

History of the Traditions

Each of AA's three Legacies of Recovery, Unity and Service are grounded upon a foundation of spiritual principles. Each Step, Tradition and Concept is, of itself, a "principle" (i.e. a rule of personal conduct).

When you see wall charts or wallet cards that convey the notion of a single-word descriptor as a so-called "principle" behind each Step, Tradition or Concept, it is far more a contemporary editorial invention of individual AA members rather than an historic cause and effect association.

Bill W published essays (in the Grapevine, 12&12, "AA Comes of Age" and "Twelve Concepts for World Service") defining the context, origin and basis of each of the 36 principles. Bill's original Grapevine essays on the Traditions can be found in the book "The Language of the Heart." These Grapevine Essays later became the basis for publication of the Traditions portion of the 12&12 and the "Unity" portion of the book "AA Comes of Age."

This history below provides a timeline of the origin and development of the Traditions.

1937

On the AA calendar of "year two" the spirit of Tradition 3 emerged. A member asked to be admitted who frankly described himself to the "oldest" member as "the victim of another addiction even worse stigmatized than alcoholism." The "addiction" was "sex deviate." [*] Guidance came from Dr Bob (the oldest member in Akron, OH) asking, "What would the Master do?" The member was admitted and plunged into 12th Step work. (DBGO 240-241 12&12 141-142) Note: this story is often erroneously intermingled with an incident that occurred 8 years later in 1945 at the 41st St clubhouse in NYC. (PIO 318).

[*] Information on this revelation was provided by David S from an audiotape of Bill W at an open meeting of the 1968 General Service Conference. See also the pamphlet The Co-founders of Alcoholics Anonymous. (Publication number P-53, pg 30).

1939

Principles defined in the Foreword to the First Edition Big Book provided the seeds for many of the Traditions that Bill later published in the April 1946 Grapevine. These same principles were also incorporated into the AA Preamble which was first published in the June 1947 Grapevine.

1942

Correspondence from groups gave early signals of a need to develop guidelines to help with group problems that occurred repeatedly. The basic ideas for the Twelve Traditions emerged from this correspondence and the principles defined in the Foreword to the first Edition of the Big Book. (AACOA 187, 192-193, 198, 204, PIO 305-306, LOH 154).

October, Clarence S (whose Big Book story is The Home Brewmeister) stirred up a controversy in Cleveland after discovering that Dr Bob and Bill W were receiving royalties from Big Book sales. (DBGO 267-269, BW-FH 153-154, AACOA 193-194) Bill and Dr Bob re-examined the problem of their financial status and concluded that royalties from the Big Book seemed to be the only answer to the problem. Bill sought counsel from Father Ed Dowling (Bill's spiritual sponsor) who suggested that Bill and Dr Bob could not accept money for 12th Step work, but should accept royalties as compensation for special services. (AACOA 194-195, PIO 322-324). This later formed the basis for Tradition 8.

1945

April, Earl T, founder of AA in Chicago (whose Big Book Story is He Sold Himself Short) suggested to Bill W that he codify the Traditions and write essays on them in the Grapevine. (AACOA 22, 203, GTBT 54-55, 77, SM S8, PIO 306, LOH 20-24). Earl T played a prominent role in the development of both the long and short form of the Traditions.

Bill W was called by Barry L (who would later author Living Sober) from the 41st St clubhouse. Bill persuaded the group to take in a black man who was an ex-convict with bleach-blond hair, wearing women's clothing and makeup. The man also admitted to being a "dope fiend." When asked what to do about it, Bill posed the question, "did you say he was a drunk?" When answered, "yes" Bill replied, "well I think that's all we can ask." The man was reported to have disappeared shortly after. (BW-FH 8, PIO 317-318) Anecdotal accounts erroneously say that this individual went on to become one of the best 12th Steppers in NY. This story is often erroneously intermingled with that of a 1937 incident ("year two" on the AA calendar) involving an Akron member that is discussed in the Tradition Three essay in the 12&12 (pgs 141-142).

August, the Grapevine carried Bill W's first article (titled Modesty One Plank for Good Public Relations) setting the groundwork for his 5-year campaign for the Traditions. The July Grapevine edition had an article by member CHK of Lansing, MI about the Washingtonians. Bill used this article to begin his essay commentaries.

The Alcoholic Foundation wrote to John D Rockefeller, Jr. and the 1940 dinner guests that AA no longer needed their financial help. Big Book royalties could look after Dr Bob and Bill W and Group contributions could pay the general office expenses. This ended all "outside contributions" to AA. (AACOA 203-204). It formed the basis of Tradition 7. All loans received from Rockefeller and the dinner guests from 1941 to 1945 were repaid in 1945 out of Big Book income.

1946 Grapevine

April, the Grapevine carried Bill W's article Twelve Suggested Points for AA Tradition. They would later be called the long form of the Twelve Traditions. (AACOA viii, 96, 203, LOH 20, 154)

1947 Grapevine

December, the Grapevine carried a notice that an important new 48-page pamphlet titled AA Traditions was sent to each group and that enough copies were available for each member to have one free of charge.

1949

As plans for the first Int'l Convention were under way, Earl T suggested to Bill W that the Twelve Suggested Points for AA Tradition would benefit from revision and shortening. (AACOA 213 says it occurred in 1947) Bill, with Earl's help, set out to develop the short form of the Twelve Traditions. (AACOA 213, GTBT 55, 77, PIO 334)

November, the short form of the Twelve Traditions was first printed in the AA Grapevine. The entire issue was dedicated to the Traditions in preparation for the forthcoming Cleveland Convention. Two wording changes were subsequently made to the initial version of the short form of the Traditions: "primary spiritual aim" was changed to "primary purpose" in Tradition 6, and "principles above personalities" was changed to "principles before personalities" in Tradition 12. (LOH 96)

July 28-30, AA's 15th anniversary and first International Convention at Cleveland, OH with an estimated 3,000 attendees. The attendees adopted the Twelve Traditions unanimously by standing vote. (AACOA 43, LOH 121, PIO 338)

1953

June, the book Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions was published. (GTBT 37) Bill W described the work as “This small volume is strictly a textbook which explains AA’s 24 basic principles and their application, in detail and with great care.” Betty L and Tom Powers helped Bill in its writing. Jack Alexander also helped with editing. It was published in two editions: one for \$2.25 (\$15.50 today) for distribution through AA groups, and a \$2.75 (\$19 today) edition distributed through Harper and Brothers for sale in commercial bookstores. (AACOA ix, 219, PIO 354-356)

1955

July 1-3, AA’s 20th anniversary and second Int’l Convention at St Louis, MO. Theme: Coming of Age. (BW-RT 311, AACOA viii, GTBT 42-51, NG 131, SM S2) Bill W claimed attendance of 5,000. Nell Wing (GTBT 105) was told by Dennis, who handled registrations that attendance was 3,100 plus a few hundred walk-ins. On July 3, by resolution, Bill W and its old-timers turned over the stewardship of the AA society to the movement. The Conference became the Guardian of the Traditions and voice of the group conscience of the entire Fellowship. The resolution was unanimously adopted by the Convention by acclamation and by the General Service Conference by formal resolution and vote. (AACOA ix, 47-48, 223-228)

1957 Conference Advisory Action

No change in Article 12 of the [Conference] Charter or in AA tradition or in the Twelve Steps of AA may be made with less than the written consent of three-quarters of the AA groups. (SM S87)

1958 Conference Advisory Action

The 1958 General Service Conference approved removing the word “honest” from the term “honest desire to stop drinking” in the AA Preamble. It also changed the term “AA has no dues or fees” to “There are no dues or fees for AA membership; we are self-supporting through our own contributions.” The wording of the Conference advisory action can give the misleading impression that the Traditions were changed. The advisory action reads: “The General Service Conference recognize the original use of the word ‘honest’ before ‘desire to stop drinking’ and its deletion from the Traditions as part of the evolution of the AA movement. Any change to be left to the discretion of AA Publishing, Inc.” The advisory action did not change the Traditions nor did it change the Foreword to the first Edition Big Book.

1976 Conference Advisory Action

It is resolved by the 1976 General Service Conference that those instruments requiring consent of three-quarters of the responding groups for change or amendment would include the Twelve Steps of AA should any such change or amendment ever be proposed.

In case a change is needed in the Twelve Traditions, the Twelve Steps, or the Six Warranties of Article 12, wherever the words “registered AA groups of the world”, “registered groups” or “directory-listed groups” appear in the AA Service Manual and Twelve Concepts for World Service, a bracketed sentence be inserted to state, “This would include all AA groups known to the General Service Offices around the world.”

Interpretation of the Traditions

The lead paragraph to the Ninth Tradition in the pamphlet "The Twelve Traditions Illustrated" reads "The words 'Let's keep it simple' were the last Bill W heard from his fellow founder of AA, shortly before Dr Bob's death in 1950. Aware that 'it' meant our recovery program, Bill later wrote 'We need to distinguish sharply between spiritual simplicity and functional simplicity. When we get into questions of actions by groups, by areas and by AA as a whole, we find that we must to some extent organize to carry the message - or else face chaos. And chaos is not simplicity.'"

Perhaps the main challenge and barrier in interpreting and applying the Traditions in a spiritual manner, is a propensity of many members to inform themselves with little more than what is printed on the short form window-shade displays of the principles. The spiritual application of the principles is a function of how well members are informed either on their own initiative or by others. Interpretations can vary widely depending on whether a member is acting as an "AA lawyer" or an "AA unifier."

All too often a member will extract a word or two from the short form of the Traditions or Concepts and interpret the principle(s) as their semantic imagination leads them rather than to be constructively informed by AA literature. There is much helpful literature e.g. the books "Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions" "AA Comes of Age" "Twelve Concepts for World Service" by Bill W, or the pamphlets "The Twelve Traditions Illustrated" and/or "Twelve Concepts Illustrated" and other pamphlets and service pieces.

The long form of the Traditions and Concepts is far more informative, in context and substance, than their short form counterparts. Also, there is a very under-appreciated pamphlet titled "The AA Group" that is a gold mine of information for groups on the application of the Traditions and Concepts.

Much can be gained, and gleaned, from the Steps, Traditions and Concepts, both in understanding and results, when each of them is viewed as a whole instructive sentence. Each whole instructive sentence can then be viewed as a "principle" (i.e. a rule of personal conduct) that we try to practice in all our affairs as a means of developing a spiritual condition that offers a daily reprieve from alcohol. The resultant God-given gift is something called "sobriety" (freedom from alcohol). The gift of the Traditions is "unity" (to keep the Fellowship from destroying itself).