

Your Move

'Bye' to 'Hi'?

Responses from readers on sharing at meetings

Most of us spend a fair amount of time in meetings, and yet the format and content of meetings is not discussed at length in either of our two major texts, the Big Book and the "Twelve and the Twelve." But recently we have heard from a number of AA members on the subject of what's appropriate--and useful--to share at a meeting, and we thought we'd pass these communications on to our readers. As always, we present individual views, not "AA consensus." We hope these different perspectives will be helpful to you, and serve to stimulate thoughtfulness on the critical matter of sharing experience, strength, and hope in a way that keeps us sober, and helps others do the same.

Over recent years I've noticed rituals creeping into AA and this has disturbed me greatly. At most of the meetings I attend, we now say, "Hi Bill!" when someone introduces themselves, make several group responses to readings including, "How It Works," hold hands during the Lord's Prayer, and then tack on "It works if you work it--sober!" at the end of the prayer.

This bothers me for a couple of reasons. The first is that I have never seen any of these practices approved by the group conscience in line with the Second Tradition. What usually happens is that one or more persons decide to say "Hi" or hold hands or chant, and these people begin doing so whether it is a group tradition or not.

My old home group had a tradition, voted on by the group, that we would not say "Hi," hold hands, chant, etc., and one of the biggest issues we had to deal with was asking visitors to honor our group traditions and refrain from ritual. The response was usually that the visitors would go ahead anyway and then comment that our group had something wrong with it because "Everybody else does it." This group has been in existence since 1947 and has helped hundreds of suffering alcoholics recover. We made it clear that everyone was welcome at our meeting but that the group would appreciate it if they would respect our traditions. Some visitors never came back, others returned and continued to try and change our traditions by continuously saying "Hi," chanting, etc., attempting to void the results of our group conscience through peer pressure. Happily, this tactic did not work at my home group. Unhappily, at other groups the members wore down and gave in rather than be uncomfortable. In no case was this change the result of a group conscience.

This seems very silly and childish on all sides, doesn't it? It's the kind of issue where I sit and inventory myself and ask why I am overreacting to such small things. Saying "Hi" seems harmless, doesn't it? After several years and several inventories, I came to the conclusion that introducing these rituals into AA is not harmless and that they may be a long-term threat to the Fellowship. Sounds like I'm definitely "viewing with alarm" when I make that statement, but it comes from studying the history of the Oxford Group, AA, and formal religions. Why was the Oxford Group founded? The answer in our literature is that a minister decided that a return to the early practices of Christianity was needed in order to make contact with God; he thought all of the ritual that had grown up over the centuries was actually blocking the formation of a personal relationship with God. This is why the Oxford Group sat quietly waiting for inspiration from God to share with each other without ceremony and ritual. The Oxford Group founders saw that the focus had been taken off communion with God and placed, instead, on spending an hour or so walking through assorted ceremonies that could be performed with little or no thought about what they represented. I spent years performing assorted religious rituals while thinking

about what I was going to do once the ceremony was over: "Let's see, I can wash the car right after this and then pick up some milk."

To my way of thinking, ritual is what I do when I don't want to have to pay attention; it's a reflex. The point of every AA meeting is that I am allowed to share my experience, strength and hope and get to hear other members do so as well, and that's what I need to be focused on the entire time I am in the meeting. As it stands now, I spend a fair amount of time waiting for the ritual to end so I can actually listen to a member share their story. At some meetings the readings, responses, and other rituals now consume fifteen minutes of a one-hour meeting. At the current rate, I can see a day, perhaps not tomorrow or the day after but at some point in the future, where an AA meeting will consist mainly of ritual responses and ceremony, and the sharing will be an afterthought. Where will AA be then?

I hope that this letter will stimulate a dialog in the Fellowship and that, further, the next time members say "Hi" or chant a response to a reading, that they will begin to ask themselves the question, "How does this contribute to sharing what I have found in AA?"

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