

# Tradition Five

Short form:

Each group has but one primary purpose – to carry its message to the alcoholic who still suffers.

Long form:

Each Alcoholics Anonymous group ought to be a spiritual entity having but one primary purpose—that of carrying its message to the alcoholic who still suffers.

**To start, let's reflect on why the fifth tradition plays such a vital role in the survival of AA as a whole by looking back at an experience from almost a century before Bill and Bob ever came to know one and other:**

The story of the Washingtonian movement brings sharply into focus the importance of the Twelve Traditions of Alcoholics Anonymous as guidelines of group behavior designed to protect us against a similar fate. To take our Traditions for granted or to ignore them should at least justify a check mark on the debit side of our inventory charts.

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On April 5, 1840, [six drinking buddies gathered at Chase's Tavern in Baltimore, MD] around another jug spirits and were liberally toasting the great advantages of temperance and condemning the curse of drink. Although a number of active temperance groups were already in existence, none was acceptable to our friends. Good drunks that they were, they decided to form a group of their own. They elected officers and drew up a pledge of total abstinence:

"We, whose names are annexed, desirous of forming for our mutual benefit and to guard against a pernicious practice which is injurious to our health, standing, and families, do pledge ourselves as gentlemen that we will not drink any spirituous or malt liquors, wine or cider."

They chose the name Washington Temperance Society in honor of George Washington, and a membership fee of twenty-five cents was established, together with monthly dues of twelve and a half cents. With fond embraces they parted, each agreeing to bring one new member to the next meeting at the tavern. And they stayed sober!

In response to membership growth and at the frantic urging of the tavern owner, the group eventually rented its own hall and decided to meet weekly. At these meetings, a unique format developed. Each speaker told his own story: "what I used to be like--what happened--and what I am like now." The idea was greeted with explosive acceptance. It gave new impact to the entire temperance movement. Total abstinence had created the miracle of the man at the podium!

In November 1840, the group held its first public meeting. Newspaper editors were liberal with coverage, complete with names of members. The audience was standing-room-only. Both alcoholics and non-alcoholics--all who pledged themselves to total abstinence--were welcomed into the group. Five months later, Washingtonian membership claimed over 1,000 "reformed drunkards" and 5,000 members who were not sure whether they were drunkards or not, but were also pledged to total abstinence, plus thousands of temperance advocates who welcomed the Washingtonian crusade.

Enthusiastic promoters that they were, members of the group organized and marched in a parade. It flaunted bands and banners and was witnessed by more than 40,000 spectators in Baltimore. Following the parade, there was a great open-air park meeting to spread the Washingtonian "Twelfth Step" message: "Drunkard! Come up here! You can reform. I met a gentleman this morning who reformed four weeks ago and was rejoicing in his reformation. We don't slight the drunkard. We love him! We nurse him as a mother does her infant learning to walk!"

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"Now, can any human agency alone do this? All will answer 'No!' for we have invariably the testimony of vast numbers of reformed men who have spoken in public and declared they have broken off a number of times, but have as often relapsed again; and the reason they give for doing this is that they wholly rely on the strength of their resolution without looking any higher. Now they feel the need of God's assistance, which having been obtained, their reform is genuine. Praise God!" [Samuel F. Holbrook, first president of the society]

The Washingtonian manifestation of miracles could not be contained geographically. Members were sure it was within their power to meet widespread, pressing needs. The reclaimed drunks active in the movement proved by their example that drunkards could be helped, and they had an overwhelming drive to carry their message of hope to other drunks who still suffered. This drive spilled over into a desire to *prevent* such suffering by persuading those not addicted to insure their sobriety through total abstinence. Influential temperance leaders of the day needed salesmen to sell this message of prevention, and the Washingtonians provided a waiting list of available manpower...

In less than four years from the first meeting of our alcoholic friends at Chase's Tavern, Washingtonian membership hit its peak. At that point, it is commonly computed, the movement included at least 100,000 "reformed common drunkards," 300,000 "common tipplers" who also became total abstainers, and untold thousands who were simply enthusiastic temperance advocates.

And then came oblivion.

By 1848, all that remained of the organization's spectacular power as a method of treatment was its Home for the Fallen in Boston. That institution has undergone a number of changes in name and policy, now functions as the Washingtonian Hospital, and engages in the treatment of alcoholism by modern medical and social techniques. Otherwise, the movement destroyed itself completely and dropped out of sight. With it went the hope it had held out for thousands of drunks of that day.

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Although it is obvious that this program of the Washingtonians was incomplete and possessed only limited opportunity for personality change, as compared with AA's Twelve Steps, it did provide the

tools for at least short-lived sobriety for thousands of drunks. But it failed to provide any standards at all that were comparable to AA's Twelve Traditions. Because there were no such safeguards for the movement as a whole, it died. Most of the Washingtonians' problems lay in areas now covered in our Traditions... The AA Preamble and Tradition Five advise us to protect our singleness of purpose; Tradition One cautions us to protect our unity. Without these guidelines, the Washingtonian movement developed into a three-headed monster. First was the program of reclaiming suffering alcoholics. Second was the call to the general public for temperance through moral suasion. Third was the call for temperance through legal suasion. Influential men controlled the action of each head, and it was not long until the heads were fighting each other.

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A final destructive note came when influential leaders of nonalcoholic groups decided that the need for ex-drunks to reform other drunks was past, and that emphasis should be placed instead on the importance of laws to promote temperance."

- D. P., *AA Grapevine*: February 1971

**As is common with the traditions, they extend not only to the well being of AA as a whole, but are also of vital importance to the individual alcoholic.**

"My strong belief in the importance of the principle of singleness of purpose for the Fellowship of AA has some important consequences. It means that when I go to a meeting, I introduce myself as an alcoholic, period. Like many alcoholics (including Bill W. --see page seven of the Big Book), my story includes drug use, ranging from pot to crack to LSD. I don't hesitate to share this at meetings when it is relevant, as it is part of the experience that brought me to AA, and a part of my story that many other young people, especially, can relate to. However, I think it is extremely important to emphasize that I am an alcoholic, and that in meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous we discuss the common solution to alcoholism that we share. If I'm an "alcoholic and an addict" and you're an "alcoholic and a compulsive overeater" and the person leading the meeting is an "alcoholic and a compulsive gambler" we begin to lose our commonality. I become slightly different from you--an attitude that I believe is potentially fatal. Moreover, we've started down the slippery slope that doomed the Washingtonians. Our program is no longer focused on the single purpose of recovery from alcoholism, but instead is tackling the issues of drug addiction, gambling, codependency, etc.--very serious problems, undoubtedly, but outside the scope of Alcoholics Anonymous. A careful reading of Traditions Five, Six, and Ten has convinced me of how dangerous this is to the continued existence of our Fellowship, and it is my responsibility as an AA member to ensure that the hand of Alcoholics Anonymous is always available in the future to reach out to the suffering alcoholic.

I've found that the concept of singleness of purpose applies to my life in an even more immediate, personal way as well. When I got sober at twenty-one, I didn't have an established career to return to, a family to reunite, or even all that much wreckage of the past to clean up. The future was a blank slate, and the newly found freedom of sobriety made the possibilities overwhelming. I immediately jumped into school, work, and relationships--and suddenly didn't have time for meetings. Life would get chaotic and painful and I'd make my way back to the Fellowship and principles just long enough to soak up a little bit of serenity by osmosis, then head back out into the fray. Fortunately, some AA members were able to point out to me the insanity of my actions, and I was able to alter my behavior before it led me to the inevitable drink.

I discovered that in order to maintain any semblance of spirituality and serenity in my life, I needed to live by the principle of singleness of purpose. Like the Fellowship as a whole, I have but one primary purpose: to stay sober and help other alcoholics achieve sobriety. The same three reasons that support our group commitment to singleness of purpose underlie my personal commitment: (1) duty--I can repay those who have given me this gift by giving it away to others; (2) love--I've learned compassion for those still suffering and want to help others; and (3) self-preservation--I must help others in order to stay sober myself. I inevitably find that when I'm able to stay focused on my primary purpose, my "secondary purposes" (school, jobs, relationships) work themselves out quite satisfactorily. For me, the concept of singleness of purpose has become the bedrock of my personal program of recovery, just as it is the fundamental principle supporting the structure of our entire Fellowship."

- Brad B., AA Grapevine: February 1994

**Unlike the steps, where each one helps to build and strengthen the foundation necessary to approach the next step and thus must be laid out in a specific order, the traditions tend to have a much more interwoven relationship that can make it difficult to address one without simultaneously addressing other traditions, even if they appear further on in the list.**

"Having one primary purpose allows each group to focus all its energies on carrying its message to the alcoholic who still suffers. The group is therefore not distracted by other things. Other Traditions support this singleness of purpose. The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking, so a group doesn't have to worry about who its members are. Each group is autonomous; so it has the freedom to focus its energy on the needs of its members. A group doesn't endorse, finance or lend the AA name to outside enterprises so it can't get involved with other pursuits. Each group is self-supporting through its own contributions so it is accountable and responsible solely to its membership. Groups have no opinion on outside issues, so the only subject available is the message of recovery contained in the Big Book. This singleness of purpose allows each group to stay in touch with its members, their needs and the Fellowship as a whole.

Over the years I've gone to different types of groups to meet different needs in my life or to share experience, strength, and hope about a particular problem I was struggling with. Some days I've been part of the solution for another suffering alcoholic; other days I've been the one who was suffering.

Thanks to our Fifth Tradition, no matter what my needs or my location I can find an AA group where I can talk about--and listen to--not drinking one day at a time, practicing the principles in all of my affairs, and being happily and usefully whole.

The Third Tradition makes me part of the group and the Fifth Tradition frees us all to carry the message."

- Mark L., AA Grapevine: May 1996