

THE SPIRITUAL PRINCIPLES OF THE 12 TRADITIONS

The Twelve Traditions are often referred to as, "Why it works." They ensure the continuance of A.A. as a whole, by providing guidelines for groups to evaluate their activities and actions. In a practical vein they are, individually and collectively, humility builders for the group; they ask that the group consider its conduct from a broader perspective and, when necessary, give up something for the overall good of A.A.

The Traditions also contain spiritual principles. These principles, when applied in our lives, complement the Steps as a guide to personal recovery. Here, taken from Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions, (with minor editorial modification) are the spiritual principles of the Traditions that I strive to apply in my daily life:

1. The A.A. member conforms to the principles of recovery; at first because he must, later because he discovers a way of life he really wants to live. (Unity)
2. When we come to understand the wisdom of the group decision and the necessity of patiently awaiting developments, the real and permanent leadership of A.A. can offer the quiet opinion, the sure knowledge and humble example that resolve a crisis, leading by example, rather than driving by mandate. (Group Conscience)
3. When confronted by the fear that is the true basis of intolerance, we need only ask, "What would the Master do?" (Membership)
4. Eventually, we must conform to whatever tested principles guarantee survival. Sobriety must be our sole objective. In all other respects there is perfect freedom of will and action. We have the right to be wrong, but we no longer have the right to harm others. (Autonomy)
5. It is the great paradox of A.A. that we know we can seldom keep the precious gift of sobriety unless we give it away. (Primary Purpose)
6. We are all perfectionists who, failing perfection, have gone to the other extreme. We can not be all things to all men, nor should we try. (Non-Affiliation)
7. We, too, should be self-supporting through our own contributions. Not only is it a responsibility of sobriety, it is essential to our self-esteem. (Self-Supporting)
8. We give freely what has been given freely to us. (Non-Professional)
9. Unless each A.A. member follows to the best of his ability our suggested Twelve Steps to recovery, he almost certainly signs his death warrant. His drunkenness and dissolution are not penalties inflicted by people in authority; they result from his personal disobedience to spiritual principles. (Spirit of Service)
10. We should not back away from our individual responsibility to act as we believe upon the issues of our time, yet self-righteousness should not cause us to enforce our will on others. (Outside Issues)
11. Personal ambition has no place in A.A. There is never need to praise ourselves. (Attraction Rather Than Promotion)
12. The spiritual substance of anonymity is sacrifice. We try to give up our natural desires for personal distinction as A.A. members both among fellow alcoholics and before the general public. We are sure that humility, expressed by anonymity, is the greatest safeguard that Alcoholics Anonymous can ever have. (Principles Before Personalities)

The spiritual principles of the traditions teach us that, "we are actually to practice a genuine humility. This to the end that our great blessings may never spoil us; that we shall forever live in thankful contemplation of Him who presides over us all."

Jack D. (The Home Group)

Living the Traditions
They work for individuals as well as for groups
AA Grapevine, March 1982

In our book AA Comes of Age, Bill W. says: "Our Traditions are a guide to better ways of working and living, and they are also an antidote for our various maladies. The Twelve Traditions are to group survival and harmony what AA's Twelve Steps are to each member's sobriety and peace of mind . . . But the Twelve Traditions also point straight at many of our individual defects. By implication they ask each of us to lay aside pride and resentment. They ask for personal as well as group sacrifice . . . The Traditions guarantee the equality of all members . . . They show how we may best relate ourselves to each other and to the world outside."

For some of us, the Traditions have been in reality an extension of the Twelve Steps. In trying to understand the last part of the Twelfth Step--"practice these principles in all our affairs"--I know I found it helpful to use the Twelve Traditions as a guideline. Here are some of the ways each Tradition affected me personally:

Tradition 1: It didn't take long for me to realize that without other AA members, my group, and AA as a whole, I would probably find it difficult to stay sober. Even though I was sometimes in hearty disagreement, I learned that I must be willing to yield--first to my sponsor, then to our group conscience, finally to the principles of AA as a whole. I tried to learn how to "disagree without being disagreeable."

Tradition 2: As I kept coming back, I began to believe that the Higher Power was speaking through the members of my home group. It was the beginning of faith in the group conscience, belief that it might represent God's will for me today. The concept of AA leaders who are "but trusted servants" calmed my rebellious nature and guided me toward trust in other people and peace of mind.

Tradition 3: When I first arrived at the doors of AA, I had little or no feeling of self-worth. I was filled with guilt over my "sins of commission and omission." How comforting to know that I was welcome as a member in spite of my imagined or actual faults--no questions asked! I felt the urge to earn the friendship of those wonderful people around the tables. So I began the long journey back to self-respect, to productivity, and to rejoining society as a whole--just because of Tradition Three.

Tradition 4: For too long, I thought I was autonomous in my own right; this is also called being self-centered or selfish, with "self-will run riot." This Tradition helped me understand that I could not take any actions harmful to others without dire consequences to myself. I learned that nothing was really good unless other people also were considered.

Tradition 5: This Tradition, I realized, delineated pretty clearly my own primary purpose, as well as the group's. I was told that I could not keep my sobriety unless I gave it away. Each of us is but a small

part of the whole, but by joining AA's primary purpose to our own, we become something bigger than our individual selves.

Tradition 6: In this Tradition, I began to learn the importance of singleness of purpose, both in AA and in my private life. I came to understand the difference between that which helps and that which hinders. By keeping my AA program simple, I underscored my own way to "Live and Let Live."

Tradition 7: Self-support lent me a sense of freedom of thought and of action. As an AA member, I knew, I was not bound by what other people thought. That helped me to open up my mind and start to think for myself--for the first time in a long time. AA gave me proof that money and spirituality can mix.

Tradition 8 & 9: When I began AA service work, these Traditions Eight and Nine told me I was simply one of many trusted servants, for whom special training or talent was unimportant. The fact that this Society was nonprofessional was reassuring. Titles and degrees became trivial. I felt a new sense of responsibility to myself and to others. It made me aware of pride and ambition as defects, so I could commence to learn my true identity before God.

Tradition 10: Here, I began to understand that as an AA member, I owed certain disciplines, obligations, and responsibilities to AA as a whole. I could speak out as an individual on any matter with which I was concerned; but as an AA member, I had to operate within certain limits, try to "engage the mind before opening the mouth."

Tradition 11: "Walk like you talk," I heard. If I could do that, I knew there would be a sufficient difference in my way of living and thinking to be noticeable by example, and there should be no necessity for me to blow my own horn. I didn't need to break my arm by patting myself on the back for staying sober, either (millions of people have been doing that for centuries). Tradition Eleven reminded me not to take personal credit for anything that I might do; ego and personal ambition have no place in AA life.

Tradition 12: When I listened to others, this Tradition told me, the important thing was the principle expressed, not the person expressing it. If I could go a step further and learn to place AA principles before my own personality, I could travel a long way on my journey of spiritual progress. Public anonymity was essential to such development--that was clear. But I also had to learn that I should not seek praise within the Fellowship. A simple job well done speaks for itself.

Using the Traditions as guides to spiritual progress, we begin to know that "God is doing for us what we could not do for ourselves," and the sense of humility is enhanced. So, although the Twelve Traditions are designed to further group survival and harmony (and those are most important!), a closer examination shows that another ultimate objective is the welfare of the individual AA member--truly an extension of the Twelve Steps to recovery.

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