

11th Tradition

Short Form: Our public relations policy is based on attraction rather than promotion; we need always maintain personal anonymity at the level of press, radio and films.

Long Form: Our relations with the general public should be characterized by personal anonymity. We think A.A. ought to avoid sensational advertising. Our names and pictures as A.A. members ought not be broadcast, filmed, or publicly printed. Our public relations policy should be guided by the principle of attraction rather than promotion. There is never a need to praise ourselves. We feel it better to let our friends recommend us.

Therefore a great responsibility fell upon us to develop the best possible public relations policy for Alcoholics Anonymous. Through many painful experiences, we think we have arrived at what that policy ought to be. It is the opposite in many ways of usual promotional practice. We found that we had to rely upon the principle of *attraction* rather than promotion.

Let's see how these contrasting ideas—attraction and promotion—work out. A political party wishes to win an election, so it advertises the virtues of its leadership to draw votes. A worthy charity wants to raise money; forthwith, its letterhead shows the name of every distinguished person who support can be obtained. Much of the political, economic, and religious life of the world is dependent upon publicized leadership. People who symbolize causes and ideas fill a deep human need. We of A.A. do not question that. But we do have to soberly face the fact that being in the public eye is hazardous, especially for us. By temperament, nearly every one of us had been an irrepressible promoter, and the prospect of a society composed almost entirely of promoters was frightening. Considering this explosive factor, we knew we had to exercise self-restraint. (Twelve and Twelve p 181)

There was actually a time when the press of America thought the anonymity of A.A. was better for us than some of our own members did. At one point, about a hundred of our Society were breaking anonymity at the public level. With perfectly good intent, these folks declared that the principle of anonymity was horse-and-buggy stuff, something appropriate to A.A.'s pioneering days. They were sure that A.A. could go fast and farther if it availed itself of modern publicity methods. A.A., they pointed out, included many persons of local, national, or international fame. Provided they were willing—and many were—why shouldn't their membership be publicized, thereby encouraging others to join us? These were plausible arguments, but happily our friends of the writing profession disagreed with them. (Twelve and Twelve p 182)

To us, however, it represents far more than a sound public relations policy. It is more than a denial of self-seeking. This Tradition is a constant and practical reminder that personal ambition has no place in A.A. In it, each member becomes an active guardian of our fellowship. (Twelve and Twelve p 183)

Attraction versus promotion Safeguarding the unity of the Fellowship

The principle of anonymity serves many purposes in Alcoholics Anonymous. At the personal level, it provides protection for its members, especially newcomers, from being identified as alcoholics. In our groups and at the public level, it protects the unity and integrity of the Fellowship itself from the efforts of those who might exploit their AA membership for prestige, power, or personal gain.

All members of Alcoholics Anonymous are equal, united by the common bond of their recovery from alcoholism. The guardian of that unity is the principle of anonymity, ever putting principles before personalities.

A loving reminder

Our Traditions, of course, are guidelines, which we voluntarily follow; they are not rules or regulations. Recognizing the importance of following up on anonymity breaks, the General Service Conference recommended that the GSO staff member on the Public Information (PI) desk pass along the basic facts of

an anonymity break to the delegate from the area where the member in question resides and suggested that the delegate remind the member of the importance of the principle of anonymity.

GSO, on average, receives notice of anonymity breaks ranging in number from under twenty to a little over thirty a year. They involve the average member known only in his or her community as well as the high-profile celebrity. This is not the result of any active searching on the part of GSO. The information usually comes from members reporting the anonymity breaks of other AAs or from the clipping service GSO retains as part of its archives activity. In any case, GSO takes no action unless it has the relevant press clipping or radio or TV transcript.

Who's in charge of anonymity?

Most members feel that it is not an anonymity break to say that you are a sober alcoholic in a public forum, but that when we publicly let others know that we are members of AA, we are not in keeping with the Eleventh Tradition.

Sometimes a member will write to GSO to get feedback on how to inform the media of AA's principle of anonymity. One AA, for example, after hearing a member's full name and membership in the program revealed on a radio show, e-mailed GSO on how to go about educating the station regarding AA's Traditions of anonymity. Rick W., the GSO staff member currently serving on the Public Information desk, informed her that in addition to being posted on the GSO web site, an anonymity letter is sent every year to over 9,500 media outlets, requesting their cooperation in maintaining our Tradition of anonymity. "While we seek the cooperation of the media," Rick told her, "we do not want to be seen to be telling them how they must do their reporting." He then reminded her that it is the responsibility of the individual AA member, not the media professional, to observe our Tradition of anonymity.

Anonymity in cyberspace

AA members have responded creatively to the challenges to our anonymity Traditions posed by the Internet. Online meetings rigorously adhere to all of the Traditions of AA. There is generally no concern about anonymity breaks with e-mails sent from one AA to another, and real-time meetings have procedures in place that safeguard the anonymity of members, particularly newcomers.

Some AAs, who are in touch through online meetings or by e-mail with other members of the Fellowship scattered all over the world, have asked this question regarding anonymity: Is posting one's picture on a personal web site, which identifies oneself as a member of Alcoholics Anonymous, an anonymity break?

The answer to the question can be found in the AA pamphlet "Understanding Anonymity." The pamphlet shares how AA members have maintained anonymity at the public level. It says that "...if full-face photographs and other easily identifiable photos of AA members (who are described as AA members) are published or broadcast, even though their full names are not given, these are considered anonymity breaks."

With respect to web sites, Rick cites this passage from that same pamphlet: "Publicly accessible aspects of the Internet such as web sites featuring text, graphics, audio, and video ought to be considered another form of 'Public Media.' Thus, they need to be treated in the same manner as press, radio, TV, and films. This means that full names and faces should not be used. However, the level of anonymity in e-mail, online meetings, or chat rooms would be a personal decision."

Attraction versus promotion

Our relations with the public at large, as our Eleventh Tradition states, "is based on attraction rather than promotion." Occasionally, for an AA member questioning GSO about the appropriateness of AA public service announcements, the line between the two activities may seem blurry. To be attracted to Alcoholics Anonymous, however, one must at least be made aware of its existence and how it can help. Accomplishing that goal is what AA's public service announcements are designed to do.

"Public information in Alcoholics Anonymous," as Rick points out to one such member, "is the attempt to share with the general public what AA is, what we do, and how to get in touch with us. Our hope is that an alcoholic, or a concerned friend or relative, who hears about AA, will know that we offer a solution to

alcoholism." AA has been producing public service announcements (PSAs) to be aired on television for almost thirty years. These short spots, as Rick explains, "are not intended to promote AA, to say that AA is better than any other way of dealing with alcoholism, or that we offer the only solution. Their purpose is to share that if others are going through some of the things we did, they may find sobriety in AA as well."

About 700 AA committees around the U.S. and Canada are involved in public information efforts-- activities such as giving talks at local high schools, providing AA literature for local libraries, working with newspapers to provide accurate information about AA, and placing our public service announcements with local radio and television stations. The guidelines for this type of work are AA's Twelve Traditions, particularly Tradition Eleven.

To uphold our Traditions, GSO sends a memorandum like this one each year, to major media people, reaffirming our commitment to this key discipline. As Bill W. says in his last message, "...the principle of anonymity must remain our primary and enduring safeguard."

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The author says: "AA's Twelve Traditions have, in my experience, often proved vital in keeping me sober, and helpful otherwise in all my affairs."

THE NAMES of Joe DiMaggio, Henry Ford, Fiorello La Guardia, Mrs. Thomas A. Edison, Admiral Richard E. Byrd, Senator Harry S. Truman, the Duke of Windsor, Earl Baldwin, and Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek may not seem to fit together. But they were all listed in New York newspapers as joint "sponsors" of the Oxford Group, an evangelical religious movement very popular in the 1930's. You can read the wonderful story of AA's great debt of gratitude to the Oxford Group in the book *AA Comes of Age*. (Actually, it had no ties with the renowned English university; but people thought it did, so the name was used because such an image had obvious prestige value.

When Bill W., who codified AA customs into our Twelve Traditions, first sat down to write them out (for the Grapevine), in 1946, he had very much in mind this Oxford Group practice of exploiting celebrity names to promote its cause. And that, he told me once, was one reason he proposed "attraction" rather than such "promotion" as the basis of AA's relations with the public.

In fact, AA had already pretty much adopted the nonpromotion policy as the young Fellowship's way of doing things. Ex-drunks knew from their own experience that the hard sell generally does not persuade a rumpot (or anyone else) to give up his pot. Tradition Eleven just put this idea into capsule form

But none of this was known to me, or of any use or interest whatsoever, one hot summer day in 1942. I stood in a seedy old joint on lower Main Street in Fort Worth, Tex., trying to get a glass of cold beer down before my shakes made me spill the damn thing.

Three thousand years and two bottles later, I had begun to get it all together, and I realized, to my mild surprise, that it must be afternoon. The evening-paper boys were delivering their wares.

I bought a paper and turned to my favorite gossip columnist. He had a funny piece that day about a bunch of folks in town who called themselves Alcoholics Anonymous. They sounded like awful fools, or some kind of fanatic reformers, just like the fellows who ran that rundown, shabby old mission next door to the tavern I was in. They had gone all sanctimonious, I figured, and had given up drinking and almost everything else I liked to do, which the mission preachers called "sinful ways."

Despite my scorn for both the mission and this AA business, I did tear out the AA story and slip it into my wallet. I explained to the bartender that I wanted to show it to some drinking buddies of mine, for a laugh.

I wonder now whether that story really was funny, intentionally or unintentionally. Anyhow, I lost it and never thought of it again--consciously--through the next two and a half years of fierce alcoholic drinking. During that time, I took a geographical cure, seriously believing that, if I moved to New York from Fort Worth, my drinking would somehow get straightened out. It was a severe and scary setback to find myself drinking even worse around Times Square than I ever had back in the old corrals of Cowtown.

One morning, sweatily trying to decide which shoelace to tackle first, desperately trying to remember what horrors I had perpetrated the night (or nights) before, I found myself crying and saying, "I've got to get out of this hell, some way." Then I suddenly remembered that old Fort Worth newspaper clipping about Alcoholics Anonymous.

Two general ideas from that gossip column had apparently lodged themselves in the collection of throbbing cavities I called my head. One was that AA had something to do with people known to be very heavy drinkers. The other impression was that AA didn't ask for more than your first name, so they could never tell anyone that you had joined their club.

That promise of privacy, that pledge--implied in the name Alcoholics Anonymous--to keep my shameful record absolutely confidential made it possible for me to show up at the local AA office a few days later. The Traditions were still unwritten, but the spirit of trustworthiness and anonymity which pervaded our Fellowship enabled me to sneak through the door on a clear, cold January day of 1945 and find at long last, not only that I was at home, that I was wanted, but that no one would tell on me.

Already, I was the beneficiary of both halves of Tradition Eleven. Fort Worth members had cooperated with that Texas columnist back in 1942, so he could carry the message of AA in his newspaper. They had given him information about AA--not boastful promotion material. By that action, they had acknowledged that AA itself could not be anonymous; it could not be a secret society if it wanted to carry the message. And in their message that problem drinkers could recover, they also conveyed the AA promise of privacy, or confidentiality.

Because their behavior saved my life, I have ever since been glad to see our public information committees helping to get more and more publicity for AA in newspapers, on television, in magazines, books, and movies. It may not always be the kind of publicity I like; but, when I am tempted to criticize, I just remember that all it has to do is to plant the twin seeds of (1) hope for the problem drinker and (2) anonymity--the conviction that he can trust us never to betray him. I'm sure such publicity has saved many other lives, and I hope we get cleverer and cleverer at figuring out ways to keep AA constantly being mentioned in the public media.

Once I had joined AA, I found there was something I could do, personally and privately, to help spread the message. Rather soon after starting to sober up, I told my friends and family about this wonderful new thing I had learned: that alcoholism is a disease, not a moral failing. It wasn't my fault that I had been such a bad drunkard for so long; it was the disease's fault. But I quickly added that now I was going to be all right, it wouldn't happen again, because I had joined this marvelous organization called Alcoholics Anonymous.

I also told my doctor and employers, when it seemed appropriate for them to know. My friends in AA did, too. Whenever we told of our own membership, we knew that it might help chip away at the cruel stigma which still kills too many alcoholics. Sometimes, of course, the message was carried to other alcoholics, indirectly, through these doctors and employers.

Since we also told of our AA membership when we made amends, when we spoke at open meetings, and when we did Twelfth Step work, the notion of keeping our membership secret, or being furtive about it, just never occurred to most of us, I guess. After all, why should we be ashamed of recovering from a disease?

We did not tell any outsiders the names of other members, of course. That promise of confidentiality in our name was precious to me, and still is; I certainly would not break it.

But I have always loved to gossip, and it wasn't easy to keep from telling last names and other identifying facts about members to other AAs. I have learned my lesson on that one, I hope, the hard way--through embarrassment. It happened to me twice. Having told one member about another member, I learned that the two were old acquaintances and each wanted particularly to keep the other from knowing he was in AA! Clearly, I had violated confidences. It was unforgivable, and I am still ashamed when I think of it.

Now, I consider my knowledge of people in AA to be very much like the privileged information confided to a doctor, lawyer, or priest. I have absolutely no right whatever to disclose anything about a member to anyone else, in AA or out, without that member's explicit permission. Respect of this privileged information is not a matter of professional ethics, specifically sanctioned by law, but I think the AA promise of confidentiality is a sacred one, and I must do my part to keep it.

Within the Fellowship, I prefer to speak of another member--and be spoken of--only by the first name. I like this practice simply because it is extra insurance against letting slip things told me privately, and because it is an effective symbol, making the point--particularly to outsiders and newcomers--that we mean it when we say we're anonymous, we're trustworthy, we don't tell.

Few of us in AA, I guess, have much occasion to worry about that part of the Tradition cautioning against the use of our names or faces in mass communications media. Not long after sobering up, I discovered that neither Winchell, Life, the New York Times, nor anyone else was standing outside the meeting doors every night to announce to a breathless world that I was just leaving an AA meeting, sober. As far as I know, David, Walter, and Harry and their TV cameras have let practically all the rest of us alone, too. By and large, the record is remarkably good on that part of Tradition Eleven. Even if as many as seventy-five "anonymity breaks" accidentally occur in, say, one year, that's only about .00015 percent of our membership.

One particular set of AA members does run into that problem, however, and I especially admire the way they handle it. I refer to the many good AAs who work professionally in the field of alcoholism and are always being interviewed by newspapers and on television and radio. They just say they are "recovered alcoholics," without saying that they are AA members. It seems to me that this device is honest, adheres perfectly to the Tradition, and at the same time may carry a message of hope. Certainly, the old stigma fades when good-looking, smart-sounding, respectable folks like that are not ashamed to say in public that they are recovered alcoholics, and when they say it as casually as they would state any other fact about themselves.

In my opinion, anonymity in the mass media is still very important, to all AA members and to all potential members. It signals to sick alcoholics: Come on in--we won't tell. And it guards us against the temptation to start bragging about ourselves. . . but I'm ahead of myself again. That's Tradition Twelve.

And I still have a long way to go in getting Number Eleven under my belt. Doesn't "attraction rather than promotion" have a personal meaning for me? Yes, I am supposed to make AA life look so attractive that drunks will want the kind of sobriety they see in me more than they want to go on drinking. Rather than promote AA with the hard sell or with bribes (a cup of coffee, a flop, a job, or other favors), it's up to me to make AA seem very attractive.

The members I met in 1945 did just that for me. I don't find it so easy.
Eleventh Tradition Checklist

1. Do I sometimes promote AA so fanatically that I make it seem unattractive?
2. Am I always careful to keep the confidences reposed in me as an AA member?
3. Am I careful about throwing AA names around--even within the Fellowship?
4. Am I ashamed of being a recovered, or recovering, alcoholic?
5. What would AA be like if we were not guided by the ideas in Tradition Eleven? Where would I be?
6. Is my AA sobriety attractive enough that a sick drunk would want such a quality for himself?

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