

Tradition Ten

“Alcoholics Anonymous has no opinion on outside issues; hence the A.A. name ought never be drawn into public controversy.”

NEVER since it began has Alcoholics Anonymous been divided by a major controversial issue. Nor has our Fellowship ever publicly taken sides on any question in an embattled world. This, however, has been no earned virtue. It could almost be said that we were born with it, for, as one oldtimer recently declared, “Practically never have I heard a heated religious, political, or reform argument among A.A. members. So long as we don’t argue these matters privately, it’s a cinch we never shall publicly.”

As by some deep instinct, we A.A.’s have known from the very beginning that we must never, no matter what the provocation, publicly take sides in any fight, even a worthy one. All history affords us the spectacle of striving nations and groups finally torn asunder because they were designed for, or tempted into, controversy. Others fell apart because of sheer self-righteousness while trying to enforce upon the rest of mankind some millennium of their own specification. In our own times, we have seen millions die in political and economic wars often spurred by religious and racial difference. We live in the imminent possibility of a fresh holocaust to determine how men shall be governed, and how the products of nature and toil shall be divided

among them. That is the spiritual climate in which A.A. was born, and by God's grace has nevertheless flourished.

Let us reemphasize that this reluctance to fight one another or anybody else is not counted as some special virtue which makes us feel superior to other people. Nor does it mean that the members of Alcoholics Anonymous, now restored as citizens of the world, are going to back away from their individual responsibilities to act as they see the right upon issues of our time. But when it comes to A.A. as a whole, that's quite a different matter. In this respect, we do not enter into public controversy, because we know that our Society will perish if it does. We conceive the survival and spread of Alcoholics Anonymous to be something of far greater importance than the weight we could collectively throw back of any other cause. Since recovery from alcoholism is life itself to us, it is imperative that we preserve in full strength our means of survival.

Maybe this sounds as though the alcoholics in A.A. had suddenly gone peaceable, and become one great big happy family. Of course, this isn't so at all. Human beings that we are, we squabble. Before we leveled off a bit, A.A. looked more like one prodigious squabble than anything else, at least on the surface. A corporation director who had just voted a company expenditure of a hundred thousand dollars would appear at an A.A. business meeting and blow his top over an outlay of twenty-five dollars' worth of needed postage stamps. Disliking the attempt of some to manage a group, half its membership might angrily rush off to form another group more to their liking. Elders, temporarily turned Pharisee, have sulked. Bitter attacks have been di-

rected against people suspected of mixed motives. Despite their din, our puny rows never did A.A. a particle of harm. They were just part and parcel of learning to work and live together. Let it be noted, too, that they were almost always concerned with ways to make A.A. more effective, how to do the most good for the most alcoholics.

The Washingtonian Society, a movement among alcoholics which started in Baltimore a century ago, almost discovered the answer to alcoholism. At first, the society was composed entirely of alcoholics trying to help one another. The early members foresaw that they should dedicate themselves to this sole aim. In many respects, the Washingtonians were akin to A.A. of today. Their membership passed the hundred thousand mark. Had they been left to themselves, and had they stuck to their one goal, they might have found the rest of the answer. But this didn't happen. Instead, the Washingtonians permitted politicians and reformers, both alcoholic and nonalcoholic, to use the society for their own purposes. Abolition of slavery, for example, was a stormy political issue then. Soon, Washingtonian speakers violently and publicly took sides on this question. Maybe the society could have survived the abolition controversy, but it didn't have a chance from the moment it determined to reform America's drinking habits. When the Washingtonians became temperance crusaders, within a very few years they had completely lost their effectiveness in helping alcoholics.

The lesson to be learned from the Washingtonians was not overlooked by Alcoholics Anonymous. As we surveyed the wreck of that movement, early A.A. members resolved

to keep our Society out of public controversy. Thus was laid the cornerstone for Tradition Ten: “Alcoholics Anonymous has no opinion on outside issues; hence the A.A. name ought never be drawn into public controversy.”