

65th General Service Conference Keynote Address

Celebrating 80 Years of Recovery, Unity, and Service: The Foundation for Our Future

The theme of our Conference this year is “Celebrating 80 Years of Recovery, Unity, and Service: The Foundation for Our Future.” And there is indeed much to celebrate. Eighty years ago, two men met in Akron, Ohio: one struggling to maintain a precarious sobriety, and one firmly in the grip of this terrible disease. From that inauspicious beginning emerged a Fellowship and a program that now counts among its membership over 1.4 million in the United States and Canada alone, with an additional nearly three quarters of a million worldwide. From our program’s simple beginnings, countless lives have been saved, families restored, and reparations made. Much to celebrate indeed!

We frequently say that “this is a simple program for complicated people.” At its simplest, the program would have only a single principle: “Don’t drink”. But over the years, we have found it necessary to craft a total of three dozen principles – twelve to aid us in our recovery, twelve to help preserve our Fellowship, and twelve to assist us in carrying the message to those who still suffer.

We consider AA to have been “founded” in June of 1935 when Dr. Bob is said to have taken his last drink. But it was not until 1939, that the nature of the program in general, and its Twelve Steps in particular, were published in the book, *Alcoholics Anonymous* – a book that later became known affectionately as “The Big Book”.

The Steps, of course, were the logical set of principles to be developed first. Recovery was certainly the sole focus in those early days. But this formative period was also fraught with controversy. Debates ensued over issues such as money, membership, public relations, authority, governance, and anonymity, to name just a few. And it soon became apparent to Bill that if our Fellowship were to survive, some additional principles were needed. In April 1946, Bill published "Twelve Suggested Points for AA Tradition" in the Grapevine. These twelve new principles – now known as the Twelve Traditions – were formally adopted at the International Convention held in Cleveland, Ohio in 1950. Three years later, the book, *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, brought our first 24 spiritual principles together under one cover.

Around the time that the foundations for our Legacies of Recovery and Unity were being established, our General Service structure was beginning to emerge. Bill spent several years working on the final set of principles that would ultimately guide us in our service around the globe, and at the 1962 General Service Conference, the Twelve Concepts for World Service were unanimously accepted.

And so a little over a half a century ago, AA's Three Legacies of Recovery, Unity, and Service - along with the twelve principles underlying each one - were firmly established. Alcoholics Anonymous sat upon a solid, three-legged structure – indestructible for all time. What could possibly go wrong?

Well, so far, nothing. Oh, we certainly debate from time to time the interpretation of our principles. And we certainly question from time to time the relevance of some of them in today's world. And we actually have mechanisms in place through which we can even change them should we so choose. But to date, these thirty six principles have remained the bedrock

of our movement. So, should we assume that this will always be the case? Should we assume that these principles will continue to form a foundation for our future?

I would submit that today, Alcoholics Anonymous is facing challenges of a nature and a magnitude that could not even have been imagined eighty years ago. In the interest of time, I will name only a few:

Singleness of Purpose: The epidemic of drug abuse that is evident today was not nearly of this magnitude when AA's principles were first being crafted. It is my belief that while our principle of singleness of purpose is as important today as it was in the beginning, it is now being challenged to a greater extent than ever before. The so-called "pure alcoholic" is a vanishing breed. How do we best counsel the multi-addicted in how to consider their "problems other than alcohol" while in the rooms of Alcoholics Anonymous? We want to honor our principles, but we do not wish to shut the door on any who need us.

Social Media: The relatively recent availability and widespread use of social networks and social media have placed new challenges on our principle of anonymity at the public level. When this principle was first being crafted, the concern was for the individual who purposefully stepped into a public forum and declared him or herself to be a member of our Fellowship. Today the potential for even an accidental anonymity break is enormous. Ever-changing privacy controls, hasty photo posting, and links to a network of so-called "friends" all conspire to diminish the control that we have over what we share and with whom. And yet, these new modes of communication have extraordinary potential for helping us connect with one another and for carrying our message of hope to those still suffering.

Diversity of Membership: While AA is no longer the collection of white males that it was in the beginning, our membership does not yet reflect the diversity of society at large. If we believe that the disease of alcoholism does not acknowledge the boundaries of gender, race, ethnicity, religion, age, economics, education, disability, or sexual orientation, then we have much to do in terms of making our program attractive to those who are underrepresented in our rooms. Having said that, however, are we willing to invest the effort, the resources, and the open-mindedness necessary to create a welcoming, safe, and nurturing environment for everyone? If the only requirement for membership is simply a desire to stop drinking, then what are the impediments that are keeping so many who need us from not coming in?

Diversity in Service: If our general membership is not reflective of society as a whole in terms of diversity, our trusted servants seem even further removed in this regard. In 1967, Eastern Pennsylvania sent Louis R. to the General Service Conference. Lou was the first African American Delegate to participate in service at this level. It is said that Bill W. shed tears when he first greeted Lou. That historic moment opened the door to at least greater racial diversity within our service structure. But how far have we come in the intervening years? As far as we should? As far as we can? I invite you to simply look around.

Size of Our Membership: In its formative years, Alcoholics Anonymous experienced an explosive growth in membership. Some recent estimates, however, suggest that we have reached essentially a steady state. Our Membership Survey also suggests that the average age within our Fellowship is increasing. Are these trends due to alcoholism itself being on the decline? Is it because today's youth are no longer vulnerable to our common malady? I invite you to pick up a newspaper and simply take a look at what's going on within our society. We

need to explore new strategies and new modes of communication to help keep our message alive and relevant, while still respecting the principle of “attraction rather than promotion”.

The Decline of Print: Alcoholics Anonymous manages two publishing corporations: AA World Services, Inc. and the AA Grapevine, Inc. Both concerns grew up in the print world. Today’s readers are migrating away from the printed word and toward electronic and audio media. Amazon’s Kindle, Barnes & Noble’s Nook, and Apple’s iBooks are rapidly replacing the printed page for both books and magazines. And audio publishers such as Audible are migrating us from the eye to the ear. Alcoholics Anonymous must cope effectively with these trends if we are going to continue to carry our message through our literature as well as through our “Meeting in Print”.

Technology Polarization: Early in our evolution, while virtually everyone had access to the US Postal Service, not everyone had a telephone. Today, we take for granted that there is a land line in most homes, and there is a mobile device in many pockets and purses. There is a television set in most homes. There is also a computer in many homes with access to the Internet. But “many” and “most” are not equivalent to “all”. As we think about new technologies and social networks and emerging modes of publication, let us be mindful of the risk of creating two Fellowships: those with access and those without. Communication via email, texting, social media, and methods that will be invented next month are exciting and powerful. But let us not assume that all of our Fellowship enjoys such access. If it is truly the case that the only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking, we must not risk excluding a subset of our members from our communication network simply because of a technological divide.

International Structures: Alcoholics Anonymous is no longer merely a few groups in Akron and a few groups in New York. It is a global phenomenon. And while the United States and Canada are not the “bosses” of AA, we are frequently looked to for guidance and example. Some countries are currently struggling with the question of just who AA is within their borders – countries in which multiple service structures are beginning to emerge. How do we interact with our friends who are currently struggling with these situations? How do we help in these developments while still respecting our principle of autonomy of AA entities? And finally ...

Litigation: We live in a litigious society. In the world at large, everyone seems to be suing everyone else over anything and everything. Alcoholics Anonymous is not immune to this phenomenon. Our Traditions say that “Each group should be autonomous except in matters affecting other groups or AA as a whole.” Does that mean that we have no collective, spiritual responsibility for fostering the well-being of our members within these rooms or for promoting the understanding that, even while in the rooms, we are still obligated to adhere to the laws of society as a whole?

And so I repeat: While our thirty-six spiritual principles have stood us in good stead for the eight decades of our existence, are they sufficient foundation for our future in light of this myriad of challenges that lay before us? You will not find the definitive answer to this question nor the definitive solution to any of the issues cited above in the short week ahead. But you will touch on many of these issues, and the conversations can certainly begin. And as you do think about these issues and talk about them and struggle to make decisions about them, I would remind you of Bill’s words from a July 1965 Grapevine article entitled, “Responsibility Is Our Theme”. Recognizing what a central role fear plays in the life of an alcoholic, Bill wrote:

In the fear of accumulated wealth and bureaucracy, we should not discover an alibi for failure to pay AA's legitimate service expenses. For fear of controversy, our leadership should not go timid when lively debate and forthright action is a necessity. And for fear of accumulating prestige and power, we should never fail to endow our trusted leaders with proper authority to act for us. Let us never fear needed change.

We frequently say to you at the close of each General Service Conference, "You are now a part of AA's history". I would submit that you are also a part of AA's future.

Respectfully Submitted

J. Gary L.

Northeast Regional Trustee