should perhaps take another stab -not at another batch of twelve principles or points, God forbid, but at trying to organize the ideas and relationships that already exist so as to present them in an easily understood manner.

As you know the Third Legacy Manual is a manual that largely tells us how; it is mostly a thing of mere description and of procedure. So I have cooked up in a very tentative way something which we might call Twelve Concepts for World Service. This has been a three-year job. I found the material, because of its ramifications, exceedingly hard to organize. But I have made a stab at it and the Concepts, which are really bundles of related principles, are on paper and underneath each is a descriptive article. And I have eleven of the articles and perhaps will soon wind up the Twelfth.

Now, to give you an idea of what's cooking, what I've been driving at, I'll venture to bore you with two or three paragraphs of the introduction to this thing.

The Concepts to be discussed in the following pages are primarily an interpretation of AA's world service structure. They spell out the traditional practices and the Conference charter principles that relate the component parts of our world structure into a working whole. Our Third Legacy manual is largely a document of procedure. Up to now the Manual tells us how to operate our service structure. But there is considerable lack of detailed information which would tell us why the structure has developed as it has and why its working parts are related together in the fashion that our Conference and General Service Board charters provide.

These Twelve Concepts therefore represent an attempt to put on paper the why of our service structure in such a fashion that the highly valuable experience of the past and the conclusions that we have drawn from it cannot be lost.

These Concepts are no attempt to freeze our operation against needed change. They only describe the present situation, the forces and principles that have molded it. It is to be remembered that in most respects the Conference charter can be readily amended. This interpretation of the past and present can, however, have a high value for the future. Every oncoming generation of service workers will be eager to change and improve our structure and operations. This is good. No doubt change will be needed. Perhaps unforeseen flaws will emerge. These will have to be remedied.

But along with this very constructive outlook, there will be bound to be still another, a destructive one. We shall always be tempted to throw out the baby with the bath water. We shall suffer the illusion that change, any plausible change, will necessarily represent progress. When so animated, we may carelessly cast aside the hard won lessons of early experience and so fall back into many of the great errors of the past.

Hence, a prime purpose of these Twelve Concepts is to hold the experience and lessons of the early days constantly before us. This should reduce the chance of hasty and unnecessary change. And if alterations are made that happen to work out badly, then it is hoped that these Twelve Concepts will make a point of safe return.

Now, quickly, what are they?

Well, the first two deal with: ultimate responsibility and authority for world services belongs to the AA group. That is to say, that's the AA conscience.

The next one deals with the necessity for delegates authority. And perhaps you haven't thought of it, but when you re-read Tradition Two, you will see that the group conscience represents a final and ultimate authority and that the trusted servant is the delegated authority from the groups in which the servant is trusted to do the kinds of things for the groups they can't do for themselves. So, how that got that way, respecting world services: ultimate authority, delegated authority is here spelled out.

Then there comes in the next essay this all questioned importance of leadership, this all important question of what anyway is a trusted servant. Is this gent or gal a messenger, a housemaid - or is he to be really trusted? And if so, how is he going to know how much he can be trusted? And what is going to be your understanding of it when you hand him the job? Now, these problems are legion. The extent to which this trust is to be spelled out and applied to each particular condition has to have some means of interpretation, doesn't it? So I have suggested here that, throughout our services, we create what might be called the principle of decision - and the root of this principle is trust. The principle of decision, which says that any executive, committee, board, the Conference itself, within the state or customary scope of their several duties, should be able to say what questions they will dispose of themselves - and which they will pass on to the next higher authority for guidance, direction, consultation and whatnot.

This spells out and defines, and makes an automatic means of defining throughout our structure at all times, what the trust is that any servant could expect. You say this is dangerous? I don't think so. It simply means that you are not, out of your ultimate authority as groups, to be constantly giving a guy directions who you've already trusted to think for himself. Now, if he thinks badly, you can sack him. But trust him first. That is the big thing.

Now, then, there is another traditional principle, the source of another essay here called the principle of participation. Our whole lives have been wrecked, often from childhood, because we have not been participants. There had been too much of the parental thing, too much of the wrong kind of the parental thing, we always wanted to belong, we always wanted to participate; and there is going to be a constant tendency, which we must always defend against, and that is to place in our service structure any group, AA as a whole, the Conference, the Board of Trustees, committees, executives - to place any of these people in absolutely unqualified authority, one over the other. This is an institutional, a military, set-up - and God knows we drunks have rejected institutions and this kind of authority, for our purpose, haven't we?

So, therefore, how, as a practical matter, are we going to express this participation. Right here in this conference it's burned in; in Article XII you'll see this statement in the Conference Charter: nobody is to be set in utter authority over anybody else. How do we prevent this?

The Trustees here, and the headquarters people here, are in a great minority over you people. You have the ultimate authority over us. And you say, well these folks are nicely incorporated, and we ain't; and they have the dough legally, so have we got it? Sure, you got it. You can go home and shut the dough off, can't you? You've got the ultimate authority but - we've got some delegated authority. Now when you get in this Conference, you find that the Trustees, and the Directors and the staffs have votes.

And many of you say, why is it; we represent the groups; why the hell shouldn't we tell these people? Why should they utter one yip while we're doing it? Oh, we'll let 'em yip, but not vote. Well, you see, right there we get from the institutional idea to the corporate idea. And in the corporate business world, there is participation in these levels. Can you imagine -how much stock would you buy in General Motors if you knew the president and half the board of directors couldn't get into a meeting because they were on the payroll? Or could just come in and listen to the out-of-town directors? You'd want these people's opinions registered. And they can't really belong unless they vote. This we have found out by the hardest kind of experience. So therefore, the essay here on participation deals with the principle that any AA servant in any top echelon of service, regardless of whether they're paid, unpaid, volunteer or what, shall be entitled to reasonable voting privileges in accordance with their responsibility.

And you good politicians are going to say, but these people here hold a balance of power. Well, we qualified that in one way. We'll take the balance of power away from them when it comes to qualifications for their own jobs or voting in approval of their own actions. But the bulk of the work of this Conference has to do with plans and policy for the future. So supposing that among you Delegates there is a split. And supposing these people come in and vote, which, by the way, they seldom do as a bloc, and they swing it one way or the other on matters of future policy and planning; well, after all, why shouldn't they? Are they any less competent than the rest of us? Of course not. Besides these technical considerations, there is this deep need in us to belong, to participate. And you can only participate on the basis of equality - and one token of this is voting equality. At first blush, you won't like the idea. But you'll have a chance to think about it.

One more idea: There came to this country some hundred years ago a French Baron whose family and himself had been wracked by the French revolution. De Tocqueville. And he was a worshipful admirer of democracy. And in those days democracy seemed to be mostly expressed in people's minds by votes of simple majorities. And he was a worshipful admirer of the spirit of democracy as expressed by the power of a majority to govern. But, said de Tocqueville, a majority can be ignorant, it can be brutal, it can be tyrannous - and we have seen it. Therefore, unless you most carefully protect a minority, large or small, make sure that minority opinions are voiced, make sure that minorities have unusual rights, you're democracy is never going to work and its spirit will die. This was de Toqueville's prediction and, considering today's times, is it strange that he is not widely read now?

That is why in this Conference we try to get a unanimous consent while we can; this is why we say the Conference can mandate the Board of Trustees on a two-thirds vote. But we have said more here. We have said that any Delegate, any Trustee, any staff member,

any service director, - any board, committee or whatever -- that wherever there is a minority, it shall always be the right of this minority to file a minority report so that their views are held up clearly. And if in the opinion of any such minority, even a minority of one, if the majority is about to hastily or angrily do something which could be to the detriment of Alcoholics Anonymous, the serious detriment, it is not only their right to file a minority appeal, it is their duty.

So, like de Tocqueville, neither you nor I want either the tyranny or the majority, nor the tyranny of the small minority. And steps have been taken here to balance up these relations.

Now, some of the other things cover topics like this, I touched on this: The Conference acknowledges the primary administrative responsibility of the Trustees. We have talked about electing trustees and yet primarily they are a body of administrators. In a sense, it's an executive body, isn't it? Look at any form of government. (Understand we're not a form of government, but you have to pay attention to these forms). The President of the United States is the only elected executive; all the rest are appointive, aren't they, subject to confirmation by, which is the system we got here - and this goes into that.

And then there is this question taken up in another essay. How can these legal rights of the Trustees, which haven't been changed one jot or title by the appearance of this Conference, if they've got the legal right to hang on to your money and do as they dammed please, what's going to stop them? Well, the answer is: Nobody has a vested interest. They have to be volunteers always. They are amenable to the spirit of this Conference and its power and its prestige -- and if they are not, there is a provision here by which they can be reorganized; there is a provision in here by which they can be censored - and you can always go home and shut off the money spigot. So, the traditional power of this Conference and the groups is actually superior to the legal power of the Trustees. That is the balance. But the trustees as a minority some day, should this Conference get very angry and unreasonable, say: Boys, we're going to veto you for the time being, we ain't gonna do this - even as the President of the United States has the veto, so will these fellows. You go home and think this over. We won't go along. And if you give them a vote of no confidence, they can appeal to the groups. These are the balances, see; this is interpretive, this has all been implicit in our structure but we're trying to spell it out.

Well, there are others - There's a whole section on leadership, service leadership from top to bottom, what it's composed of. In AA we wash between great extremes. On the one side, we've got the infallible leader who never makes any mistakes - and let us do just as he says. On the other side we have a concept of leadership which goes and says: What shall I do? What shall I do? Tell me, what time do - I'm just a humble servant, not a trusted one, just a humble one. The hell with either. Leadership in practice works in between - and we spell that out. And so on.

This will give you an idea of what's cooking in the Twelve Concepts for World Service. The last one which I haven't done deals with the Conference - Article XII of the Conference charter. And you who recall it know that this is several things. First of all, it's the substance of the contract the groups made with the Board of Trustees at the time of St. Louis. And this contract decrees that this body shall never be a government.

It decrees that we shall be prudent financially. It decrees that we shall be keepers of the AA Tradition - and so on - so that it is in part a spiritual document and in part a contract. And, God willing, because it is both spiritual and contract, let it be for all time of our existence a sanctified contract.

My own days of active service, like the sands in our last hourglass, are running out. And this is good. We know that all families have to have parents and we know that the great unwisdom of all parenthood is to try to remain the parents of infants in adolescence and keep people in this state forever. We know that when the parents have done their bit, and said their pieces, and have nursed the family along, that there comes the point that the parents must say: Now, you go out and try your wings. You haven't grown up and we haven't grown up, but you have come to the age of responsibility where, with the tools we are leaving you, you must try to grow up, to grow in God's image and likeness.

So my feeling is not that I'm withdrawing because I'm tired. My feeling is that I would like to be another kind of parent, a fellow on the sidelines. If there is some breach in these walls which we have erected, some unseen flaw or defect, of course all of us oldsters are going to pitch in for the repairs. But this business of functioning in the here and now, that is for the new generation.

May God bless Alcoholics Anonymous forever. And I offer a prayer that the destiny of this society will ever be safe in the hearts of its membership and in the conscience of its trusted servants. You are the heirs. As I said at the opening the future belongs to you.