

The View from Here: - Each Month a Group of Past Delegates to the General Service Conference Will Talk About the Traditions

Amateurs Anonymous

Tradition Eight: Alcoholics Anonymous should remain forever nonprofessional, but our service centers may employ special workers.

The first two lines of the long form of Tradition Eight state that "Alcoholics Anonymous should remain forever nonprofessional. We define professionalism as the occupation of counseling alcoholics for fees or hire." Several lines further we read: "But our usual AA Twelfth Step work is never to be paid for."

These may be the most thoroughly ignored words in all of our Twelve Traditions.

The AA message is a message from one amateur to another amateur. AA didn't begin as one of many ways to help alcoholics. It began because there was nothing else that worked for alcoholics. That's still the case.

Who could possibly misunderstand those words in Tradition Eight? Just about everyone, apparently. When Dr. Vincent Dole retired as Class A (nonalcoholic) trustee some years ago, he said, "My greatest concern for the future of AA is that the principle of personal service might be eroded by money and professionalism." Unfortunately, that's precisely what seems to have happened.

In July 1950, Dr. Bob, speaking of AA's beginning and growth up to that date, said, "Let's not louse it all up with Freudian complexes and things that are interesting to the scientific mind but have little to do with our actual AA work." Like Vincent Dole, Bob had an uncannily accurate view of our future.

Early in AA's existence, Bill W. was offered a job at Towns Hospital as a paid therapist. Every one of those early AAs said, "Bill, you can't do this to us." Bill would have brought a flood of new business and made money for Towns Hospital and for himself, but what do you think would have happened to our Fellowship if Bill hadn't remained an amateur? With a sharply-focused vision of the real roots of our recovery process, those early members saw the perils.

It seems that the farther we go in time from the experience of our founders, the farther we get from what they actually did. In large part that's what's happened in AA. We have endless books and booklets explaining the Big Book and the Steps. We have workshops on something called "relapse prevention" which overlook the obvious fact that if we work and rework the Twelve Steps, we'll stay sober and enjoy mental and emotional health.

Unquestionably, some alcoholics need medication but most of them with depression, anxiety, apathy, and fear suffer from untreated alcoholism--a result of insufficient continuing work with the Twelve Steps. The AA message is not the joy of therapy or the gospel according to Prozac, but a "spiritual awakening as the result of these Steps." The foreword to the "Twelve and Twelve" says: "AA's Twelve Steps are a group of principles, spiritual in their nature, which, if practiced as a way of life, can expel the obsession to drink and enable the sufferer to become happily and usefully whole."

In my experience that's totally correct.

In the spring of 1948, I heard Paul S. talk in Chicago. He was one of the early Akron AAs and I was sober less than a year at the time. Over and over in his talk he said, "AA is of itself sufficient." If the quality of my life isn't what it should be, the best place for me to go for counseling or therapy is to the Big Book or to an AA member who has done enough continuing work with the Twelve Steps to understand that "how it works" means precisely what it says.

Some years ago I was talking with Dr. Leonard Borman, a research associate at Northwestern University's Center for Urban Affairs and the director of the Center's Self-Help Institute. Borman, who'd spent years studying the development of the self-help movement, told me, "Two principles stand out in AA and the self-help movement. One is that a person who has recovered from a problem can be far more helpful than a professional using only theoretical knowledge. The second is that when an individual helps another without charge, they both benefit."

The Twelve Steps provide a precise formula for sobriety and a road to mental, emotional, and spiritual health. They give directions for lives of expanded joy and usefulness. They also point up the need for continuing work in the Steps for my own recovery and continuing work with other alcoholics to pass on what I've been given at no charge. If we work with another alcoholic a spiritual transaction takes place, and we both benefit. If, on the other hand, we're paid for this, it becomes a monetary transaction and the spiritual component is destroyed.

In the past twenty-five years, the treatment of alcoholics has become an immensely profitable industry. In a remarkable coincidence, the optimum length of treatment invariably equaled the number of days covered by insurance. The term "greed" doesn't begin to describe what happened. Greed creates ignorance and it created monumental ignorance in the field of alcoholism treatment on what really helps alcoholics. The problem became obvious. If all that hospitals offered the alcoholic was the AA program, it would be difficult to charge large fees for their services. Inevitably the programs were larded with whatever therapy was popular at the moment.

Meanwhile, many individuals and institutions wanted to cash in on these suddenly gold-plated drunks. Countless AAs went to work in the treatment business and began twelfth-stepping for money. Not surprisingly, AA has been increasingly infected by the professional virus. All of this is destined to befuddle a new person on what really works for alcoholics: the Twelve Steps as a continuing way of life.

In our eagerness to be friendly with our friends we've been busily trading our spiritual birthright for a mess of psychiatric pottage. By profession Dr. Bob was a physician, but he helped alcoholics as an amateur. By profession Bill W. was a stockbroker, who helped alcoholics as an amateur. In the mid-1960s I spent three years as a member of a board of directors charged with dispensing two grants from the Eli Lilly foundation. One of the members was Dr. William Glasser, a prominent California psychiatrist and author of the best-selling book *Reality Therapy*. A couple of things that Glasser said have always stuck with me. One was, "If all the therapists disappeared today it wouldn't make any difference, because people would find someone else to talk to tomorrow." And the other was, "When you pay a therapist, you're buying a friend."

The AA message is free. We don't buy it and we don't sell it because money corrupts the message. We give it away in gratitude for our own recovery. That's the forgotten meaning of Tradition Eight.

We work with alcoholics for nothing because it's our privilege to help another breathe deeply in the life of the spirit and enjoy the vigorous healing generated by our program's principles. It doesn't work for money.

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