

WHO'S SITTING NEXT TO YOU?

I know who you are. You are "X" who attend the ABC Meeting at the XYZ Club where AAs meet in Anywhere, USA.

I saw you there the other night at the eight o'clock meeting. I don't know how long you've been sober, but I know you've been coming around for a while because you spoke to a lot of people who knew you.

I wasn't one of them.

You don't know who I am. I wandered into your meeting place alone the other night, a stranger in a strange town. I got a cup of coffee, paid for it, and sat down by myself.

You didn't speak to me.

Oh, you saw me. You glanced my way, but you didn't recognize me, so you quickly averted your eyes and sought out a familiar face.

I sat there through the meeting.

It was okay, a slightly different format but basically the same kind of meeting as the one I go to at home.

The topic was gratitude. You and your friends spoke about how much AA means to you. You talked about the camaraderie in your meeting place. You said how much the people there had helped you when you first came through the door--how they extended the hand of friendship to make you feel welcome, and asked you to come back.

And I wondered where they had gone, those nice people who made your entrance so welcoming and so comfortable.

You talked about how the newcomer is the life-blood of AA. I agree, but I didn't say so. In fact, I didn't share in your meeting. I signed my name in the book that was passed around, but the chairperson didn't refer to it. He only called on those people in the room whom he knew.

So who am I? You don't know, because you didn't bother to find out. Although yours was a closed meeting, you didn't even ask if I belonged there.

It might have been my first meeting, I could have been full of fear and distrust, knowing AA wouldn't work and any better than anything else I'd tried, and I would have left convinced that I was right.

I might have been suicidal, grasping at one last straw, hoping someone would reach out and pull me from the pit of loathing and self-pity from which, by myself, I could find no escape.

I might have been a student with a tape recorder in my pocket, assigned to write a paper on how AA works--someone who shouldn't have been permitted to sit there at all but could have been directed to an open meeting to learn what I needed to know.

Or I could have been sent by the courts, wanting to know more, but afraid to ask.

It happens that I was none of the above.

I was just an ordinary drunk with a few years of sober living in AA who was traveling and was in need of a meeting.

My only problem that night was that I'd been alone with my own mind too long. I just needed to touch base with my AA family.

I know from past experience that I could have walked into your meeting place smiling, stuck out my hand to the first person I saw and said, "Hi. My name is--. I'm an alcoholic from--."

If I'd felt like doing that, I probably would have been warmly welcomed. You would have asked me if I knew Old So-and-so from my state, or you might have shared a part of your drunk-a-log that occurred in my part of the country.

Why didn't I? I was hungry, lonely, and tired. The only thing missing was angry, but three out of four isn't a good place for me to be.

So I sat silently through your meeting, and when it was over I watched enviously as all of you gathered in small groups, talking to one another the same way we do in my hometown.

You and some of your friends were planning a meeting after the meeting at a nearby coffee shop. By this time I had been silent too long to reach out to you. I stopped by the bulletin board to read the notices there, kind of hanging around without being too obvious, hoping you might ask if I wanted to join you, but you didn't.

As I walked slowly across the parking lot to my car with the out-of-state license plates you looked my way again. Our eyes met briefly and I mustered a smile. Again, you looked away.

I buckled my seat belt, started the car, and drove to the motel where I was staying.

As I lay in my bed waiting for sleep to come, I made a gratitude list. You were on it, along with your friends at the meeting place. I knew that you were there for me, and that I needed you far more than you needed me. I knew that if I had needed help, and had asked for it, you would have gladly given it. But I wondered...what if I hadn't been able to ask?

I now who you are.

Do you remember me?

AA Grapevine, March 1991

WELCOME OR "A WELCOME"

I am writing this article to urge AA members to remember one of the most important reasons why we all kept coming -- at least for me, anyway. And from what I have seen for the last eleven years, it's important to all of us.

Remember that person who approached you at your first meeting? The one with the glowing smile and friendly handshake? The one who talked to you for hours in the parking lot after the meeting? Not the one who just said, "Welcome," but the one who made you feel welcome. These are people who gave me hope -- and still do.

Today, I try to make people feel welcome. It takes more than a brief handshake before and after a meeting to do this. Diner meetings and long car rides to far-off speaking engagements in my early days were some of the most powerful meetings I've ever been to. I would ask, "Where are we going?" The reply was, "Don't worry about it."

As I look around at meetings today, I notice there are a lot of members saying "Welcome" but not necessarily making newcomers feel welcome. It almost seems that helping a newcomer has become too inconvenient for some members. Now that they are sober they don't want to stay up too late because they have "responsibilities." They need sleep. I'm sure glad people weren't too tired to make me feel welcome when I first got sober. Remember, everything we have today is a result of God, AA, and a friendly welcome. Sleep on that awhile!

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