

Anarchy Melts



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It may be that Alcoholics Anonymous is a new form of human society.

The first of our 12 Points of A.A. Tradition states, “Each member of Alcoholics Anonymous is but a small part of a great whole. AA must continue to live or most of us will surely die. Hence our common welfare comes first. But individual welfare follows close afterward”. This is a recognition, common in all forms of society, that the individual must sometimes place the welfare of his fellows ahead of his own uncontrolled desires. Were the individual to yield nothing to the common welfare there could be no society at all – only self-will run riot; anarchy in the worst sense of that word.

Apparent Contradiction

Yet Point Three in our AA Tradition looks like a wide-open invitation to anarchy. Seemingly, it contradicts Point One. It reads, “Our membership ought to include all who suffer alcoholism. Hence *we may refuse none* who wish to recover. Nor ought AA membership *ever depend on money or conformity*. *Any two or three alcoholics* gathered together for sobriety *may call themselves an AA Group*”. This clearly implies that an alcoholic is a member if *he* says so; that we can’t deny him his membership; that we can’t demand from him a cent; that we can’t force our beliefs or practices upon him; that he may flout everything we stand for and still be a member. In fact, our Tradition carries the principle of independence for the individual to such an apparently fantastic length that, so long as there is the slightest interest in sobriety, the most unmoral, the most anti-social, the most critical alcoholic may gather about him a few kindred spirits and announce to us that a new Alcoholics Anonymous Group has been formed. Anti-God, anti-medicine, anti-our Recovery Program, even anti-each other – these rampant individuals are still an AA Group if *they think so!*

Our non-alcoholic friends sometimes exclaim, “Did we hear you say that AA has a sound social structure? You must be joking. To us, your Tradition Number Three looks about as firmly grounded as the Tower of Babel. In your Point One you plainly say that group welfare comes first. Then you evidently proceed, in Point Three, to tell every AA that nobody can stop him if he thinks and does exactly what he pleases! True enough, your Second Point speaks vaguely about an *ultimate authority*, ‘A loving God as he may express himself in our Group conscience’. With all deference to your views, that Point does look just a little impractical to outsiders. After all, the whole world today is but the sad story of how most men have lost their conscience and so cannot find their way. Now come you alcoholics (unstable people, too, you’ll admit) and you blandly tell us: 1. That AA is a beautiful socialism – most democratic. 2. That AA is also a dictatorship, its members subject to the benign rule of God. And finally, 3. That AA is so very individualistic that the organization cannot discipline its own members for misbehavior or unbelief.

Crux of Our Credo

“So,” continue our friends, “within the society of Alcoholics Anonymous it appears to us that you have a democracy, a dictatorship and an anarchy, all functioning at once. Do these sleep quietly in the same bed – these same concepts whose conflict is tearing apart our world of today? Yet we know that AA works. So you people must have somehow become reconciled to these great forces. Tell us, if you can, what holds AA together? Why doesn’t AA tear apart, too? If each A.A. has personal liberty which can amount to license, why doesn’t your AA society blow up? It ought to, yet it doesn’t.”

Our friends of the world outside, so puzzled over this paradox, are apt to miss a most significant statement as they read our Point One. It is this: “AA must continue to live or most of us will surely die.”

That stark assertion carries a world of meaning for every member of Alcoholics Anonymous. While it is perfectly true that no A.A. group can possibly coerce an alcoholic to contribute money, to conform to the 12 Steps of our Recovery Program or to the 12 Points of AA Tradition, each AA member is, nevertheless, most powerfully compelled, in the long run, to do these very things. The truth is, that in the life of each AA member, there still lurks a tyrant. His name is Alcohol. He is cunning, ruthless. And his weapons are misery, insanity and death. No matter how long we may be sober, he always stands at each man’s elbow, ever watchful of an opportunity to resume his destruction. Like an agent of the Gestapo he ever threatens each AA citizen with torture or extinction. Unless, of course, the A.A. citizen is willing to live unselfishly, often placing the welfare of AA as a whole ahead of his own personal plans and ambitions. Apparently no human being can force alcoholics to live happily and usefully together. But Mr. John Barleycorn can—and he often does!

Rugged Souls Return

A story will illustrate: Some time ago we made a long list of our seeming failures in the first years of AA. Every alcoholic on the list had been given a good exposure. Most of them had attended AA meetings for several months. After slipping and sliding around they had all disappeared. Some said they were not alcoholic. Others couldn’t stand for our belief in God. Many had developed intense resentments toward their fellows. Anarchists at heart, they could not conform to our society. And because our society did not conform to them, they quit. *But only temporarily*. Over the years, most of these so-called failures have returned, often becoming magnificent members.

We never ran after them; they returned of their own accord. Each time I spot one newly back, I ask him why he has rejoined our fold. Invariably his answer runs like this: “When I first contacted AA I learned that alcoholism is a disease; an obsession of the mind that compels us to drink, and a sensitivity of the body that condemns us to go mad or die if we keep on. I also learned that AA worked, at least for some alcoholics. But I then disliked AA methods, hated some of the alcoholics I met there and I still toyed with the idea that I could do the job of quitting all by myself. After several more years of terrible drinking, which I found I was powerless to control, I gave up. I returned to AA because it was the only place left to go; I’d tried everything else. Arrived at this point, I knew that I must act quickly; that I must adopt the 12 Steps of the AA Recovery Program; that I must cease hating my fellow alcoholics; that I must now take my place among them as a very small part of that great whole, the society of Alcoholics Anonymous. It all boiled down to a simple question of ‘do or die’. I had to conform to AA principles—or else. No more anarchy for me. So I’m back.”

This illustration shows why we of AA must needs hang together “or else hang separately.” We are players at a stern drama where death is the prompter to those who falter. Could anyone imagine a more powerful restraint upon us than this?

Yet the history of uncontrolled drinking shows that fear alone has chastened but few alcoholics. Much more than fear is needed to bind us anarchists together. Several years ago, speaking at Baltimore, I ran on at a great rate about the terrible sufferings we alcoholics had endured. My talk must have had a strong flavor of self pity and exhibitionism. I kept referring to our drinking experience as a great calamity, a terrible misfortune. After the meeting I was approached by a Catholic clergyman who genially remarked, “I heard you say you thought your drinking a great misfortune. But it seems to me that in your case it was your *great good fortune*. Was not this terrible experience the very thing which humbled you so completely that you were able to find God? Did not suffering open your eyes and your heart? All the opportunity you have today, all this wonderful experience you call AA, once had its beginnings in deep personal suffering. In your case that was actually no misfortune. It was your great good fortune. You AAs are a privileged people.”

Searching the Motives

That simple yet profound remark affected me deeply. It is a landmark in my life. It set me thinking as never before about my relationship to my fellow AAs. It caused me to question my own motives. “Why had I come to Baltimore anyway? Had I come only to enjoy the applause and approval of my fellows? Was I there as a teacher or a preacher? Did I fancy myself a great moral crusader?” On reflection, I shamefacedly admitted to myself that I had all these motives, that I had been taking a vicarious and rather self-centered enjoyment out of my visit. But was that all? Had I no better motive than my natural craving for prestige and applause? Had I come to Baltimore in response to no better or deeper need than that? Then followed a flash of realization. Underneath my shallow and childish vainglory I saw Someone much greater than I at work! Someone who sought to transform me; who would, if I permitted, sweep away my less worthy desires and replace them with truer aspirations. In these I might, were I humble enough, find peace.

At that moment I saw ever so clearly why I really should have come to Baltimore. I should have journeyed there with the happy conviction that I needed the Baltimoreans even more than they needed me; that I needed to share with them both their burdens and their joys; that I needed to feel at one with them, merging myself into their society; that even if they did insist on thinking me

their teacher, I should actually feel myself their pupil. I saw that I had been living too much alone, too much aloof from my fellows, and too deaf to that Voice within. Instead of coming to Baltimore as a simple agent bearing the message of experience, I had come as a founder of Alcoholics Anonymous. And, like a salesman at a convention, I had been wearing my identification badge so that all might well see it. How much better it would have been, had I felt *gratitude* rather than self satisfaction—*gratitude* that I had once suffered the pains of alcoholism, *gratitude* that a miracle of recovery had been worked upon me from above, *gratitude* for the privilege of serving my fellow alcoholics and *gratitude* for those fraternal ties which bound me ever closer to them in a comradeship such as few societies of men have ever known. Truly did the clergyman say, “Your misfortune has become your good fortune. You AAs are a privileged people.”

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My experience at Baltimore was not unique. Every AA has such spiritual landmarks in his life—moments of insight which draw him closer to his fellows and to his Maker. The cycle is ever the same. First we turn to AA because we may die if we don’t. Next, we depend upon its fellowship and philosophy to stop our drinking. Then, for a time, we tend once more to depend upon ourselves, seeking happiness through power and acclaim. Finally, some incident, perhaps a sharp reverse, opens our eyes still wider. Then, as we learn our new lesson and *really accept its teaching* we enter a new level of better feeling and doing. Life takes on a finer meaning. We glimpse realities new to us; we apprehend the kind of love which assures us that it is more blessed to give than to receive. These are some of the reasons why we think that Alcoholics Anonymous may be a new form of society.

Each AA Group is a safe haven. But it is always circumscribed, however, by the tyrant Alcohol. Like the men on Eddie Rickenbacker’s raft, we who live in the haven of AA cling together with an intensity of purpose which the outside world seldom comprehends. The anarchy of the individual melts away. Self love subsides and democracy becomes a reality. We begin to know true freedom of the spirit. The awareness grows that all is well; that each of us may implicitly trust in Him who is our loving Guide from within – and from above.
