

Dissent Within A.A.:

The System Provides the Means to Handle It*

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Dissent is commonplace within A.A.—particularly, in this country, when A.A. was young; and in other countries where A.A. is still learning from experience. Our cofounder Bill W. enjoyed relating stories of the disagreements and petty squabbles, the controversies and the dissensions that so often marked the early years. Many sober alcoholics do not handle dissent well—either individually or collectively. As individuals, some of us can be emotionally immature, with our emotions on the surface, raw and exposed.

We can be quick to anger, and prone to resentments. But our Big Book warns us that, as alcoholics, anger and resentments will destroy us! Often we express our dissent by sulking or by cutting ourselves off, or we “get even” by taking some ill-considered action. For example, if we don’t get that raise we think we deserve, we quit the job! Thus cutting off all our pay! Or our A.A. group goes against our sage advice: “Mark my word, if you change the meeting time from 8:30 to 7:30, nobody will come...” So we leave in a huff to try other groups, taking our grumpiness with us. Meanwhile, back at the home group the new meeting time is a huge success!

“Given enough anger, both unity and purpose are lost,” wrote Bill W. in a 1966 letter. “Given still more ‘righteous’ indignation, the group can disintegrate; it can actually die. This is why we avoid controversy.” (As Bill Sees It, p. 98.) In A.A. Comes of Age (p. 79) Bill wrote, “Ours is...the story of how...under threats of disunity and collapse, world-wide unity and brotherhood have been forged. In the course of this experience we have evolved a set of traditional principles by which we live and work together...the Twelve Traditions.” And, later, the Twelve Concepts. How, then, might we handle dissent in A.A.? By the grace of God, we have been provided with three tools which provide the means of expressing dissent and bringing about change without taking precipitous action.

They are: the Traditions, the Concepts and the service structure. Let’s see how these tools might be used. The guiding principle should be Tradition One, “Our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends upon A.A. unity,” and Bill, in Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions, says it more eloquently than we can: “The unity of Alcoholics Anonymous is the most cherished quality our Society has. Our lives, the lives of all to come, depend squarely upon it. We stay whole, or A.A. dies. Without unity, the heart of A.A. would cease to beat; our world arteries would no longer carry the life-giving grace of God...Back again in their caves, alcoholics would reproach us and say, ‘What a great thing A.A. might have been!’” He goes on to point out that the A.A. member “has to conform to the principles of recovery. His life actually depends upon obedience to spiritual principles.” As he recovers in a group, “It becomes plain that the group must survive or the individual will not.

So...how best to live and work together as groups became the prime question.” And finally, “On anvils of experience, the structure of our Society was hammered out.” The dissenter, then, can use the tool of the service structure to bring about the desired change. The whole system was devised to make that practicable, because in A.A., the groups “hold ultimate responsibility and final authority” (Concept I). The groups in each area elect a delegate to represent them at the annual General Service Conference; and through their general service representatives (G.S.R.), the groups make their “group conscience” known at the area assembly, and, if the assembly agrees, the delegate carries that particular concern to the Conference itself. The Conference, in turn, represents the group conscience of A.A. as a whole.

Its recommendations, arrived at by substantial unanimity, are binding on the trustees (who are also part of the Conference) and through them, on the General Service Office. This system, which is described very explicitly in the Twelve Concepts, ensures that the only power in Alcoholics Anonymous is “a loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience”; i.e., through the groups. Furthermore, if the dissenters feel that they have not been given a fair hearing or their views have been misrepresented or that a mistaken decision has been made, they are given “a traditional Right of Appeal...thus assuring us that minority opinion will be heard and that petitions for the redress of personal grievances will be carefully considered.” The words of Bill again: “We recognize that minorities frequently can be right; that even when they are partly or wholly in error, they still perform a most valuable service when, by asserting their ‘Right of Appeal,’ they compel a thorough-going debate on important issues. The well-heard minority, therefore, is our chief protection against an uninformed, misinformed, hasty or angry majority.” (Concept V) This suggested recourse for the dissenter is not just theoretical, it works. Dissent in Alcoholics Anonymous is not only tolerated, it is encouraged. But how that dissent is expressed and handled becomes, in the final analysis, a spiritual matter. “Our common welfare should come first,” states Tradition One — even though it means we must submit our personal wills to the authority of “a loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience.”

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