

Long form: Our membership ought to include all who suffer from alcoholism. Hence we may refuse none who wish to recover. Nor ought AA membership ever depend upon money or conformity. Any two or three alcoholics gathered together in sobriety may call themselves an AA group, provided that as a group, they have no other affiliation.

Short form: The only requirement for AA membership is a desire to stop drinking.

TRADITION 3

February 1948

The third tradition is a sweeping statement indeed; it takes a lot of territory. Some people might think it too idealistic to be practical. It tells every alcoholic in the world that he may become, and remain a member of Alcoholics Anonymous *so long as he says so*. In short, AA has no membership rule.

Why is this so? Our answer is simple and practical. Even in self-protection, we do not wish to erect the slightest barrier between ourselves and the fellow alcoholic who still suffers. We know that society has been demanding that he conform to its laws and conventions. But the essence of his alcoholic malady is the fact that he has been unable or unwilling to conform either to the laws of man or God. If he is anything, the sick alcoholic is a rebellious nonconformist. How well we understand that; every member of AA was once a rebel himself. Hence we cannot offer to meet him at any halfway mark. We must enter the dark cave where he is and show him that we understand. We realize altogether that he is too weak and confused to jump hurdles. If we raise obstacles, he might stay away and perish. He might be denied his priceless opportunity.

So when he asks, "Are there any conditions?" we joyfully reply, "Not a one." When he skeptically comes back saying, "But certainly there must be things I have to do and believe," we quickly answer, "In Alcoholics Anonymous there are no musts." Cynically, perhaps, he then inquires, "What is it all going to cost me?" We are able to laugh and say "Nothing at all, there are no fees and dues." Thus in a brief hour, is our friend disarmed of his suspicion and rebellion. His eyes begin to open on a new world of friendship and understanding. Bankrupt idealist that he has been, his ideal is no longer a dream. After years of lonely search, it now stands revealed. The reality of Alcoholics Anonymous bursts upon him. For Alcoholics Anonymous is saying,

“We have something priceless to give, if only you will receive.” That is all. But to our new friend, it is everything. With more ado, he becomes one of us.

Our membership tradition does contain, however, one vitally important qualification. That qualification relates to the use of our name, Alcoholics Anonymous. We believe that any two or three alcoholics gathered together for sobriety may call themselves an AA group provided that, as a group they have no affiliation. Here our purpose is clear and unequivocal. For obvious reasons we wish the name Alcoholics Anonymous to be used only in connection with straight AA activities. One can think of no AA group who would like, for example, to see the formation of “dry” AA groups, “wet” AA groups, Republican AA groups, communist AA groups. Few, if any, would wish our groups to be designated by religious denominations. We cannot lend the AA name, even indirectly, to other activities, however worthy. If we do so we shall become hopelessly compromised and divided. We think that AA should offer its experience to the whole world for whatever use could be made of it. But not its name. Nothing could be more certain.

Let us of AA therefore resolve that we shall always be inclusive and never exclusive, offering all we have to all, save our title. May all barriers be thus leveled, may our unity thus be preserved. And may God grant us a long life, - and a useful one.

The Language of the Heart pp.79-80

A member gives us a glimpse of the early days. “At one time,” he says, “every A.A. group had membership rules. Everybody was scared witless that something or somebody would capsize the boat and dump us all back into the drink. Our Foundation office asked each group to send a list of ‘protective’ regulations. The total list was a mile long. If all those rules had been enforced everywhere, nobody could have possibly joined A.A. at all, so great was the sum of our anxiety and fear.

“We were resolved to admit nobody to A.A. but that hypothetical class of people we termed ‘pure alcoholics.’ Except for their guzzling, and the unfortunate results thereof, they could have no other complications. So beggars, tramps, asylum inmates, prisoners, queers, plain crackpots, and fallen women were definitely out. Yes sir, we’d cater *only* to pure and respectable alcoholics! Any others would surely destroy us. Besides, if we took in those odd ones, what would decent people say about us? We built a fine-mesh fence right around A.A.

Why did A.A. finally drop its membership regulations? Why did we leave it to each newcomer to decide himself whether he should join us? Why did we dare to say, contrary to the experience of society and government everywhere, that we would neither punish or deprive any A.A. of membership, that we must never compel anyone to pay anything, believe anything, or conform to anything?

The answer, now seen in Tradition Three, was simplicity itself. At last, experience taught us that to take away any alcoholic's full chance was sometimes to pronounce his death sentence, and to condemn him to endless misery. Who wants to be judge, jury, and executioner of his own sick brother?

Twelve and twelve pp. 139-141

Tradition Three says: "The only requirement for AA membership is a desire to stop drinking." The trial-and-error method produced all the traditions; failed attempts to impose other requirements underlay this one. For instance, even Dr. Bob had expressed uneasiness about admitting women to A.A. membership when the first few appeared.

The principle that would be expressed concisely in tradition three might have been generally accepted, but putting it into practice was not so easy. One of the obstacles was that it was sometimes seemed to contradict the Fourth Tradition, which says, "Each group should be autonomous except in matters affecting other groups or A.A. as a whole."

Barry L., who joined the Manhattan Group in 1945, remembered what happened upon the arrival of a person who not only was black, but also had other obvious and startling differences.

In 1945, Barry was doing desk duty at a clubhouse on 41st Street. "A man came in needing help. He was black, and we had no black members then. He was an ex-convict. He had all his earthly belongings on his back. His hair was bleached blonde; he had on makeup; and he told us he was a dope fiend."

"We didn't know what to do about the guy. I got together with some of the older members, and we talked to the man, and about him. What could we do?"

When no satisfactory group-conscience decision was forthcoming, Barry did what many other A.A. would have done: he called Bill, to whom he described the prospective member. After a silence, Bill asked Barry to run over the list again. Barry did so.

“Now,” said Bill, “Did you say he was a drunk?” “Oh yes,” Barry replied. “There’s no question about that. He’s certainly a drunk.” “Well, I think that’s all we can ask,” said Bill.

The prospect was invited to attend meetings, and although he soon disappeared, his presence created a precedent for the Third Tradition.

Pass It On pp. 315-318

Yours in Love and Service,
Anonymous