

Unity or Uniformity?

One of the big concerns (or one of the pre-planned excuses to leave) I had when I came to AA was that I would be joining a cult whose members would practice some form of mind control through psychological conditioning. This was not an idle fear on my part. A childhood friend had joined a cult while he was in college and had become exactly the type of zombie that cults are rumored to produce--in full flight from reality, feeling safe only in the confines of a world of prescribed behaviors and beliefs.

By the time I came to AA, I had been a salesman for seven years and had sat through sales meetings every single Friday. There, I had seen every imaginable form of group manipulation and intimidation done in the name of motivation.

I can't describe how relieved I was at my first AA meetings when I found groups of people who had the same problem I did and who spent an hour or so each week discussing the principles they applied, in their own individual ways, to recovery. As a rabid atheist in the beginning, I was amazed to hear one person talk about asking God for help on his knees every morning, another say he asked for help but did it while lying in bed, another talk about how the group was his Higher Power, still another say he didn't believe in any of that God stuff (me), and no one was shutting anyone up or threatening to throw them out of the meeting. The people at those meetings made it a point that the only requirement for AA membership was a desire to stop drinking, and that no one could demand that anyone do anything. Even the Lord's Prayer at the end of the meeting was only "for those who care to." Faced with this example of attraction rather than promotion, all of my excuses to leave AA evaporated and I found myself wanting what these people had and willing to go to meetings, get a sponsor, and work the Steps to get it.

I remember those meetings very well. They began with a long quiet time (the old-timers told me it was so I could quiet the marching band in my head and prepare to listen), a couple of brief readings, a short lead based on the readings, and then discussion of the lead topic by all the other members, who introduced themselves with, "I'm Paul and I'm an alcoholic." No one said, "Hi, Paul!" when someone introduced himself, and everyone had the courtesy to let the speaker say what he had to say without interruption. The first time I heard, "Hi, Paul!" at a meeting I thought I was in one of my sales meetings and it left a bad taste in my mouth. After everyone had spoken, people would stand, without holding hands, and "those who cared to" would quietly say the Lord's Prayer. I emphasize not holding hands because, for years, I had very sweaty palms and was extremely embarrassed by them, especially since I had gone to a retreat where they held hands and the guy on my right said, "Yuck! What is your problem?" in front of forty other men. I wonder how many other people, especially newcomers, have a similar problem, or are trying to hide their shaking, or have been in AA for years and now have arthritis in their hands, or have trouble standing and find saying the Lord's Prayer an endurance contest rather than an inspiration. What struck me most about those meetings was the quiet sincerity and the focus on sharing our experience, strength, and hope. The meetings seemed to be about how people lived AA principles outside of the meetings, not about the activities of the meeting itself.

Now, in some meetings, I find a number of rituals that also involve some form of censure if a member is in non-compliance:

What strikes me most is that meetings seem to have become more like religious services than "a Fellowship of men and women who share their experience, strength, and hope with each other that they may solve their common problem and help others to recover from alcoholism."

It also strikes me that these rituals are essentially exclusive in nature, that they say, "You had better do this if you want to be part of this group!" To me, that is a violation of the Third

Tradition. It would be easy enough to say, "Let the whirling dervishes whirl!" and I have tried that, but I have found that group pressure will be applied to any member who does not toe the party line. I think that some people confuse uniformity with unity of purpose. The two are not the same at all.

Well, I've gotten this off my chest and I thank whoever is reading this for their patience and tolerance. I believe that the biggest threat to AA comes from within, and I wonder if there is anyone else in the Fellowship who feels the same way, or if I am off "viewing with alarm for the good of the movement" again.

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