

Tradition Four

“Each group should be autonomous except in matters affecting other groups or A.A. as a whole.”

AUTONOMY is a ten-dollar word. But in relation to us, it means very simply that every A.A. group can manage its affairs exactly as it pleases, except when A.A. as a whole is threatened. Comes now the same question raised in Tradition One. Isn't such liberty foolishly dangerous?

Over the years, every conceivable deviation from our Twelve Steps and Traditions has been tried. That was sure to be, since we are so largely a band of ego-driven individualists. Children of chaos, we have defiantly played with every brand of fire, only to emerge unharmed and, we think, wiser. These very deviations created a vast process of trial and error which, under the grace of God, has brought us to where we stand today.

When A.A.'s Traditions were first published, in 1946, we had become sure that an A.A. group could stand almost any amount of battering. We saw that the group, exactly like the individual, must eventually conform to whatever tested principles would guarantee survival. We had discovered that there was perfect safety in the process of trial and error. So confident of this had we become that the original statement of A.A. tradition carried this significant sentence: “Any two or three alcoholics gathered together for

sobriety may call themselves an A.A. group provided that as a group they have no other affiliation.”

This meant, of course, that we had been given the courage to declare each A.A. group an individual entity, strictly reliant on its own conscience as a guide to action. In charting this enormous expanse of freedom, we found it necessary to post only two storm signals: A group ought not do anything which would greatly injure A.A. as a whole, nor ought it affiliate itself with anything or anybody else. There would be real danger should we commence to call some groups “wet,” others “dry,” still others “Republican” or “Communist,” and yet others “Catholic” or “Protestant.” The A.A. group would have to stick to its course or be hopelessly lost. Sobriety had to be its sole objective. In all other respects there was perfect freedom of will and action. Every group had the right to be wrong.

When A.A. was still young, lots of eager groups were forming. In a town we’ll call Middleton, a real crackerjack had started up. The townspeople were as hot as firecrackers about it. Stargazing, the elders dreamed of innovations. They figured the town needed a great big alcoholic center, a kind of pilot plant A.A. groups could duplicate everywhere. Beginning on the ground floor there would be a club; in the second story they would sober up drunks and hand them currency for their back debts; the third deck would house an educational project—quite noncontroversial, of course. In imagination the gleaming center was to go up several stories more, but three would do for a start. This would all take a lot of money—other people’s money. Believe it or not, wealthy townfolk bought the idea.

There were, though, a few conservative dissenters among the alcoholics. They wrote the Foundation*, A.A.'s headquarters in New York, wanting to know about this sort of streamlining. They understood that the elders, just to nail things down good, were about to apply to the Foundation for a charter. These few were disturbed and skeptical.

Of course, there was a promoter in the deal—a super-promoter. By his eloquence he allayed all fears, despite advice from the Foundation that it could issue no charter, and that ventures which mixed an A.A. group with medication and education had come to sticky ends elsewhere. To make things safer, the promoter organized three corporations and became president of them all. Freshly painted, the new center shone. The warmth of it all spread through the town. Soon things began to hum. To insure foolproof, continuous operation, sixty-one rules and regulations were adopted.

But alas, this bright scene was not long in darkening. Confusion replaced serenity. It was found that some drunks yearned for education, but doubted if they were alcoholics. The personality defects of others could be cured maybe with a loan. Some were club-minded, but it was just a question of taking care of the lonely heart. Sometimes the swarming applicants would go for all three floors. Some would start at the top and come through to the bottom, becoming club members; others started in the club, pitched a binge, were hospitalized, then graduated to education on the third floor. It was a beehive of activity, all right, but

*In 1954, the name of the Alcoholic Foundation, Inc., was changed to the General Service Board of Alcoholics Anonymous, Inc., and the Foundation office is now the General Service Office.

unlike a beehive, it was confusion compounded. An A.A. group, as such, simply couldn't handle this sort of project. All too late that was discovered. Then came the inevitable explosion—something like that day the boiler burst in Wombly's Clapboard Factory. A chill chokedamp of fear and frustration fell over the group.

When that lifted, a wonderful thing had happened. The head promoter wrote the Foundation office. He said he wished he'd paid some attention to A.A. experience. Then he did something else that was to become an A.A. classic. It all went on a little card about golf-score size. The cover read: "Middleton Group #1, Rule #62." Once the card was unfolded, a single pungent sentence leaped to the eye: "Don't take yourself too damn seriously."

Thus it was that under Tradition Four an A.A. group had exercised its right to be wrong. Moreover, it had performed a great service for Alcoholics Anonymous, because it had been humbly willing to apply the lessons it learned. It had picked itself up with a laugh and gone on to better things. Even the chief architect, standing in the ruins of his dream, could laugh at himself—and that is the very acme of humility.