

Background on Tradition 2

Tradition 2:

For our group purpose there is but one ultimate authority—a loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience. Our leaders are but trusted servants, they do not govern.

Long Form:

For our group purpose there is but one ultimate authority—a loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience.

Note: The “long form” of Tradition Two refers to the version originally published in the A.A. Grapevine in 1946. While each of the other eleven Traditions was later condensed, the Second Tradition was lengthened from this original version to its present form.

As newcomers, many of us say to ourselves, “Let the group officers worry about the Traditions. I’m just an average member. They’re rules for running groups, aren’t they? And everybody tells me, ‘There are no rules in A.A.’!” Then we look closer—and find that the Traditions are *not* rules—and they are *not* just for officers. They have deep meaning for each one of us, as the Twelve Steps do.

Like the Steps, the Traditions were not figured out in advance, as courses of action against future problems. The action came first. Pioneer A.A. groups, with nothing to go on except the trial-and-error-and-try-again method, soon discovered: “Well, that way didn’t work. But the other one did. And *this* one works even better!”

Both successes and failures were reported in letters to A.A. headquarters (eventually to become the General Service Office). In went these shared experiences of A.A.’s first ten years, and out came the Twelve Traditions. In 1946, then in the “long form”, they were published in the A.A. Grapevine. By 1950, they had been condensed to their present form and were adopted by A.A.’s First International Convention.

“Our Traditions are a guide to better ways of working and living,” co-founder Bill W. said. “And they are to group survival what A.A.’s Twelve Steps are to each member’s sobriety and peace of mind... Most individuals cannot recover unless there is a group. The group must survive or the individual will not.”...

The Twelve Traditions: A Distillation of AA Experience

To begin with, each A.A. has been an individual who, because of his alcoholism, could seldom govern himself. Nor could any other human being govern the alcoholic’s obsession to drink, his drive to have things his own way. Time out of mind, families, friends, employers, doctors, clergymen, and judges have tried their hand at disciplining alcoholics. Almost without exception the failure to accomplish anything by coercion has been complete. Yet we alcoholics can be led, we can be inspired: coming into A.A. we can, and we gladly do, yield to the will of God. Hence it is not strange that the only real authority to be found in A.A. is that of spiritual principle. It is never personal authority.

A.A. Tradition: How It Developed pg. 32

Nowhere in A.A. is there to be seen any constituted human authority that can compel an A.A. group to do anything. Some A.A. groups, for example, elect their leaders. But even with such a mandate each leader soon discovers that while he can

always guide by example or persuasion he can never boss, else at election time he may find himself passed by.

A.A. Tradition: How It Developed pg. 33

Where does A.A. get its direction? Who runs it? This, too, is a puzzler for every friend and newcomer. When told that our Society has no president having authority to govern it, no treasurer who can compel the payment of any dues, no board of directors who can cast an erring member into outer darkness, when indeed no A.A. can give another a directive and enforce obedience, our friends gasp and exclaim, "This simply can't be. There must be an angle somewhere." These practical folk then read Tradition Two, and learn that the sole authority in A.A. is a loving God as He may express Himself in the group conscience. They dubiously ask an experienced A.A. member if this really works. The member, sane to all appearances, immediately answers, "Yes! It definitely does." The friends mutter that this looks vague, nebulous, pretty naïve to them. Then they commence to watch us with speculative eyes, pick up a fragment of A.A. history, and soon have the solid facts.

Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions pg. 132

A.A. is both a democracy and, in Bill W.'s words, "a benign anarchy." A group elects its own officers—who have no power to *order* anybody to do anything. In most groups, most of the slate rotates out of office at the end of six months, and new officers are elected.

If a group wants to be a part of the whole A.A. service structure, it elects a G.S.R. (general service representative, with a two-year term). G.S.R.'s elect area committee members and then join them in electing a delegate from their area to the annual General Service Conference. The Conference is about the closest approximation of a government that A.A. has; it produces opinions on important matters of policy; it approves the choice of some trustee nominees for the General Service Board and directly elects others. But neither the Conference nor the board can give orders to any A.A. group or member.

Then who's in charge around here? A.A. is a spiritual movement, and so the "ultimate authority" is the spiritual concept of the "group conscience." Its voice is heard when a well-informed group gathers to arrive at a decision. The result rests on more than arithmetic, a "yes" and "no" count. Minority ideas get thoughtful attention. What about that annoying character who's always sure she's right? Better listen—maybe, just this once, she *is* right. If she's wrong, then she will—if she remembers the First Tradition as well as the Second—go along with the decision of the group conscience. Does this notion seem too cloudy? Let's think back to our first meetings. The presence we newcomers felt in those rooms was the same as the group conscience. And it was *real*—welcoming us in, setting up no barriers of rules.

The Twelve Traditions Illustrated

Now let us think about Tradition Two... We A.A.'s have learned this principle the hard way. Few obstacles have been tougher to remove than those which blocked the way to realization that A.A.'s group conscience can be the only ultimate authority in our affairs.

I expect that many an old-timer still does not believe this proposition. He feels that he is older and more experienced than recent generations of A.A.'s and that it was his guidance and leadership that brought them into the new life. We oldsters often construed our longer experience as a sort of vested right, even an unlimited license, to run A.A. indefinitely. Whenever we got sick, tired, or old, we naturally thought ourselves entitled to hand-pick our own successors. Who could know better than we?

But with the passage of time most of us came up against some hard facts of A.A. life. We ruefully discovered that the groups, no matter how much they liked and respected us, simply did not want us to be the self-appointed managers of their service and policy affairs forever. Neither would they let us pick our own successors to do the job for them. They wanted to name their own service committees. Again and again they showed us that the ultimate authority must speak through the groups. For some of us this was tough to take.

Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age pg. 98-99

Many people wonder how A.A. can function under such a seeming anarchy. Other societies have to have law and force and sanction and punishment, administered by authorized people. Happily for us, we found we need no human authority whatever. We have two authorities which are far more effective. One is benign, the other malign. There is God, our Father, who very simply says, "I am waiting for you to do my will." The other authority is named John Barleycorn, and he says, "You had better do God's will or I will kill you." And sometimes he does kill. So, when all the chips are down, we conform to God's will or perish. ... So there is authority enough, love enough, and punishment enough, all without any human being clutching the handles of power. Such is A.A.'s backstop against dissolution, and its final guarantee of survival under any conditions. For us, it is do or die.

Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age pg. 105-06

Sooner or later, every AA comes to depend upon a Power greater than himself. He finds that the God of his understanding is not only a source of strength, but also a source of positive direction. Realizing that some fraction of that infinite resource is now available, his life takes on an entirely different complexion. He experiences a new inner security together with such a sense of destiny and purpose as he has never known before. As each day passes, our AA reviews his mistakes and vicissitudes. He learns from daily experience what his remaining character defects are and becomes ever more willing that they be removed. In this fashion he improves his conscious contact with God.

Every AA group follows the same cycle of development. We are coming to realize that each group, as well as each individual, is a special entity, not quite like any other. Though AA groups are basically the same, each group does have its own special atmosphere, its own peculiar state of development. We believe that every AA group has a conscience. It is the collective conscience of its own membership. Daily experience informs and instructs this conscience. The group begins to recognize its own defects of character and, one by one, these are removed or lessened. As this process continues, the group becomes better able to receive right direction for its own affairs. Trial and error produces group experience, and out of corrected experience comes custom. When a customary way of

doing things is definitely proved to be best, then that custom forms into AA tradition. The Greater Power is then working through a clear group conscience.
Language of the Heart pg. 77