

Anonymity Applied to Archives

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The definition of "anonymity" is relatively simple on the surface. The *American Heritage Dictionary* defines anonymous as "having and unknown or unacknowledged name." Also, "having and unknown or withheld authorship or agency." The word is from the Greek prefix *a-*, meaning "without" and *nomos*, "name".

Researching the term "having a withheld agency," we learn that "agency" means "action, operation, power; a business or service authorized to act for others." Combining the two definitions we arrive at: "Being anonymous is having a name that is unknown and actions that are unacknowledged as we serve others with a power that is not our own."

There is only one definition that better describes the word as it relates to a spiritual way of life. It is found in the best place to look for meanings of spiritual terms as they apply to A.A.: our own A.A. literature, our group conscience in print.

In the "Contents" section of *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, the synopsis of Tradition Twelve states, "Anonymity is real humility." We all know that Tradition Twelve tells us that, "Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our Traditions," but how many of us have overlooked that the chapter on Step Seven in the *12 & 12* says, "indeed, the attainment of greater humility is the foundation principle of each of A.A.'s Twelve Steps."

Therefore, A.A.'s Legacies of Recovery and Unity are a constant seeking for humility expressed as anonymity. Without humility we cannot survive as individuals. Without anonymity, we cannot survive as a fellowship.

The topic of "Anonymity as It Applies to Archives," forces a closer look at Traditions 11 and 12. But how intertwined each of our principles is to the other! There is an old A.A. saying: "Anonymity is a principle so important it is half of our name." Studying how this principle applies to Archives, however, gives a glimpse of the fact that Anonymity is the entire program. When it is removed from our name, we are left with the word Alcoholics, what we were before we arrived: alcoholics without a program for living.

When we remember that anonymity, expressed as humility, is the principle that we strive above all to maintain in our service work, we have a sure light to guide us in A.A. Archives. While, as we have seen, that encompasses all of our principles, we need to take a closer look at the two A.A. Traditions that expressly mention anonymity.

Tradition 11 states: "Our public relations policy is based on attraction rather than promotion; we need always maintain personal anonymity at the level of press, radio, and films." During the 1995 International Convention in San Diego, the San Diego daily newspaper was covered with articles pertaining to how much A.A. has changed for the worse during the years of our

existence, and what some of those causes were. Of course, there were some glowing accounts, also, but the negative ones were the eye catchers.

For instance, despite our singleness of purpose, it was stated that A.A. no longer caters to those who really need it, such as "young people and drug addicts." The reason for this was said to be a fellowship that was hopelessly outdated and out of touch with the real needs of today's young people, as though spiritual principles can ever be outdated!

The disturbing thing about these articles, and several negative ones that have continued to appear in newspapers and magazines around the country, is that the reporters were not giving their opinions. They were quoting A.A. members! The members had not given their names, and probably believed they were keeping Traditions 11. But were they?

This is a program of attraction. Surely any one of those who shared so negatively with a reporter about their opinions and beliefs would, as an A.A. member, be quick to 12th Step an alcoholic who was still suffering. Yet, they spoke in this manner apparently unaware that anytime we have communication with the media we are on a 12th Step call of tremendous proportions! Many alcoholics will live or die, depending upon how attractive we are as a fellowship.

An equal caution arises from the opposite experience. When we get overblown with our praise and enthusiasm about A.A. when speaking with the media or outside agencies, we do not demonstrate that quality of humility that ways it is better to have our friends recommend us. We get into promotion rather than attraction. All we need do is give the simple facts about A.A., its principles and its work. That is true personal anonymity.

In *A.A. Comes of Age*, on page 293, we find: "We now fully realize that 100 per cent personal anonymity before the public is just as vital to the life of A.A. as 100 per cent sobriety is to the life of each and every member. This is not the counsel of fear; it is the prudent voice of long experience."

What does all this have to do with the A.A. Archives? Since our primary purpose is to try to carry the message to the still suffering alcoholic, we need always be mindful of the full meaning of Tradition 11 as we serve in any capacity with our history. Whether we are writing our group history, presenting a district archives workshop, or putting a history display together for our Intergroup or Area Assemblies, let us strive to present the materials in a factual way that allows for attraction and not promotion. And while we need A.A. members' full names in our repositories in order to keep the record straight, these names are not to be published, nor to become part of any public records at any outside agencies, such as archives in universities and private foundations. Contrary to many mistaken beliefs, this holds true even after death. Our group conscience has spoken on at least three occasions through our General Service Conference that anonymity continues after death. The purpose for this is the same. We are a program of attraction and not promotion. It does not matter who these people were. It only matters that, through the grace of God and this A.A. program, they were able to stay sober and helped to carry the message of A.A. to the still suffering alcoholic. That is the only need for A.A. history!

It is helpful to look at the long form of Tradition 11: "Our relations with the general public should be characterized by personal anonymity. We think A.A. ought to avoid sensational advertising. Our names and pictures as A.A. members ought not be broadcast, filmed, or publicly printed. Our public relations should be guided by the principle of attraction rather than promotion. There is never any need to praise ourselves. We feel it better to let our friends recommend us."

One day, in the Arkansas Archives stack room at the Wolfe Street Center in Little Rock, where our Area Archives repository is housed, a stranger stepped into the room. The stack room, where we store our papers is always dead-bolted unless one of the archivists is present. The woman smiled warmly and asked if it was possible for her to do some research while she was there. She wondered if she could check our files for anything we might have on a deceased member who was one of the first two dozen in Arkansas, back before 1943.

Thankfully, our active Area Archives Committee had voted years before to use the Archives Handbook from GSO as our guide in getting started, and had long ago adapted the Trustees Archives Committee's Access Policy to our needs. The lady was told that our files on A.A. members were closed to the general public, and that we did not keep records on individuals, as such, but on the principles and service of A.A. as a whole.

As she continued to ply questions about our Archives, it slowly emerged that she was the daughter of one of our early members in Arkansas, who had been especially active in starting several groups in the South and Mid-West. While she was not an alcoholic, she had grown up in A.A. and considered herself an "A.A. baby." She was very proud of her father and of what A.A. had done for him.

She was in Arkansas for a professional seminar and had been staying with her brother, a prominent professional man in central Arkansas. At dinner the night before, he had informed her that he had heard that A.A. in Arkansas now had an Archives, and he was very concerned about their father's anonymity. He did not want it broken. While his sister remained neutral, she understood her brother's trepidation, and had arrived on the scene to check us out. We were very pleased to be able to share our access policy with her. Her father's anonymity, along with his family's, is as safe with us as it was when he was alive and serving us so well. He and his family deserve no less from us after his death, than they did while he was an active member of Alcoholics Anonymous! And we have probably made two professional friends who will recommend us.

This thought leads us into Tradition 12: "Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our Traditions, ever reminding us to place principles before personalities."

The term "principles before personalities" is simply a more pronounced way of saying "personal anonymity." What Tradition 11 does for our fellowship on the outside, Tradition 12 does for us on the inside. Just as individual A.A. members remain "nameless" to outside agencies, individual A.A. members remain essentially "nameless" inside A.A. as well.

However, we cannot remain unknown to each other and survive. So the anonymity inside the program does not mean relinquishing our names, although we are certainly free to do so if we choose. It means we are to constantly strive to practice a true humility that does not take credit for anything we have done to serve A.A. Nor should we overly praise and acclaim other members for doing what this program suggests we must do to survive: carry the message.

The depth of Tradition 12 becomes more obvious when we study our literature closely and come to understand that this Tradition also applies after death. In *A.A. Come of Age*, on pages 136-137, Bill recalls his last meeting with his close friend and co-founder: "Dr. Bob was essentially a far more humble person than I, and anonymity came rather easily to him. When it was sure that he was mortally afflicted, some of his friends suggested that there should be a monument erected in honor of him and his wife, Ann -- befitting a founder and his lady. Telling me about this, Dr. Bob grinned broadly and said, 'God bless 'em. They mean well. Just let's you and me get buried just like other folks.'

"In the Akron cemetery where Dr. Bob and Ann lie, the simple stone says not a word about A.A. This final example of self-effacement is of more permanent worth to A.A. than any amount of public attention or any great monument."

There is not a better example of posthumous anonymity in the spirit of Tradition 12 anywhere in our literature. The only monuments in A.A. are the Twelve Steps, the Twelve Traditions, and the Twelve Concepts. Dr. Bob and Bill, and all early trusted servants, left us the A.A. legacies to ensure that this life-saving Fellowship would survive without them, but also to ensure that as individual A.A. members, they would not be adored and acclaimed after their deaths, no more than their personal anonymity allowed them to be in their lifetimes.

If we value their gifts to us, if we are grateful that they allowed the God of their understanding to sue them so well for our benefit, then we must remember that gratitude flows forever forward, never backward! May we use A.A. Archives as a valuable tool to try to carry the message of Alcoholics Anonymous to the still suffering alcoholic, not as a means of hero worship, with larger than life photographs and icons, making relics of personal items.

The spiritual paradox is also true that morbid fascination into deceased members' lives, with the things they wished to be held in confidence, which our program assures us we all deserve, strikes at the very heart of what this spiritual way of life is all about. As archivists, we are particularly entrusted with the keeping of confidentiality of our members, both living and deceased. This includes their private correspondence and anything else of a personal matter that they did not share openly with the fellowship in their lifetimes. Our founders deserve the respect of our continuing the anonymity they sought in life. No A.A. member's personal life should ever be held up to adoration or ridicule.

A.A. Comes of Age tells us on pages 292-293, "We alcoholics are the biggest rationalizers in the world. Fortified with the excuse that we are doing great things for A.A., we can, through broken anonymity, resume our old and disastrous pursuit of personal power and prestige, public honors, and money -- the same implacable urges that, when frustrated, once caused us to drink." Today, this disastrous pursuit can be undertaken using a deceased member's life, rather than one's own, a

possibility that needs to keep all of us involved in A.A. Archives alert to the true meaning of Anonymity.

As stated in the *12 & 12* on page 187, "Moved by the spirit of anonymity, we try to give up our natural desires for personal distinction as A.A. members, both among fellow alcoholics and before the general public. As we lay aside these very human aspirations, we believe that each of us takes part in the weaving of a protective mantle which covers our whole Society and under which we may grow and work in unity."

Tradition 12

The long form of Tradition 12 states: "And finally, we of Alcoholics Anonymous believe that the principle of anonymity has an immense spiritual significance. It reminds us that we are to place principles before personalities; 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."

-- Fay W., Archivist, Central Arkansas Area 4 Archives