

Tradition Six—an opinion

This article was written by John F., a member of the World Service Board of Trustees, in January 1985. It represents his views at the time of writing.

As Narcotics Anonymous continues its maturing process, the Twelve Traditions assume larger and larger dimensions in the life of our fellowship. They become important for the individual member, the autonomous group, the entire service structure. As we vigilantly continue to pursue our primary purpose—to carry the message to the addict who still suffers—we must seek to understand the spiritual guidelines that bind us together.

An understanding of the traditions of Narcotics Anonymous is a requirement for genuine service to our fellowship. The traditions are the point from which our success has sprung, in bringing our program of recovery to tens of thousands of addicts. The traditions cannot be taken lightly. They are not merely "suggested" nor are they so hopelessly complex as to be unworkable. Our Basic Text reminds us: "The Twelve Traditions of Narcotics Anonymous are not negotiable."

And while it is impossible to say if one tradition is any more important than another (as it is similarly impossible to single out any one step as the most important to recovery), the tradition chosen as the basis of this discussion is one whose significance looms large on the NA horizon—Tradition Six. I believe that the obligations that Tradition Six place on all NA members, groups, trusted servants, and service units are imperative to the continued well-being of Narcotics Anonymous.

What is Tradition Six? To begin with, it's the one which says, "An NA group ought never endorse, finance, or lend the NA name to any related facility or outside enterprise, lest problems of money, property, or prestige divert us from our primary purpose."

Tradition Six comes immediately after Tradition Five, which states, "Each group has but one primary purpose, to carry the message to the addict who still suffers."

The purpose of Tradition Six then would seem to be to enumerate the things that must be done to ensure the furtherance of NA's primary purpose. It lists what we must do to preserve and protect the NA program of recovery.

There would be no Narcotics Anonymous if Tradition Six were a source of casual or continual violation. If there were no Tradition Six, NA might be destroyed from within, or it might be destroyed from without, but it would most surely be destroyed.

What, therefore, does Tradition Six mean? Tradition Six says first of all that we must never endorse or finance nor lend the NA name to a related facility or outside enterprise. By "endorsement" is meant to be an official expression of approval. By "finance" is meant to give money in the name of NA. "To lend" means just that—to allow another group, organization, or entity to use the NA name for its own purposes, however praiseworthy and however close to our own aims. The terms "money, property, and prestige" speak for themselves and warn us of the different ways we can be sidetracked from our primary purpose.

Possible violations of this tradition are being constantly brought to the attention of the board of trustees. Questions are always being asked. It is clear to many NA members that to preserve the integrity of our program, Tradition Six must be rigorously adhered to.

Just in the past three months I have been asked to answer questions such as the following: "Can EST literature be read at NA meetings?" "Can the rehabilitation center my group meets at tell people it is an NA-approved facility?" "Can we make announcements at meetings about Hare Krishna?" "About OA?" "About the halfway house a lot of our members live at?" "About the AA young peoples' dance?"

AA as in *Alcoholics Anonymous*? Yes, AA—there, I've let the cat out of the bag.

Alcoholics Anonymous--the issue that causes more emotion and more confusion among NA members than any other. I believe the time has come for NA to discuss and resolve the issue of its relation to the AA Fellowship. I believe that this discussion and resolution should occur within the context of our Tradition Six.

For many, the answer to this issue is very simple; unfortunately, a lot of NA members do not agree on just what the simple answer is. To clarify a discussion of the situation, I would like to create two hypothetical NA members--each representing the two most prevalent positions on the issue.

Member #1 believes that the AA issue doesn't even need to be discussed. For him, AA is an outside organization to which he doesn't belong. This member hates the mere mention of AA at Narcotics Anonymous meetings and feels people who are so attached to AA should stay there, since they obviously have no respect for the NA traditions.

Member #2 went to AA before there was NA in his area. He sees the AA program as being the parent of NA and entitled to a status in the NA program that no other organization has. Since everybody he knows goes to both NA and AA, he doesn't understand how talking about AA at NA meetings could possibly be a violation of Tradition Six. He ridicules Member #1 for being an "NA purist."

While perhaps lacking somewhat in tact and sensitivity, Member #1 is, of course, essentially correct in his interpretation of the traditions. While Member #2 has a point of view which comes from his love of the AA program of recovery, it is essentially in violation of the NA traditions and therefore an error which really can't be negotiated.

Accordingly, this article is not directed at Member #1. It's offered to Member #2 as an honest attempt to explain the rationale and importance of Tradition Six. It is also offered to every NA member who has been puzzled, angered, or confused by the AA issue.

~~As a beginning to this discussion, I would like to acknowledge as a historical fact that Narcotics Anonymous is deeply indebted to Alcoholics Anonymous. NA was founded in July 1953, by addicts who had learned the tools of their recovery from addiction in the AA program. NA freely admits~~

its debt in its literature. It says in our White Book that "in NA we follow a program adapted from Alcoholics Anonymous. We are deeply grateful to the AA Fellowship for pointing the way for us to a new way of life."

But, from the origin of our fellowship, NA members have always known that it was something different to be in NA than to be an AA member--even if (as many people apparently do) a person belongs to both fellowships.

When I was preparing this article, I began to wonder if there was perhaps some new way I could approach a discussion of Tradition Six in order to more clearly and lovingly explain its spirit and importance. I realize that it's a difficult thing to ask some NA members to leave their membership in the much-loved AA program outside the NA meeting door. But I knew that I had to find a way of making them realize just how important this was to NA unity.

But not only did I want to convince these members who couldn't distinguish between the NA and AA programs; I also wanted to impart some of the frustration many NA members feel. After all our efforts to explain Tradition Six, we go to our home group and still hear people identifying themselves as "cross addicted alcoholics" while expressing their gratitude to the AA (but not the NA) program for their "sobriety" (not recovery). Then during the meeting break the latest AA dance is announced. I felt that they needed to know how much we love NA and how Tradition Six violations tear us up.

So, what could I say differently this time? I had an inspiration and found an answer--an answer at least to the issue of a new perspective. The answer has to do with history.

I wonder how many realize that both NA and AA have complex roots and that both of these fellowships grew and changed to their present shapes? That AA, for instance, didn't just happen, and like NA has its origins in another, "parent" organization? And that the genius of the AA founders lay in their ability to synthesize material already there.

I bet that not too many people know the details behind some of the above statements. Most people (even AA members) seem to believe that Bill Wilson and Dr. Bob Smith--the founders of Alcoholics

Anonymous—were inspired by absolutely new ideas which had no relation with anything that had ever happened before.

This belief, however, is not true and if they were still alive would be contradicted by Bill and Bob themselves. In his book, *AA Comes of Age*, Bill Wilson explained where some of the ideas came from. He discussed, for instance, the medical theories of William D. Silkworth and the pragmatic philosophy of William James as providing a context for the AA program.

Wilson also extensively discusses the relation of the early AA groups to a Protestant evangelical religious movement called the Oxford Group—with its precepts of confidence, confession, conversion, and continuance—so crucial that for the first two years of AA existence (1935-1937), in order to join AA a person had to join the Oxford Group.

Bill Wilson makes no bones about AA's debt to the Moral Rearmament movement and to other sources. He acknowledges, for instance, that when he wrote the Twelve Steps that "most of the basic ideas had come from the Oxford Group, William James, and Dr. Silkworth."

In 1955, at its General Convention, AA received a special visitor. They were addressed by an Oxford Group clergyman, a nonalcoholic named Samuel Shoemaker, who was instrumental in starting many early AA groups. Bill Wilson expresses his gratitude for Sam Shoemaker in the following passage from *AA Comes of Age*:

"It was from Sam Shoemaker that Dr. Bob and I, in the beginning, had absorbed most of the principles that were afterward embodied in the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. AA got its ideas of self-examination, acknowledgement of character defects, restitution for harm done, and working with others straight from the Oxford Groups and directly from Sam Shoemaker, their former leader in America, and from nowhere else. He will always be found in our ~~annals as the one whose inspired example and teaching did most to show us how to create the spiritual climate in which we alcoholics may survive and then proceed to grow. AA owes a debt to friends in the days of AA's infancy."~~

In 1937 a remarkable event occurred. Despite the great love and dependence early AA had for the Oxford Group, the two split. As Bill Wilson later wrote, "we most reluctantly parted company with these great friends."

What happened? The answer is plain: AA recognized that in order to survive as a fellowship it had to assert its independence, it had to concentrate on its primary purpose, it had to be affiliated with no other group, it could neither endorse nor lend its name to anything or anyone—not even its beloved parents. In other words, Alcoholics Anonymous decided to follow the traditions.

My purpose in telling you this is not to diminish the respect that we all have for AA, but to ask you to see the parallels in the situation: Here were two groups working closely together, possessing similar methods and aims, having members belonging to both, with one group functioning as the "parent" of the other, and with many members sentimentally attached to the original group although the benefits derived from the "child" group were their true reason for joining.

The point, I hope is clear: Some NA members who also belong to and love AA are probably in the same position as some early AA members who belonged to and loved the Oxford Group. Where does one group end and the other begin?

The experience of AA and the Oxford Group speaks directly to the issue. The answer for AA was found in the development of the spirit of Tradition Six. With that principle in mind, the early AA members could continue to belong to the Oxford Group if they wished (and many did), but they had to realize that their Oxford Group membership was separate from their AA membership and the Oxford Group had to stay outside the AA meeting door.

NA sees both the wisdom and the irony of being guided by AA's experience with the Oxford Group. We believe in this principle so much that we are willing (as AA was willing) to apply it to our parent organization. Narcotics Anonymous cannot endorse, lend, nor join its name to Alcoholics Anonymous. AA should be mentioned at NA meetings as frequently as the Oxford Group is mentioned at AA meetings.

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