

Tradition Two

“For our group purpose there is but one ultimate authority—a loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience. Our leaders are but trusted servants; they do not govern.”

WHERE does A.A. get its direction? Who runs it? This, too, is a puzzler for every friend and newcomer. When told that our Society has no president having authority to govern it, no treasurer who can compel the payment of any dues, no board of directors who can cast an erring member into outer darkness, when indeed no A.A. can give another a directive and enforce obedience, our friends gasp and exclaim, “This simply can’t be. There must be an angle somewhere.” These practical folk then read Tradition Two, and learn that the sole authority in A.A. is a loving God as He may express Himself in the group conscience. They dubiously ask an experienced A.A. member if this really works. The member, sane to all appearances, immediately answers, “Yes! It definitely does.” The friends mutter that this looks vague, nebulous, pretty naive to them. Then they commence to watch us with speculative eyes, pick up a fragment of A.A. history, and soon have the solid facts.

What are these facts of A.A. life which brought us to this apparently impractical principle?

John Doe, a good A.A., moves—let us say—to Middletown, U.S.A. Alone now, he reflects that he may not be able

to stay sober, or even alive, unless he passes on to other alcoholics what was so freely given him. He feels a spiritual and ethical compulsion, because hundreds may be suffering within reach of his help. Then, too, he misses his home group. He needs other alcoholics as much as they need him. He visits preachers, doctors, editors, policemen, and bartenders ...with the result that Middletown now has a group, and he is the founder.

Being the founder, he is at first the boss. Who else could be? Very soon, though, his assumed authority to run everything begins to be shared with the first alcoholics he has helped. At this moment, the benign dictator becomes the chairman of a committee composed of his friends. These are the growing group's hierarchy of service—self-appointed, of course, because there is no other way. In a matter of months, A.A. booms in Middletown.

The founder and his friends channel spirituality to newcomers, hire halls, make hospital arrangements, and entreat their wives to brew gallons of coffee. Being on the human side, the founder and his friends may bask a little in glory. They say to one another, "Perhaps it would be a good idea if we continue to keep a firm hand on A.A. in this town. After all, we are experienced. Besides, look at all the good we've done these drunks. They should be grateful!" True, founders and their friends are sometimes wiser and more humble than this. But more often at this stage they are not.

Growing pains now beset the group. Panhandlers panhandle. Lonely hearts pine. Problems descend like an avalanche. Still more important, murmurs are heard in the body politic, which swell into a loud cry: "Do these old-

timers think they can run this group forever? Let's have an election!" The founder and his friends are hurt and depressed. They rush from crisis to crisis and from member to member, pleading; but it's no use, the revolution is on. The group conscience is about to take over.

Now comes the election. If the founder and his friends have served well, they may—to their surprise—be reinstated for a time. If, however, they have heavily resisted the rising tide of democracy, they may be summarily beached. In either case, the group now has a so-called rotating committee, very sharply limited in its authority. In no sense whatever can its members govern or direct the group. They are servants. Theirs is the sometimes thankless privilege of doing the group's chores. Headed by the chairman, they look after public relations and arrange meetings. Their treasurer, strictly accountable, takes money from the hat that is passed, banks it, pays the rent and other bills, and makes a regular report at business meetings. The secretary sees that literature is on the table, looks after the phone-answering service, answers the mail, and sends out notices of meetings. Such are the simple services that enable the group to function. The committee gives no spiritual advice, judges no one's conduct, issues no orders. Every one of them may be promptly eliminated at the next election if they try this. And so they make the belated discovery that they are really servants, not senators. These are universal experiences. Thus throughout A.A. does the group conscience decree the terms upon which its leaders shall serve.

This brings us straight to the question "Does A.A. have a real leadership?" Most emphatically the answer is "Yes,

notwithstanding the apparent lack of it.” Let’s turn again to the deposed founder and his friends. What becomes of them? As their grief and anxiety wear away, a subtle change begins. Ultimately, they divide into two classes known in A.A. slang as “elder statesmen” and “bleeding deacons.” The elder statesman is the one who sees the wisdom of the group’s decision, who holds no resentment over his reduced status, whose judgment, fortified by considerable experience, is sound, and who is willing to sit quietly on the sidelines patiently awaiting developments. The bleeding deacon is one who is just as surely convinced that the group cannot get along without him, who constantly connives for reelection to office, and who continues to be consumed with self-pity. A few hemorrhage so badly that—drained of all A.A. spirit and principle—they get drunk. At times the A.A. landscape seems to be littered with bleeding forms. Nearly every oldtimer in our Society has gone through this process in some degree. Happily, most of them survive and live to become elder statesmen. They become the real and permanent leadership of A.A. Theirs is the quiet opinion, the sure knowledge and humble example that resolve a crisis. When sorely perplexed, the group inevitably turns to them for advice. They become the voice of the group conscience; in fact, these are the true voice of Alcoholics Anonymous. They do not drive by mandate; they lead by example. This is the experience which has led us to the conclusion that our group conscience, well-advised by its elders, will be in the long run wiser than any single leader.

When A.A. was only three years old, an event occurred demonstrating this principle. One of the first members of

A.A., entirely contrary to his own desires, was obliged to conform to group opinion. Here is the story in his words.

“One day I was doing a Twelfth Step job at a hospital in New York. The proprietor, Charlie, summoned me to his office. ‘Bill,’ he said, ‘I think it’s a shame that you are financially so hard up. All around you these drunks are getting well and making money. But you’re giving this work full time, and you’re broke. It isn’t fair.’ Charlie fished in his desk and came up with an old financial statement. Handing it to me, he continued, ‘This shows the kind of money the hospital used to make back in the 1920’s. Thousands of dollars a month. It should be doing just as well now, and it would—if only you’d help me. So why don’t you move your work in here? I’ll give you an office, a decent drawing account, and a very healthy slice of the profits. Three years ago, when my head doctor, Silkworth, began to tell me of the idea of helping drunks by spirituality, I thought it was crackpot stuff, but I’ve changed my mind. Some day this bunch of ex-drunks of yours will fill Madison Square Garden, and I don’t see why you should starve meanwhile. What I propose is perfectly ethical. You can become a lay therapist, and more successful than anybody in the business.’

“I was bowled over. There were a few twinges of conscience until I saw how really ethical Charlie’s proposal was. There was nothing wrong whatever with becoming a lay therapist. I thought of Lois coming home exhausted from the department store each day, only to cook supper for a houseful of drunks who weren’t paying board. I thought of the large sum of money still owing my Wall Street creditors. I thought of a few of my alcoholic friends,

who were making as much money as ever. Why shouldn't I do as well as they?

"Although I asked Charlie for a little time to consider it, my own mind was about made up. Racing back to Brooklyn on the subway, I had a seeming flash of divine guidance. It was only a single sentence, but most convincing. In fact, it came right out of the Bible—a voice kept saying to me, 'The laborer is worthy of his hire.' Arriving home, I found Lois cooking as usual, while three drunks looked hungrily on from the kitchen door. I drew her aside and told the glorious news. She looked interested, but not as excited as I thought she should be.

"It was meeting night. Although none of the alcoholics we boarded seemed to get sober, some others had. With their wives they crowded into our downstairs parlor. At once I burst into the story of my opportunity. Never shall I forget their impassive faces, and the steady gaze they focused upon me. With waning enthusiasm, my tale trailed off to the end. There was a long silence.

"Almost timidly, one of my friends began to speak. 'We know how hard up you are, Bill. It bothers us a lot. We've often wondered what we might do about it. But I think I speak for everyone here when I say that what you now propose bothers us an awful lot more.' The speaker's voice grew more confident. 'Don't you realize,' he went on, 'that you can never become a professional? As generous as Charlie has been to us, don't you see that we can't tie this thing up with his hospital or any other? You tell us that Charlie's proposal is ethical. Sure, it's ethical, but what we've got won't run on ethics only; it has to be bet-

ter. Sure, Charlie's idea is good, but it isn't good enough. This is a matter of life and death, Bill, and nothing but the very best will do!' Challengingly, my friends looked at me as their spokesman continued. 'Bill, haven't you often said right here in this meeting that sometimes the good is the enemy of the best? Well, this is a plain case of it. You can't do this thing to us!'

"So spoke the group conscience. The group was right and I was wrong; the voice on the subway was not the voice of God. Here was the true voice, welling up out of my friends. I listened, and—thank God—I obeyed."