

Tradition Nine

“A.A., as such, ought never be organized; but we may create service boards or committees directly responsible to those they serve.”

WHEN Tradition Nine was first written, it said that “Alcoholics Anonymous needs the least possible organization.” In years since then, we have changed our minds about that. Today, we are able to say with assurance that Alcoholics Anonymous—A.A. as a whole—should never be organized at all. Then, in seeming contradiction, we proceed to create special service boards and committees which in themselves are organized. How, then, can we have an unorganized movement which can and does create a service organization for itself? Scanning this puzzler, people say, “What do they mean, no organization?”

Well, let’s see. Did anyone ever hear of a nation, a church, a political party, even a benevolent association that had no membership rules? Did anyone ever hear of a society which couldn’t somehow discipline its members and enforce obedience to necessary rules and regulations? Doesn’t nearly every society on earth give authority to some of its members to impose obedience upon the rest and to punish or expel offenders? Therefore, every nation, in fact every form of society, has to be a government administered by human beings. Power to direct or govern is the essence of organization everywhere.

Yet Alcoholics Anonymous is an exception. It does not conform to this pattern. Neither its General Service Conference, its Foundation Board,* nor the humblest group committee can issue a single directive to an A.A. member and make it stick, let alone mete out any punishment. We've tried it lots of times, but utter failure is always the result. Groups have tried to expel members, but the banished have come back to sit in the meeting place, saying, "This is life for us; you can't keep us out." Committees have instructed many an A.A. to stop working on a chronic backslider, only to be told: "How I do my Twelfth Step work is my business. Who are you to judge?" This doesn't mean an A.A. won't take advice or suggestions from more experienced members, but he surely won't take orders. Who is more unpopular than the oldtime A.A., full of wisdom, who moves to another area and tries to tell the group there how to run its business? He and all like him who "view with alarm for the good of A.A." meet the most stubborn resistance or, worse still, laughter.

You might think A.A.'s headquarters in New York would be an exception. Surely, the people there would have to have some authority. But long ago, trustees and staff members alike found they could do no more than make suggestions, and very mild ones at that. They even had to coin a couple of sentences which still go into half the letters they write: "Of course, you are at perfect liberty to handle this matter any way you please. But the majority

*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.

experience in A.A. does seem to suggest..." Now, that attitude is far removed from central government, isn't it? We recognize that alcoholics can't be dictated to—individually or collectively.

At this juncture, we can hear a churchman exclaim, "They are making disobedience a virtue!" He is joined by a psychiatrist who says, "Defiant brats! They won't grow up and conform to social usage!" The man in the street says, "I don't understand it. They must be nuts!" But all these observers have overlooked something unique in Alcoholics Anonymous. Unless each A.A. member follows to the best of his ability our suggested Twelve Steps to recovery, he almost certainly signs his own death warrant. His drunkenness and dissolution are not penalties inflicted by people in authority; they result from his personal disobedience to spiritual principles.

The same stern threat applies to the group itself. Unless there is approximate conformity to A.A.'s Twelve Traditions, the group, too, can deteriorate and die. So we of A.A. do obey spiritual principles, first because we must, and ultimately because we love the kind of life such obedience brings. Great suffering and great love are A.A.'s disciplinarians; we need no others.

It is clear now that we ought never to name boards to govern us, but it is equally clear that we shall always need to authorize workers to serve us. It is the difference between the spirit of vested authority and the spirit of service, two concepts which are sometimes poles apart. It is in this spirit of service that we elect the A.A. group's informal rotating committee, the intergroup association for the area,

and the General Service Conferences of Alcoholics Anonymous for A.A. as a whole. Even our Foundation, once an independent board, is today directly accountable to our Fellowship. Its trustees are the caretakers and expeditors of our world services.

Just as the aim of each A.A. member is personal sobriety, the aim of our services is to bring sobriety within reach of all who want it. If nobody does the group's chores, if the area's telephone rings unanswered, if we do not reply to our mail, then A.A. as we know it would stop. Our communications lines with those who need our help would be broken.

A.A. has to function, but at the same time it must avoid those dangers of great wealth, prestige, and entrenched power which necessarily tempt other societies. Though Tradition Nine at first sight seems to deal with a purely practical matter, in its actual operation it discloses a society without organization, animated only by the spirit of service—a true fellowship.