

Directory Listing of the Gay and Lesbian Groups
By Barry Leach
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Barry Leach wrote *Living Sober*, 1975 and the pamphlet *Do you think you're different*, 1977 which contains two gay stories. Barry was Gay and an old timer in AA. Bill Wilson entrusted him with safe keeping the manuscript of The Big Book. Barry kept the manuscript until his death. The manuscript is now in the archives of the General Service Office in NYC. This is a transcript of a talk he gave at one of the Gay workshops during the International Convention in Montreal on July 1985.

Well, instead of talking about my drinking history, what I really want to talk about is not even the subject of roundups, particularly. I want to talk about the subject of the Third Tradition--our Third Tradition. The one that says "The only requirement for AA membership is a desire to stop drinking."

I think it's a very beautiful expression. It did not exist when I arrived in AA. The Traditions had not been written. They were already in action--people were acting them out, but they had not been written down. They were not to be written down until Bill started a series of Grapevine articles in 1946 called "Points to Assure AA's Future," and came up with the ideas that turned out to be our Twelve Traditions.

I'm thinking about the Third Tradition in terms of everybody in the world who has ever felt he or she didn't belong, who has ever felt different, who has ever felt he or she was in the wrong family, was alienated and had no right to be here. When I was a little kid in Texas, I'd often run away from home. It's an easy picture to think of, you know, little shaver wearing nothing but overalls, barefoot, maybe a straw hat. Always a bandana handkerchief with something to eat in it. I was a coward, though. I didn't go anywhere--I always got home by sundown. But I ran away a lot, not because I was trying to escape. I was trying to find something.

Marty Mann told me many years ago that she never in her life drank to escape. She drank to get in. And I think that is precisely what I was doing when I was running away from home. I had no reason to run away from home. I was not unloved, I was not mistreated. As a matter of fact, I think of two people, two good friends I had in my childhood who were very dear to me, very dear to me right now. One of them is still there in Texas. I talked to her recently. She's a good, old country girl who still goes barefooted when she can, although she's a great-grandmother now. And I called her and talked to her the other day, and we were talking about old times.

And I remember we both got into show business about the same time, in our teens. When we got into show business I discovered something that I didn't know. I discovered that when adults engaged in sexual activity, they usually had partners. (Laughter.) Well, I thought that was a jolly idea. Don't know why I hadn't thought of it, but like some other people I certainly made up my mind at that very moment not to rule out in advance half the human race as partners. And I never have.

But I remember going to my old girlfriend and trying to tell her about this. And saying, you see, I understand that there are some women who fall in love with women, instead of men, and some men who fall in love with men instead of women. Do you understand that? She said no. I don't think I ever could. And I said well, it's very important. I want you to understand it, because I think I might be one of those. And she said, well, honey, whatever it is it must be wonderful if you're one.

I think that's the Third Tradition. Anybody who feels different and doesn't fit in. And I know there are people here this weekend, although the weekend is primarily one of joy for all of us. But there are people here this weekend who are suffering and don't feel they belong. We know that, among us, there always are at an AA meeting.

Later, about ten years after that, I had joined AA and I was able to take this old girlfriend of mine to an AA meeting in New York. And I tried to explain to her what my drinking had been like, and why I considered myself an alcoholic, and what an alcoholic was. And I said, now do you think you understand any of this? She said no, I don't think I ever will. And I said, well, it's very important because I think I'm one. She said, well, then, it must be wonderful.

I think that's the kind of unconditional love that the Third Tradition is talking about. If you remember, the book Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions, there's a little section in there, I'm going to read two or three lines from it, which I want to recall to your mind, because I hope after this when you read these lines you will think of them a little bit differently.

Where I'm reading it says "On the AA calendar it was year two. In that time nothing could be seen but two struggling, nameless groups of alcoholics trying to hold their faces up to the light. A newcomer appeared at one of these groups, knocked on the door and asked to be let in. He talked frankly with that group's oldest member. He soon proved that his was a desperate case, and that above all he wanted to get well. 'But,' he asked, 'will you let me join your group? Since I am the victim of another addiction even worse stigmatized than alcoholism, you may not want me among you. Or will you?' There was the dilemma. What should the group do?" And this was in the year 1937.

I'm going to jump ahead now, to 1968, the last time Bill Wilson was able to speak before the General Service Conference. Those of you who are fairly new in AA don't have to worry about what the conference is--it doesn't have any power over any of us. And I want to recommend to all of you, however, that you get to the business meeting Sunday morning, for the Roundup. There's nothing more fun than an AA business meeting (laughter). Full moon over the loony bin. Better than Abbott and Costello. (Laughter). In 1968 Bill made a talk at the open meeting, not during the conference, so this is not a part of the official conference record. But he made a talk the night before the conference opened to all the delegates--there were delegates from all over the United States and Canada--and their guests, or spouses and various other people that were

invited. And he talked about the traditions this particular night. And it was my job that year to write the conference report. So I was there taking notes. And I knew what he was talking about so I didn't pay any attention to what he was saying (laughter).

And some two or three years ago somebody called me and said I have found a tape of a talk made by Bill in 1968. Do you know what it says? And I said, no, I don't remember. And he played it for me. And I'm going to play a tiny bit of it for you.

[Bill W. on tape:] "In about year two of the Akron group a poor devil came to Dr. Bob in a grievous state. He could qualify as an alcoholic, all right. And then he said, Dr. Bob, I've got a real problem to pose to you. I don't know if I could join AA because I'm a sex deviate. Well, that had to go out to the group conscience, you know. Up to them, it was supposed--any society could say who could join it. And pretty soon the group conscience began to seethe and boil, and it boiled over. And under no circumstances could we have such a disgrace among us, said a great many.

"And you know, right then our destiny hung on a razor edge over this single case. In other words would there be room that could exclude so-called undesirability. And that caused us in that time, and for quite a time, respecting this single case to ponder what is the more important? The reputation that we shall have? What people shall think? Or is it our character? And who are we? Considering our record--alcoholism is quite as unlovely--who are we to deny a man this opportunity--any man or woman.

"And finally the day of resolution came. And a bunch were sitting in Dr. Bob's living room arguing what to do. Whereupon dear old Bob looked around and blandly said, 'Isn't it time, folks, to ask ourselves what would the Master do in a situation like this? Would he turn this man away?'

"And that was the beginning of the AA Traditions, that any man who has a drinking problem, he's a member of AA if he says so, not whether we say so. Now, I think that the import of this on the common welfare has already been seen, because it takes in even more territory than the confines of our fellowship. It takes in the whole world of alcoholics. Their charter to freedom, to join AA, is assured. Indeed, it was an act in general welfare." [End Bill W. recording.]

I get chills when I hear that, when he said, "it was an act in the general welfare." During my first year, in 1945, I don't know how I stayed sober, except you people kept me sober, people like you kept me sober. And I did what I was told. I didn't drink, and I did some duties. And one of my duties was to take over--we did not have an office in New York, but we did have a club house. And somebody had to sit at the desk and answer the phone. And I was sitting at the desk in charge one day doing my shift and there came in a man, black, with blond hair, and a great deal of make-up, carrying on his back all his worldly possessions. He said he had been sent to us by the policeman on the corner. We had a very sweet policeman on the corner. He often sent us people he didn't know what to do with. (Laughter.)

One time he went into the Grapevine office--the Grapevine office was in the basement of this little club house at that time--and he went in and said to Bill's sister, who was the Grapevine's first paid employee, she made \$20 a month--your sign has fallen down. And Helen, Bill's sister, thought, "My Lord, I didn't know there was a sign outside that said AA or Grapevine." And she ran out and there was a man lying there. And she said what

do you mean--to the cop--she said what do you mean? And he said he's been leaning there every day for weeks and today he fell down. He was in the right place. But he began to tell me his story, and he told me about his drinking history and he said--he was obviously an alcoholic--I could tell that. He said he was also a dope fiend, which was a popular word then, and he had no place to go to eat, he had no place to go that night, he had just been let out of prison. He had every stigma in the book going for him. I didn't know what to do, so I called on all the elders of the group. And a few of them were willing to come in. A number of them found themselves playing poker at that minute and couldn't come in. But a few of them came in. And they looked at him and at me and at him, and we talked to him. And they didn't know what to do. And I finally thought the only thing to do was to call the only--the person I know who's been sober longest, and ask him what to do.

So I called Bill, I made an excuse--got someone to get the man a cup of coffee so he wouldn't hear me. And I told Bill about the case. I told him, I don't know what to do with this. He has no place to sleep, he needs help. He needs medical help, he's a dope fiend, he's blond, and he's black. And he has a lot of make-up--what do we do? And Bill said, now wait a minute. Did you say he is a drunk? And I said, oh, yes. There's no question, no question. We all know that. He's a drunk. And Bill was silent a moment, and then he said, well, I think that's the only question we can ask.

I don't remember what happened to the man. He disappeared. And that was before the Third Tradition had been written, but as you can see it was already at work. Later during that same year some dear friends of mine--by the way, I knew, I think, during my first year two other gay people--one Lesbian and one gay man in AA. And we were not just closeted. We were in a vault. (Laughter.) God bless us, holding on to each other's hands desperately--we recognized each other, of course. And by the way, Bill knew us all, too. It never bothered Bill.

But one time several other people came in who were fairly obviously having a problem with their sexual identity, and several of the--three women members who I love dearly--they happen to be three of the women who started the Grapevine. And one of them suggested we have a meeting with Bill and talk about a special meeting for gay men. And we did have a lunch with Bill, we sat down and had lunch one time. And they told him this problem. They said we see a lot of these fellows arrive, but they disappear, they don't seem to stay sober. Do you think it would be a good idea for them to have special meetings? Now, this is the year 1945, my Lord. All we had at that time were open meetings and closed meetings and beginner's meetings. Nobody had any other kind of meeting. In 1946 we finally started a meeting up in Harlem. And that was a great thrill, just to sit there week after week after week on Sunday afternoon hoping some Harlem members would show up, and finally they did, and now they're all over the place.

At any rate, Bill said, well I don't know. It might be the greatest thing that came down the pike. It may be a marvelous idea, just what these guys need, and some of the gals. Now he said, how long have you been sober? And I said almost a year. And he said well are you having any trouble staying sober. I said no. He said you've got friends, obviously, these nice gals here, now are friends to you. Do you think you can hang on a

little while longer? I said yes. He said well why don't you try a few more months, and after you've been sober a little over a year come back and talk to me and we'll see if we think this is still a good idea. And if it's a good idea, we'll do it. Well, that time passed and I forgot all about it, because there were so many of us, all over the place by then that we didn't need special groups. However, that was not to remain the case in AA history as you know.

There came a time when thanks to some pressure from groups in Southern California-- God bless you--there came a time when the question arose at the General Service Office whether or not gay groups could be listed as gay groups or as Lesbian groups in the World Directory. Now, of course, a local meeting list could do whatever it wanted to. Local--no one has any authority over a local office. They can print or not print whatever they choose.

But for the World Directory, this is rather--we have to stay out of all kind of controversy, we don't want to get into politics, this is kind of a ticklish question, so but you people out in California kept the pressure on--thank God. And finally it was decided this would have to go before the Conference of Delegates. The Conference actually serves as the successors to Bill and Dr. Bob in guidance of the movement's world affairs.

And so in 1973 the question was put on the agenda of the Conference, and the debate was hot and heavy. I cannot repeat all the things that I heard that I disliked, and I cannot repeat all the loving things that I heard. But finally the chairman of the Conference had a very good idea--he suggested they table the whole thing for a year. That's the AA solution, isn't it? (Laughter.)

The Conference doesn't like to do anything--and this is genuinely true--without almost total unanimity. Almost total unanimity of opinion. So it was placed on the agenda for the following year. And the following year, 1974, it was placed on the agenda: Should the General Service Office list in the World Directory Lesbian and gay groups? I think the question was put like this--something about gay men and Lesbian women. I don't know why. I don't know any Lesbian men. (Laughter.) But there's a lot of this I don't understand.

At any rate, I remember the debate very well that year because I was taking the notes. I was not a voting member of the Conference, but I was taking the notes. And I listened to the debate going on--it was hot and heavy. Three men, in particular, had done their homework. One man from Southern California. The delegate from Southern California had gone to visit all the gay AA groups he could find, and talk to every member he could find. A man from Chicago had done the same thing, and a man from Washington, D.C. had done the same thing. God bless all three of them. And those three led, let us say, the discussion in favor of listing gay groups if they wanted to be so listed.

Other people didn't feel the same way, from other parts of the country. A great number of them were what we would have to call rednecks, and they had a great number of unkind things to say, such as, well, if you're going to list the queers, what are you going to list next year? Child abusers? Or rapists? And I remember thinking to myself at that time, you know, come to think of it, in an outfit like ours we probably have both of many--don't you think so? We have many of both of those people. We have all kind of

child abuses, incest producers, all kinds of people in our outfit, and that's not relevant. It isn't relevant to their desire to recover, to recover some kind of spiritual health. And the debate went hot and heavy, and I remember one man said--was talking about sex deviates--he liked that word--and he didn't like the word, gay. And the delegate from Alaska that year was a little Eskimo woman--she was about three feet tall. And she went to one of the floor microphones and pulled it down to where she could squeak into it, and squeaked out loud, "Where I come from alcoholics are considered deviates." (Laughter.)

Well, it got hotter and hotter and hotter, and finally the Conference had to agree to wipe out one whole evening--the following evening, not that evening--wipe out the whole evening's agenda and sit there until they made up their mind about what to do. And the debate was resumed the next evening, and it got very hot and heavy. And we finally were getting sort of tired of it, I think. And a great many people made a great number of--had said a great number of kind things. And I remember one of the non-alcoholic doctors sitting on our Board of Trustees came back to where I was sitting in my little corner, and said did you people go through all these shenanigans when young people's groups wanted to be listed? I said no. He said did you go through these shenanigans when women's groups wanted to be listed? I said no. So he went down to the microphone--and I'm not going to tell you his name because I'm ashamed to say it was his greatest and only contribution he ever made on the board. (Laughter.) He went to the microphone and said to the group, I understand that when you wanted--when young people's groups wanted to be listed you didn't go through all these shenanigans. Is that true? And there was a chorus of "Yes." By that time everybody was awfully tired. And then he said, when the women's groups wanted to be listed you didn't go through this? They said, that's right, we didn't go through this. And he said, well, what the hell are you picking on these guys for? And went back to his seat. The whole meeting room changed. It was almost tangible. And the chairman felt it, and the chairman said I think it's time we put the question. And they did put the question: Should we or should we not list such groups if they choose to be so listed? And the vote was everybody in favor except two people. Almost totally unanimous.

** Prepared for the Triangle Club Web Site By Ray. A.*