

The Glue of A.A.:

Unity and Strength-An Informed Group Conscience

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In A.A.-speak, what do “group conscience,” “trusted servant” and the “Right of Decision” have to do with the unity, strength and very survival of the Fellowship? Everything, if you connect the dots. With the approach of the 2007 General Service Conference—the closest A.A. comes to a group conscience for the U.S. and Canada.—variations of this question are much on the minds of the 93 delegates to the Conference from the U.S. and Canada. As the trusted servants of the groups in their areas—nearly 61,000 in all—they are responsible for voting on matters crucial to the future of A.A.

But, says former Alabama/N.W. Florida delegate Cushing P., when a thorny issue, sharpened by conflicting views, unexpectedly occurs, the delegates are trusted with the Right of Decision, the bedrock of Concept III: This enables them to vote what they believe to be in the best interest of their area’s groups and A.A. as a whole. In short, Cushing explained at a sharing session at the quarterly meeting of the General Service Board in January 2006, “our trusted servants have the discretion ‘to decide which problems they will dispose of themselves and upon which matters they will report, consult or ask specific questions.’ ”

However, he recalled, “at the 2005 Conference I watched more than one delegate refer to a binder of notes for guidance in voting. One even shared that after the discussion, he agreed with the majority, but his area had been clear in their instructions so he voted in opposition.” Here Cushing stressed that “the Right of Decision was never intended to be used to undermine the group’s final authority. What it’s about is building relationships that make for effective leadership.” He pointed out that “when we come together for the common welfare . . . when we truly place spiritual principles before personalities and practice a genuine humility, listening with an open mind to all discussions, realizing that any one of us may be right, not silently arguing with those who disagree with us . . . then we begin to rightly relate one to another and to the Fellowship we serve.

Until then we cannot experience unity and are doomed to remain ‘us’ and ‘them.’ ” Cushing was describing not only the dynamics of the Conference but of the informed group conscience, where A.A. decisions begin. Not always understood, group conscience, as expressed in Tradition Two, is a basic and powerful concept that makes it possible for people of diverse backgrounds to consider all sides of a matter, rise above personal ambition and in the end arrive, fully informed, at a consensus. As Tradition Two points out, “The group conscience will, in the end, prove a far more infallible guide for group affairs than the decision of any individual member, however good or wise he may be.”

In A.A.’s continuing quest for consensus, within its groups and at the Conference level, assurance that the smallest voice will be heard is built into Concept V, with its “Right of Appeal,” and Warranty Four, which urges “that all important decisions be reached by discussion, vote and, whenever possible, by substantial unanimity.” And as Bernard B. Smith, (nonalcoholic) past trustee chairman of the General Service Board noted, arriving at a group conscience in big matters or small is a process that can take a long time. “We must never use the force of a majority to impose changes on a minority,” he affirmed at The 1969 Conference. “The strength of our Fellowship is such that it can always afford to delay changes until we know that such changes respond to the needs of all of A.A. and not to a simple majority.”

At that January board meeting, G.S.O. staff member Doug R. related that in 2000, “when the Fourth Edition of the Big Book was approved, many of the delegates to the Conference had not read it. . . . Nonetheless it passed— despite the misgivings of some that we’d go to hell in a hand basket because not every single delegate had checked it out. And what happened? There was some minor punctuation Changes, some rephrasing in the foreword; in other words, we self-corrected. But what truly mattered was that we trusted the Conference and trustees’ Literature Committees to do the work, they did it well, and the Fellowship has embraced this new edition of our basic text.”

In A.A., Doug emphasized, “there exists this self-correcting process that occurs when necessary—this is our built-in trust factor that I hope we remember in the heat of Conference labors. Trust and faith have always been essential to us as recovering alcoholics and as trusted servants of A.A.” But what if “self-correction” isn’t an option? Sometimes the road to consensus is paved with good intentions gone awry. As A.A. co-founder Bill W. wrote in a discussion of Warranty Four, “When a decision does happen to go Wrong, there can be no heated recriminations. Everybody will be able to say, ‘Well, we had a careful debate, we took the decision, and it turned out to be a bad one.

Better luck next time!’ ” (The A.A. Service Manual/Twelve Concepts for World Service, p. 69) Dorothy W., trustee-at-large/U.S., who also shared at the January board meeting, observed that “while no one can speak for A.A. officially, the Conference, through its Advisory Actions, comes close to being A.A.’s voice. It cannot be an authority, but it can bring out free discussion of problems, trends and dangers that appear to affect fellowship harmony, purpose and effectiveness. . . . In my experience as a trusted servant, it has become apparent that we need to be very careful about personal agendas and take a look at what is best for A.A.” Elaborating, Cushing said, “Those of us in a position of service are responsible for listening to A.A.’s great collective conscience. . . . We are responsible for honestly and openly reporting on our actions and our decisions, and for consulting the groups when our course is not clear. It is not our function to protect A.A. from the Fellowship but, rather, for the Fellowship. We are responsible to those we serve. We are trusted servants. Therefore we must always be trustworthy.”