

1953 General Service Conference

Bill

VARIATIONS IN FORM OF THE TWELVE STEPS AND TWELVE TRADITIONS

Bill said he proposed to consider "whether this program of ours is frozen as solid as an ice cube, or whether there is any elasticity in it, whether we are going to get into this business of insisting on conformity, whether we are going to get into the business of creating an authority that says: 'These Steps and Traditions have to be this way.'"

For the first four years, A.A. had a word-of-mouth program that could be summed up in six steps. As the Big Book was being prepared, it became apparent that the principles of the new program had to be stated, as well as the personal stories. In bed one night, Bill began to write out the steps, sensing only that the "original six" would have to be broken down to make them specific enough and concrete enough for "the distant reader."

"To my surprise, they came rather quickly and when I had finished, I found they were twelve. It seemed to me that this was quite a happy thought...and that is all I thought about it at the time. I was only trying to break the program up into such small pieces that nobody would miss an essential point."

When the Twelve Steps were presented to the other alcoholics in New York, Bill said, a great uproar developed. "My sin was that I had varied the six into twelve!" And a lot of people objected to the references to God in the new steps, as originally presented. "Because of this, we finally got around to the idea of the 'Higher Power' or 'God as you understand Him.' So the Twelve Steps themselves were a tremendous variation, not in principle, but in the manner of stating them."

This pioneering story is now being reenacted in distant lands. In one country, the Steps have been altered somewhat in phrasing and reduced to seven. "Do you think we should tell those people: 'You can't belong to Alcoholics Anonymous unless you print those Twelve Steps the way we have them?' No. They are merely going through the old pioneering process we had to go through ourselves."

Bill told of his surprise when he was presented with a proposed draft of revised Steps to be used in working with seamen who, he has been assured, "were not going to take the Twelve Steps the way they are written." Examining the "revision", he was amazed to note that they corresponded, number for number, with the six steps in the original A.A. word-of-mouth program!

"Where variations of the Traditions are concerned, we've gone up and down like a window shade. We even have a Tradition that guarantees the right of any group to vary all of them, if they want to. Let's remember, we are talking about suggested steps and traditions. And when we say each group is autonomous, that means that it also has a right to be wrong."

"My feeling is that the more we insist on conformity, the more resistance we create. But if the Traditions and Steps reflect accurately what our experience has been, the alcoholic, no matter where in the world he may be, will eventually adopt the principles that will work the best for him. If our principles are correctly stated, he will adopt them. If any improvements are to come, who can say where they may come from?"