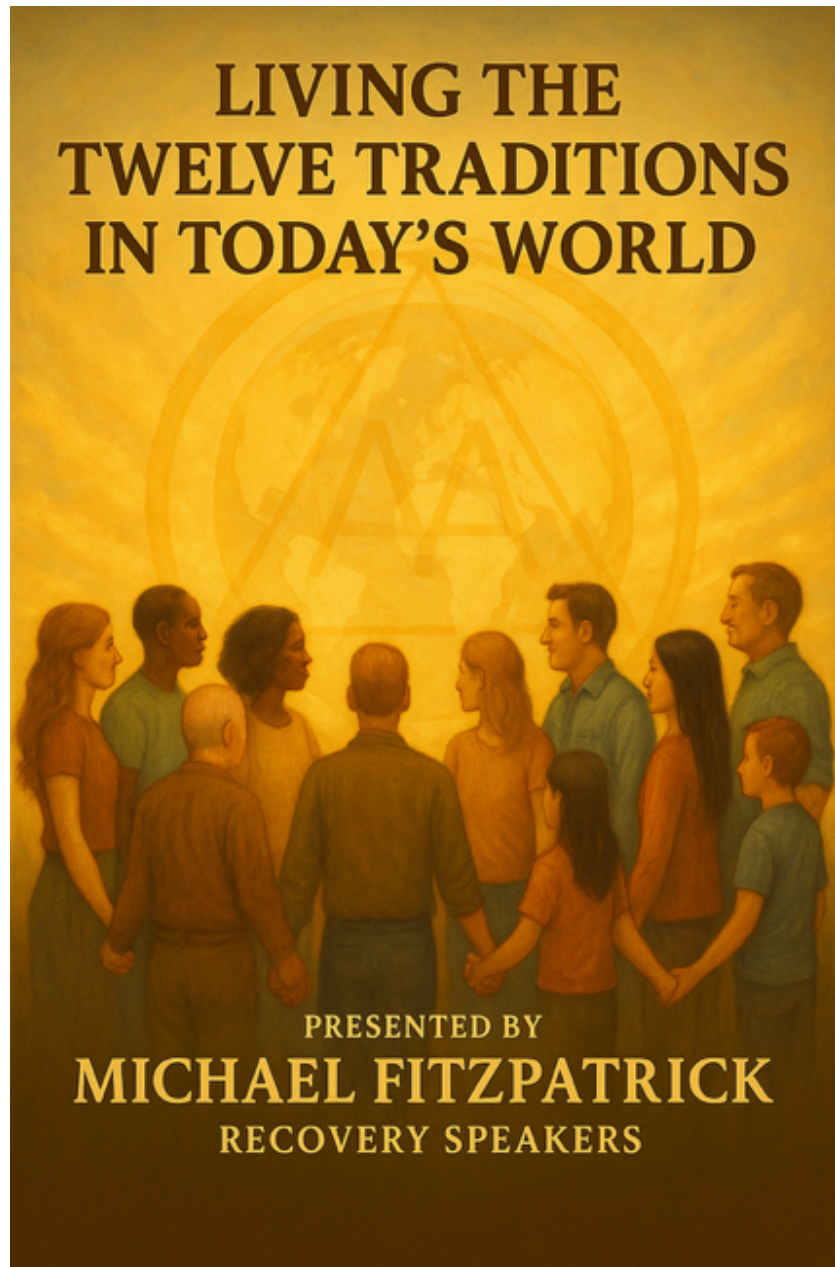


Living the Twelve Traditions Workbook and Study Guide



*Preserving and making available the
history of the 12-step recovery movement.
recoveryspeakers.com
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The reflections, commentary, and exercises in these pages are offered as educational and historical perspectives. They are not statements made on behalf of Alcoholics Anonymous as a whole. In keeping with A.A. Tradition, no individual speaks for the Fellowship.

Readers are encouraged to study the Traditions directly in A.A.'s foundational sources, including:

- Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions
- Language of the Heart
- Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age
- Dr. Bob and the Good Oldtimers
- Other A.A. Conference-approved literature and pamphlets

In addition, students of A.A. history may find it valuable to explore non-Conference- approved writings and archival materials, such as early talks, correspondence, and historical essays, which provide further insight into the development of A.A. principles and practice.

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Introduction

The Twelve Traditions of Alcoholics Anonymous are more than guidelines for our groups, they are lessons in humility, unity, and love. Each Tradition calls us to personal sacrifice, asking us to place the good of the whole above personal desires, and to discover how humility brings strength and freedom.

Since the publication of my book *Living the Twelve Traditions in Today's World*, co-authored with my friend Mel B., I have been asked the same question over and over: "How do you take people through the Traditions?"

The answer is here.

This workbook is not meant to be a lecture or a textbook. It is meant to be like salt on the oats. There's an old saying: "You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink. But if you salt the oats, the horse will get thirsty." My hope is that this workbook lights a spark - that it makes you thirsty enough to dive deeper on your own.

I hope it inspires you to explore the Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions, to read Bill W.'s Grapevine articles in *Language of the Heart*, to return often to the Big Book, to study the AA pamphlets, and to listen to the voices of those who have gone before us. These resources together create a strong foundation for understanding and living the Traditions.

The purpose of the Traditions is not to give us something to argue about or to wield as a club. They are meant to be received as a gift - a gift of unity, humility, compassion, and love that has held AA together for ninety years.

This workbook offers a framework to study and apply the Traditions in our ever-changing world. But the real work, the real discovery, comes when you take these ideas, reflect on them, and live them. That is where the true power of the Traditions is found.

Welcome to the journey. May these pages spark your thirst.

— Mike Fitzpatrick Author and Historian

Co-author of *Living the Twelve Traditions in Today's World*

Tradition One: Unity and Equality

Short Form

Our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends upon A.A. unity.

Long Form

Each member of Alcoholics Anonymous is but a small part of a great whole. A.A. must continue to live or most of us will surely die. Hence our common welfare comes first. But individual welfare follows close afterward.

Teaching Point

Tradition One is about humility, self-sacrifice, and unity. It asks us to check our egos at the door. But in doing so, it also creates a level playing field. Inside AA, no one stands higher than another. There are no titles, no status, no ranks - only members, equal in dignity and responsibility.

This Tradition reminds us that unity depends not just on our willingness to sacrifice personal preference, but also on our willingness to see ourselves as no more and no less important than any other member.

Without unity, there is no AA. Without AA, there is no recovery.

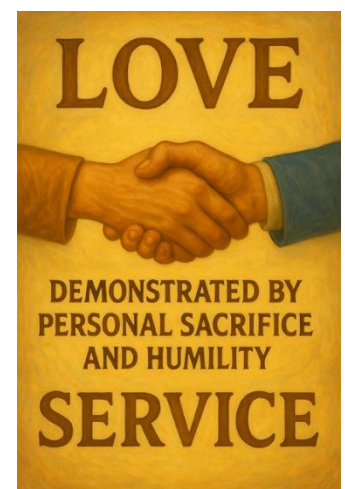


Historical Context

- In the early days in Akron and Cleveland, the question of unity was not theoretical, it was survival. Divisions over ties to the Oxford Group, whether to accept outside money, or how to organize nearly split the fellowship.
- Bill W. later reflected in the Grapevine (Language of the Heart, p. 119): "Without unity, AA dies. Individual liberty, yet great unity. Key to survival."
- At the first International Convention in Cleveland (1950), when the Traditions were formally adopted, members understood that placing unity above personal preference meant protecting AA from collapse.
- This Tradition made AA different from most organizations: no leaders with rank, no privileged members, no "special" status - only a fellowship of equals, bound together by a common need and a common solution.

Reflections

- Am I willing to set aside my ego for the good of the group?
- Do I see myself as equal to every other member, no matter how long they've been sober or what role they play?
- How do I practice humility and equality in my home group and in my daily life?

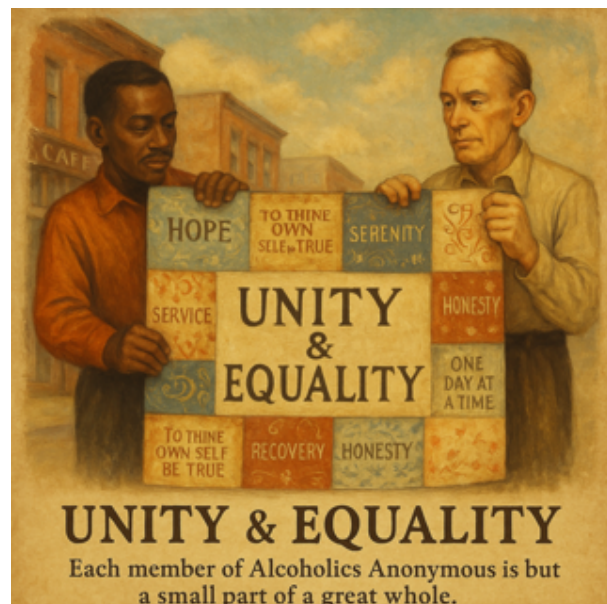


Exercises

- Ego Check: Write about a time when your ego wanted recognition. How could you have practiced equality instead?
- Unity Inventory: Think of a moment when the group came before personal opinion. What was gained through that sacrifice?
- Equality Exercise: In a small group, discuss how AA's principle of "no status" affects the way newcomers are welcomed and old-timers are respected.

Leader Prompts

- Ask: "What does it mean that AA has no status, no ranks?"
- Prompt: "How does checking our ego at the door create equality in the fellowship?"
- Remind: "Tradition One is where humility becomes practical — it's the glue that holds us together and keeps us equal."



Tradition Two: Trusted Servants, Not Governors

Short Form

For our group purpose there is but one ultimate authority — a loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience. Our leaders are but trusted servants; they do not govern.

Long Form

For our group purpose there is but one ultimate authority — a loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience. Our leaders are but trusted servants; they do not govern. They are entrusted with service responsibilities but never given power. Decisions are made through group conscience, guided by humility and unity.

Teaching Point

Tradition Two is about leadership without power, humility without ego, and service without status. In AA, we don't have bosses, rulers, or presidents. We have trusted servants. This Tradition levels the playing field once again: the newcomer and the old-timer both have a voice, and ultimate authority belongs not to personalities but to a loving God expressed in group conscience.

Checking the ego at the door isn't just for Tradition One. In Tradition Two, it means letting go of control, trusting others, and accepting that group conscience - not personal opinion - leads the way.

Historical Context

- In the 1940s, some members wanted to formalize AA with presidents, boards, and titles. Bill W. resisted, insisting that the fellowship must never be ruled by personalities.
- Bill himself was often urged to become AA's leader. Instead, he declined, choosing to serve as one trusted servant among many.
- The 1950 Cleveland Convention affirmed the principle of group conscience and rejected centralized power.
- In *Language of the Heart*, Bill W. wrote: "AA is not organized in the traditional sense. We are guided by a loving God and a group conscience that keeps us humble and equal."

Reflections

- Am I willing to serve without seeking power or recognition?
- Do I trust group conscience, even when it goes against my opinion?
- How does humility play a role in leadership in my home group or my life?

Exercises

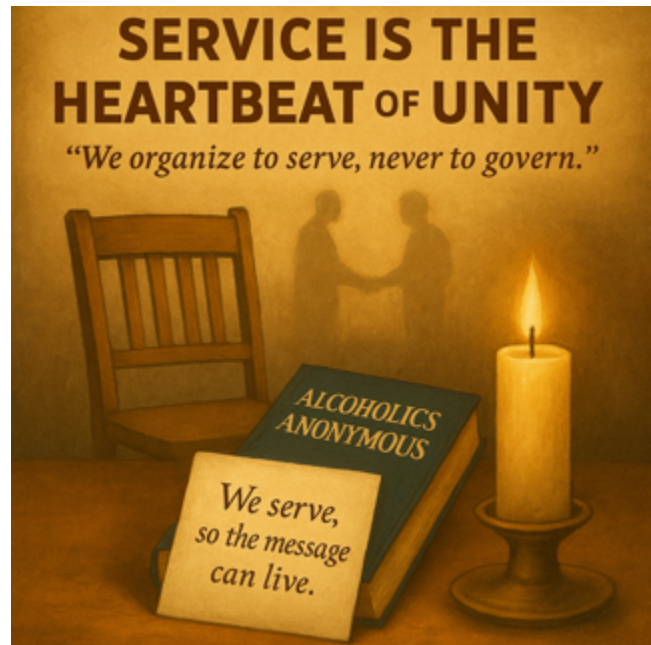
- Service Reflection: Journal about a time when you took a service position. Did you serve with humility, or did ego try to creep in?



- Group Conscience Role Play: Discuss how your group would handle a disagreement (e.g., moving meeting locations). How does Tradition Two guide the process?
- Personal Practice: This week, practice listening more than speaking in group decisions — letting go of the need to control outcomes.

Leader Prompts

- Ask: “What does it mean that our leaders are trusted servants?”
- Prompt: “Why does AA reject traditional authority?”
- Remind: “Tradition Two teaches us humility in action: service, not power.”



Tradition Three: Membership and Inclusivity

Short Form

The only requirement for A.A. membership is a desire to stop drinking.

Long Form

Our membership ought to include all who suffer from alcoholism. Hence, we may refuse none who wish to recover. Nor ought A.A. membership ever depend upon money or conformity. Any two or three alcoholics gathered together for sobriety may call themselves an A.A. group, provided that, as a group, they have no other affiliation.

Teaching Point

Tradition Three is the great open door of A.A. It is radically inclusive: anyone with a desire to stop drinking is welcome. It strips away judgment, conditions, and requirements. Bill W. explained that in the early years, some groups wanted to screen new members. But experience showed that exclusion destroyed unity and hope, while inclusion gave life. This Tradition requires humility: my opinion of who belongs does not matter. The only requirement is desire.

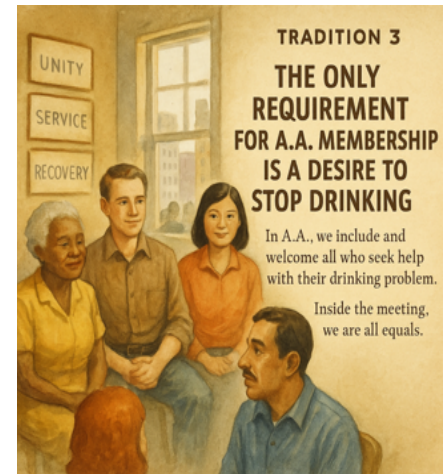
Historical Context

- In 1941, a Michigan judge sent Chauncey C. to A.A. instead of jail. Though at first feeling 'outclassed' by doctors and lawyers, he found acceptance and went on to 65 years of sobriety.
- Bill W. told the story of Dr. Thom, a man treated for drug addiction in Lexington, Kentucky, who later started a group in Shelby. Bill almost skipped visiting the group, thinking Shelby too small compared to Atlanta. Bill knew from correspondence that he was also alcoholic, yet at Thom's home, Bill found him calm and steady, and realized that God works through anyone with a desire to recover. Similarly, Dr. Bob once faced a group dispute over admitting a man with another stigma. Dr. Bob settled it with a simple question: 'What would the Master do?' The lesson was clear: our doors must always stay open.

Helping Newcomers Identify

Tradition Three is more than an open invitation. It also carries a responsibility. When newcomers arrive, especially those who may not be sure if A.A. is the right fellowship for them, groups can help by encouraging them to attend open meetings. At open meetings they can listen, learn what A.A. is about, and hear the stories of identification from members. This can reduce fear and confusion.

Sometimes newcomers may discover that their struggles align more closely with another Twelve Step fellowship. In that case, we do not turn them away in shame or judgment.



Instead, we extend respect and help them find the right community; whether Al-Anon, Narcotics Anonymous, or another program. Our responsibility is to offer clarity and support, not barriers.

Practical Application (2025)

Tradition Three invites us to extend radical welcome, but also to provide guidance. In our groups, this means embracing newcomers without judgment while also clearly explaining what A.A. is and what it is not. In our personal lives, it calls us to be honest guides: if someone is struggling with drugs more than alcohol, we can share what A.A. offers and also suggest where else help may be found. This is not exclusion - it is love expressed responsibly. Our open door is paired with integrity about our purpose.

Reflections

Do I welcome everyone who expresses a desire to stop drinking, regardless of my own judgments? When speaking with newcomers, do I take time to explain what A.A. is and encourage them to listen for identification? Do I help reduce fear by encouraging attendance at open meetings? Can I respect those who may find their path in another Twelve Step fellowship, while still offering kindness and encouragement?

Exercises

Group Inventory: Does your group create a welcoming atmosphere for newcomers? Are open meetings available to help them learn about A.A.? Discuss whether your meeting culture clearly communicates A.A.'s singleness of purpose while showing respect for other paths.

Case Study: A newcomer shares that alcohol isn't really their issue, but drugs are. How can the group respond with compassion while staying true to A.A.'s focus?

Personal Reflection: Think of your first meetings. What helped you identify with A.A.? What frightened or confused you? How can you make the door wider for others?

Suggested Resources

Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions, Tradition Three essay Language of the Heart, Bill W.'s Grapevine articles on inclusivity

Dr. Bob and the Good Oldtimers - stories of early A.A. membership decisions

Living the Twelve Traditions in Today's World - modern reflections on openness, humility, and responsibility

A.A. Pamphlets - especially 'A Newcomer Asks' and 'Is A.A. for You?'



Tradition Four: Group Autonomy and Responsibility

Short Form

Each group should be autonomous except in matters affecting other groups or A.A. as a whole.

Long Form

With respect to its own affairs, each A.A. group should be responsible to no other authority than its own conscience. When its plans concern the welfare of neighboring groups also, those groups ought to be consulted. And no group, regional committee, or individual should ever take any action that might greatly affect A.A. as a whole without conferring with the trustees of the General Service Board. On such issues our common welfare is paramount.

Teaching Point

Tradition Four gives every group remarkable freedom, even the right to be wrong. This freedom has allowed A.A. to experiment, to try new formats, and to learn through failure as well as success. But autonomy doesn't mean anarchy. When decisions threaten the unity or reputation of A.A. as a whole, groups are asked to consult with the Trustees of the General Service Board. Freedom balanced with responsibility - that's the genius of Tradition Four.

Historical Context

- At the 1950 Cleveland Convention, Dick S. described how some Cleveland groups resisted opening a downtown central office. Certain groups denied the organizer even the chance to distribute materials, claiming autonomy. Yet the office opened anyway and thrived for seven years - a vivid example of both the strength and the limits of autonomy.
- Bill W. recalled in *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age* how some feared New York might become a centralized government for A.A. He quoted the groups: "We like what you are doing. Sometimes your suggestions and advice are good. But whether to take you or leave you alone is going to be our decision. Out in the groups, we are going to run our own show. We are not going to have a personal government in New York, or anywhere else. Services, yes. But government, no." This became the spirit of autonomy - including the right to be wrong.
- Autonomy, however, has also been abused. In 2007, the *Washington Post* reported on the Midtown Group, which disregarded A.A.'s Traditions by installing leaders, coercing members, and creating cult-like practices. This episode proved why Tradition Four's balance - autonomy except when affecting the whole - is so crucial.
- Bill also looked back to history: the Washingtonian movement of the 1840s collapsed because groups lacked common principles. A.A. learned from this, ensuring that freedom was always tempered by unity and responsibility.

Reflections

- How do I balance freedom with responsibility in my own life?
- Am I willing to let others (or groups) make mistakes without trying to control them?



- Do I seek guidance or talk things over with others before acting in ways that may affect them?

Exercises

- Group Case Study: Imagine your group wants to start a controversial new meeting format. How would Tradition Four guide that process?
- Personal Application: Journal about a time when you had to respect someone else's autonomy even if you disagreed.
- Unity Exercise: Discuss how individual freedom and group consultation can coexist in daily life.

Leader Prompts

- Ask: "What does it mean that A.A. groups have the right to be wrong?"
- Prompt: "How does seeking guidance and talking things over with other groups protect unity without limiting autonomy?"
- Remind: "Tradition Four shows that freedom and responsibility go hand in hand – liberty with a purpose."



Tradition Five: Our Primary Purpose

Short Form

Each group has but one primary purpose—to carry its message to the alcoholic who still suffers.

Long Form

Each Alcoholics Anonymous group ought to be a spiritual entity having but one primary purpose—that of carrying its message to the alcoholic who still suffers.

Teaching Point

Tradition Five reminds us why A.A. exists. It's the compass that keeps us pointed toward our mission. We're not a social club, though fellowship is part of our healing. We're not a therapy group, though recovery transforms us deeply. We exist for one reason only: to carry the message of hope and recovery to the alcoholic who still suffers. Everything else — celebrations, service positions, debates, even good intentions — is secondary. When we forget this purpose, we lose our spiritual center. When we remember it, we thrive as individuals and as a fellowship.

Tradition Five also invites us to look outward. Every group is a “spiritual lifeboat,” and we stay afloat by pulling others in. Carrying the message is not just what we do — it's who we are. It is love in action; gratitude turned outward.



Historical Context

- The early Cleveland groups (1939–1940) flourished because they focused relentlessly on the newcomer. Homes overflowed with people seeking help; meetings were packed; and recovery rates soared.
- Bill W. reminded members that A.A. was not a “mutual admiration society,” but a lifeboat. The measure of success wasn't how well members got along, but how many new lives were being saved.
- He often quoted the principle “You can't keep it unless you give it away.” Members who stopped working with others often found their own recovery slipping.
- From Ebby's visit to Bill at Towns Hospital to the 1950 Cleveland Convention, A.A. learned this truth again and again: our only justification for existence is to help the alcoholic who still suffers.

Practical Application

Tradition Five challenges every member and every group to stay focused on the message, not the mess.

For groups, this means making sure newcomers feel seen, heard, and welcome. It means offering sponsorship, sharing phone numbers, and keeping meetings centered on recovery rather than opinion or gossip.

For individuals, it means remembering that service is the heartbeat of sobriety. Every time we take a call, greet someone at the door, or share our story honestly, we are carrying the message.

In today's world, "carrying the message" can also mean adapting to new tools and challenges — whether it's hosting online meetings, sharing recordings, or reaching isolated alcoholics across cultures and continents. What matters isn't how we do it — it's that we do it, with love and humility.

As Bill wrote, "Love and service are our watchwords." When our focus shifts from self to service, we rediscover the joy of living.

Modern Reflection

Tradition Five is more relevant today than ever. In an age of distraction, it calls us back to purpose. Every flyer we post, every meeting we hold, every newcomer we greet — it all points to one sacred task: to carry the message of recovery, one alcoholic at a time.

When groups drift from that mission — turning meetings into debates, therapy sessions, or social hours — the spirit of A.A. dims. But when the newcomer walks through the door and hears "You're in the right place," the light of hope burns bright again.

Reflections

- Do I remember that my sobriety depends on helping others?
- Does my group still focus on the newcomer, or have we become comfortable?
- What does it mean in my daily life to "carry the message"?
- Do I see service as a burden, or as a gift I freely give?

Exercises

- Personal Reflection: Write about a time when helping someone in recovery renewed your own gratitude.
- Group Exercise: If your group has drifted toward socializing or routine, discuss how to realign with the newcomer's needs.
- Daily Focus: Each morning this week, ask: "How will I carry the message today?"

Leader Prompts

- Ask: "Why does A.A. have only one primary purpose?"
- Prompt: "Who was the last newcomer you reached out to — and what did that do for your own sobriety?"
- Remind: "A.A. exists for one purpose — to love, to serve, and to bring hope to the next suffering alcoholic."



Tradition Six: Guarding Our Independence

Short Form

An A.A. group ought never endorse, finance, or lend the A.A. name to any related facility or outside enterprise, lest problems of money, property, and prestige divert us from our primary purpose.

Long Form

Problems of money, property, and authority may easily divert us from our primary spiritual aim. We think, therefore, that any considerable property of genuine use to A.A. should be separately incorporated and managed, thus dividing the material from the spiritual. An A.A. group, as such, should never go into business. Secondary aids to A.A., such as clubs or hospitals which require much property or administration, ought to be incorporated and so set apart that, if necessary, they can be freely discarded by the groups. Hence, such facilities ought not to use the A.A. name. Their management should be the sole responsibility of those people who financially support them. While an A.A. group may cooperate with anyone, such cooperation ought never go so far as affiliation or endorsement, actual or implied. An A.A. group can bind itself to no one.

Teaching Point

Tradition Six warns us against selling our soul. A.A. exists to carry the message, not to build empires, endorse causes, or profit from recovery. Whenever money, property, or prestige creep in, the spiritual message is at risk of being drowned out. This Tradition protects A.A. from becoming entangled with outside enterprises, no matter how good they seem. Our independence is our lifeline.

Historical Context

- In the 1940s, several groups experimented with clubhouses and even hospitals using the A.A. name. Many collapsed under debt or scandal, nearly dragging A.A.'s reputation down with them.
- Charlie Towns, owner of Towns Hospital in New York, once offered Bill W. a paid position to treat alcoholics using the A.A. method. Bill declined, knowing that taking money for A.A. work would undermine the movement's credibility and independence.
- Bill wrote in *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*: "Problems of money, property, and authority may easily divert us from our primary spiritual aim."
- At the 1950 Cleveland Convention, speakers reminded members that A.A.'s survival depended on keeping its name free from outside entanglements. Cooperation was encouraged, but affiliation or endorsement was forbidden.
- A.A. also learned from the collapse of the Washingtonians in the 1840s. They attached themselves to outside causes, and in doing so, lost focus on helping alcoholics.

Practical Application

This Tradition protects groups and individuals alike. Groups avoid endorsements, affiliations, and money-making schemes. In daily life, we can apply the same



principle: I must be careful not to sell out my recovery for money, property, or prestige. Entanglements that threaten my spiritual foundation can be just as dangerous for me personally as they are for A.A. as a whole.

Reflections

- Do I understand why A.A. must remain free of outside affiliation?
- Have I ever been tempted to use A.A.'s name, reputation, or fellowship for personal advantage?
- In my personal life, what 'outside entanglements' threaten to distract me from my spiritual purpose?

Exercises

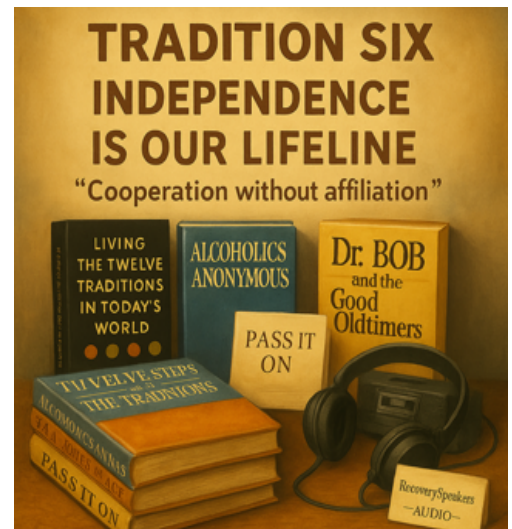
- Case Study: Imagine a local rehab asks your group to co-sponsor an ad campaign using the A.A. name. How does Tradition Six guide the response?
- Personal Reflection: Write about a time when prestige, money, or outside interests nearly pulled you off course. How does Tradition Six apply?
- Group Discussion: What's the difference between cooperation and affiliation? How do we practice that balance today?

Leader Prompts

- Ask: "Why would it be dangerous for A.A. to endorse or affiliate with outside causes, even good ones?"
- Prompt: "How has A.A. maintained its independence for 90 years?"
- Remind: "If A.A. sold its name for money or prestige, the damage could be irreparable. Independence keeps the fellowship alive."

Suggested Resources

- Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age - Bill W.'s reflections on money, property, and authority.
- Language of the Heart - Grapevine articles on the Traditions.
- The A.A. Group (AAWS pamphlet).
- Understanding Anonymity (AAWS pamphlet).
- A.A. Service Manual - sections on cooperation without affiliation.



Tradition Seven: Self-Support, Freedom, and Gratitude

Short Form

Every A.A. group ought to be fully self-supporting, declining outside contributions.

Long Form

The A.A. groups themselves ought to be fully supported by the voluntary contributions of their own members. We think that each group should soon achieve this ideal; that any public solicitation of funds using the name of Alcoholics Anonymous is highly dangerous, whether by groups, clubs, hospitals, or other outside agencies; that acceptance of large gifts from any source, or of contributions carrying any obligation whatever, is unwise. Then too, we view with much concern those A.A. treasuries which continue, beyond prudent reserves, to accumulate funds for no stated A.A. purpose. Experience has often warned us that nothing can so surely destroy our spiritual heritage as futile disputes over property, money, and authority.

Teaching Point

Tradition Seven protects our spiritual freedom. When we pay our own way, we answer to no one but our group conscience. Declining outside money is not just an accounting rule; it keeps our message clear and our motives clean. Self-support builds gratitude, responsibility, and dignity—qualities that help alcoholics stay sober.

Historical Context

Early A.A. learned quickly that outside money changes the message. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. famously concluded after meeting the founders that A.A. should not be funded on a grand scale - offering limited financial support. The fellowship discovered it thrived when it stayed poor in money and rich in spirit.

Groups that accepted large gifts often found strings attached - expectations about how meetings should run, who should lead, or what causes to endorse. Disputes over money and property repeatedly proved more corrosive than lack of funds.

The basket tradition grew not because A.A. needed much money, but because members needed the practice of giving, time, attention, and a small contribution that says, 'I'm responsible.'

Modern Practice (2025)

Today many groups pass a physical basket and also provide digital options (such as treasurer accounts or QR codes). Tradition Seven still applies: contributions are voluntary, from A.A. members only; no public fundraising; no outside grants or sponsorships. Groups remain transparent, maintain a prudent reserve, and pass along excess funds to intergroups, districts, areas, and A.A. World Services.



Why It Matters

Freedom: Outside money can become outside control. Self-support keeps the message free of obligations.

Clarity: When the basket pays the rent and coffee, the group stays focused on its primary purpose - not fundraising or publicity.

Dignity: Newcomers see members taking responsibility. Giving a little - builds belonging and gratitude.

Unity: Clear, simple finances prevent the power struggles that money often creates.

Personal Application

Tradition Seven points to a way of living: earn honestly, live within means, avoid financial entanglements that threaten sobriety, and practice generosity. Many members find that regular giving (money, time, and attention) keeps self-pity and entitlement at bay. We contribute not to buy influence, but to say, 'Thank you for my life.'

Reflections

Do I contribute regularly to my home group according to my ability? Do I expect benefits without sharing the load -rent, literature, service?

Where in my personal life do I see the danger of 'outside contributions'—relationships, jobs, or offers that come with strings?

How does giving change my attitude toward my group and my sobriety?

Exercises

Group Inventory: Review the group's prudent reserve (for example, 1–3 months of expenses). Is it clear, written, and right sized? What is our plan for excess 7th Tradition funds?

Case Study (Digital Basket): Your landlord now accepts only electronic rent. How can your group practice Tradition Seven digitally while protecting anonymity and declining outside money?



Recommended apps: Venmo, Zelle, or PayPal (Friends/Family setting). Each can be treasurer-controlled with member-only access. QR codes or payment links should be shared privately at meetings, not on public websites.

Group Discussion: How do we keep transparency while honoring Tradition Seven?

Leader Prompts

Ask: Why does self-support equal freedom?

Prompt: How has money, property, and prestige threatened unity in groups you've known?

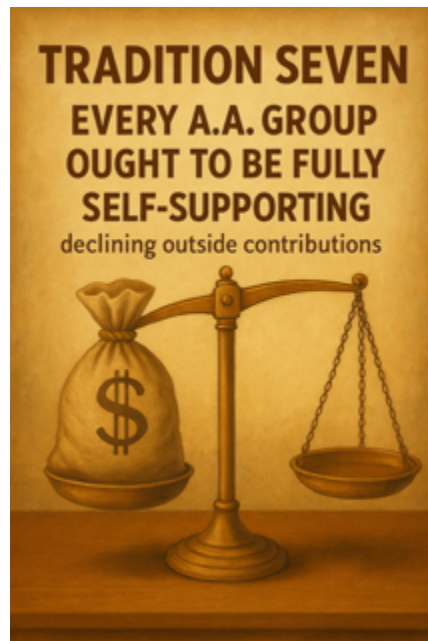
Remind: We decline outside contributions, so our message stays clean, our motives stay clear, and our doors stay open.

Suggested Resources

Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions - Tradition Seven essay

Language of the Heart - Bill W. on money, property, and spiritual priorities

Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age - Rockefeller dinner; lessons on self-support The A.A. Group (AAWS pamphlet) - prudent reserve and group finances A.A. Service Manual — self-support guidelines and contribution limits.



Tradition Eight: Nonprofessional, But Not Unorganized Short Short Form

Alcoholics Anonymous should remain forever nonprofessional, but our service centers may employ special workers.

Long Form

Alcoholics Anonymous should remain forever nonprofessional. We define professionalism as the occupation of counseling alcoholics for fees or hire. But we may employ alcoholics where they are going to perform those services for which we might otherwise have to engage non-alcoholics. Such special services may be well recompensed. But our usual A.A. Twelfth Step work is never to be paid for.

Teaching Point

Tradition Eight draws a clear line between the free gift of Twelfth Step work and the necessary services that keep A.A. functioning. Our message must never be for sale. Carrying the message to another alcoholic is always done freely, never for money or prestige. At the same time, A.A. service centers—intergroups, general service offices, meeting halls—may employ special workers to handle tasks like administration, printing, or technology. This Tradition preserves both our spirit of service and our effectiveness.



Historical Context

Bill W. and Dr. Bob soon discovered that professionalism and heavy financial support could endanger the fellowship. In 1940, John D. Rockefeller, Jr. hosted a dinner to introduce A.A. to prominent business leaders. He expressed his admiration but also his caution, warning that 'money might spoil this thing.' Instead of large-scale support, a modest contribution was provided to cover a few basic expenses. Even that limited aid soon ended. The lesson was clear: A.A. needed to remain financially poor in order to be spiritually rich. This experience reinforced the wisdom that Twelfth Step work must be freely given, and that A.A. should depend on its own members for support.

Illustrative Story

Mel B. recalled a story about his first sponsor, Maury, who worked as a hospital orderly. The hospital required an orderly to be present at every A.A. meeting on site, and Maury was assigned. Some members objected, thinking he was being paid to carry the message. In truth, he was just fulfilling his job duties. The misunderstanding was painful for him, but it highlighted how deeply A.A. members valued Tradition Eight, even in its early days. The group's conscience leaned toward caution—better to guard the principle than risk professionalism.

Practical Application (2025)

Tradition Eight continues to guide us in today's culture of counseling, treatment centers, publishing, and digital recovery platforms.

A.A. members may work professionally in addiction treatment, write books, speak at retreats, or receive honorariums for workshops. This is legitimate professional work - but it is not done as A.A.

The Tradition only asks that no one be paid to carry the A.A. message from one alcoholic to another. Twelfth Step work remains forever free.



Service structures may hire workers for administration, technology, or literature distribution, but these roles are clearly separate from Twelfth Step work.

When members take part in professional roles, events, or retreats, it is perfectly fine for them to accept a fee - so long as they do not describe these as 'A.A. events.' The distinction protects both the member and the Fellowship.

Reflections

Do I understand the difference between professional counseling and Twelfth Step work? Have I ever blurred the line between my professional work and my A.A. service?

How does Tradition Eight protect A.A.'s credibility and my own sobriety?

In today's culture of social media and online coaching, how can I apply Tradition Eight to keep the message free and clear?

Exercises

Group Inventory: Discuss the distinction between Twelfth Step work and service work. Are we clear on when it is appropriate to pay special workers?

Case Study: A group considers hiring a tech consultant to maintain its website. How does Tradition Eight guide this decision?

Personal Reflection: Write about a time you gave freely of your time and energy in Twelfth Step work. How did that experience reinforce your gratitude?

Leader Prompts

Ask: Why must Twelfth Step work always be free?

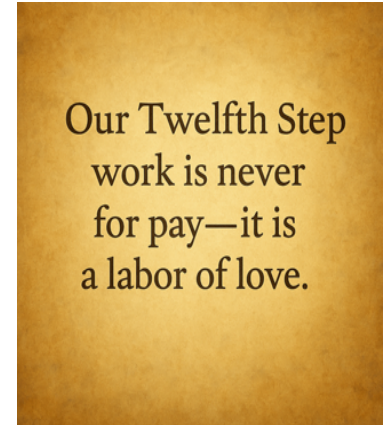
Prompt: How can a fellowship of nonprofessionals still run effective services?

Remind: A.A. may employ special workers and create service structures, but as Bill W. said, we must always have 'the least possible organization.' The heart of A.A.—one alcoholic helping another—remains forever free.

Suggested Resources

Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions - Tradition Eight essay

Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age - reflections on professionalism and service Language of the Heart - Bill W.'s Grapevine articles on the Traditions A.A. Service Manual - definitions of special workers and service structures Dr. Bob and the Good Oldtimers - anecdotes on A. A.'s early growth and principles



Tradition Nine: Service, Not Governance

Short Form

A.A., as such, ought never be organized; but we may create service boards or committees directly responsible to those they serve.

Long Form

Each A.A. group needs the least possible organization. Rotating leadership is the best. The small group may elect its secretary, the large group its rotating committee, and the groups of a large metropolitan area their central or intergroup committee, which often employs a full-time secretary. The trustees of the General Service Board are, in effect, our General Service Committee. They are the custodians of our A.A. Tradition and the receivers of voluntary A.A. contributions by which we maintain our A.A. General Service Office at New York. They are authorized by the groups to handle our overall public relations and they guarantee the integrity of our principal newspaper, the A.A. Grapevine. All such representatives are to be guided in the spirit of service, for true leaders in A.A. are but trusted servants; they do not govern.

Teaching Point

Tradition Nine teaches that A.A. is not without structure, but its structure is built only to serve. Bill W. often reminded us that A.A. must have 'the least possible organization.' The genius of this Tradition is that it balances freedom with responsibility. Leadership exists, but it rotates. Committees exist, but they serve, never govern. This keeps our fellowship safe from hierarchy and power struggles while still allowing us to function effectively.

Historical Context

At the 1950 International Convention in Cleveland, when the Traditions were formally affirmed, Bill W. spoke directly about this principle. He explained that A.A. could not survive if it became an institution with rigid authority. Instead, its service boards and committees would always remain directly responsible to the groups. Bill said, 'Our leaders are but trusted servants; they do not govern.' These words have become the foundation of how A.A. functions today. The tradition of rotating leadership was one of the safeguards Bill pointed to, a way to keep service fresh, inclusive, and free of personal domination.

Rotating Leadership: Keeping It Fresh

Rotating leadership is more than a safeguard against ego—it is a gift to the fellowship. Bill W. put it simply: 'Each A.A. group needs the least possible organization. Rotating leadership is the best.' When a treasurer, secretary, or GSR steps aside after a term, it gives someone else the same chance to grow in responsibility and to be trusted with service. It also keeps the group vibrant. A member who has been treasurer for six years may recognize that it is time to rotate out. By doing so, they not only protect the group from stagnation but also open the door for another member to step into service. This practice keeps members engaged, keeps service positions alive, and teaches humility by reminding us these are roles of service, not positions of power.



Application Beyond A.A.

The wisdom of Tradition Nine extends beyond the rooms of A.A. Many home groups and service structures have learned that healthy rotation prevents burnout and resentment. Similarly, in our families, churches, and even businesses, rotating responsibilities can prevent control from consolidating and keep things fresh. When leadership rotates, more people feel included, new ideas emerge, and everyone learns that true leadership is service. This lesson, born in A.A., is one that can strengthen communities and organizations everywhere.

Reflections

Am I willing to step aside when my term in service is done?

Have I been in a position too long—holding it for security or control—when someone else might benefit from the chance to serve?

Do I see leadership as a privilege to serve or as a position to hold?

How might I practice rotation and shared responsibility in my home, workplace, or other communities?

Exercises

Group Inventory: Review the group's service positions. Are any held too long by the same person? How might rotation invite new participation?

Case Study: Imagine a long-time treasurer reluctant to step down after six years. How should the group handle this in the spirit of Tradition Nine?

Personal Reflection: Where in my life—inside or outside A.A.—am I holding on to a role or responsibility too tightly? What would it look like to let go?

Leader Prompts

Ask: Why does Tradition Nine insist on 'the least possible organization'? Prompt: How has rotation brought growth or renewal in your group?

Remind: Our leaders are trusted servants. They do not govern. Rotation ensures that no one person becomes indispensable, and every member has the chance to grow through service.

Suggested Resources

Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions — Tradition Nine essay
Language of the Heart — Bill W.'s reflections on A.A.'s service structure
Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age — insights on the development of A.A.'s General Service structure
A.A. Service Manual — descriptions of trusted servants and rotation practice



Tradition Ten: Staying Out of Controversy

Short Form

Alcoholics Anonymous has no opinion on outside issues; hence the A.A. name ought never be drawn into public controversy.

Long Form

No A.A. group or member should ever, in such a way as to implicate A.A., express any opinion on outside controversial issues—particularly those of politics, alcohol reform, or sectarian religion. The A.A. groups oppose no one. Concerning such matters, they can express no views whatever.

Teaching Point

Tradition Ten protects A.A.'s singleness of purpose. The moment we align ourselves with any political party, religious denomination, or reform movement, we risk dividing ourselves and losing focus on our only mission: carrying the message to the alcoholic who still suffers.

Bill W. put it plainly: 'Experience has taught us that nothing can so surely destroy our heritage as futile disputes over property, money, and authority.' Extending this principle, nothing can divide us faster than taking sides on outside issues.

Historical Context

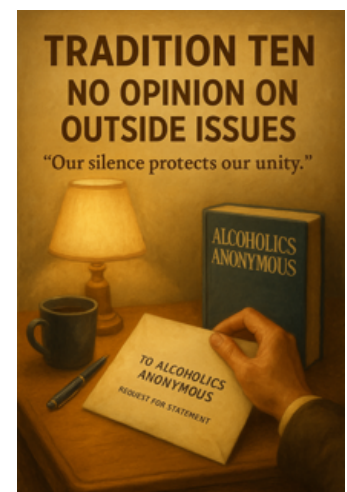
In the 1940s, A.A. was approached to support temperance campaigns, laws restricting liquor sales, and even candidates who promised prohibition-style reforms. Bill and Dr. Bob both knew that such actions would tie A.A. to outside agendas—and they refused. At the 1950 Cleveland Convention, when A.A. formally adopted the Traditions, Bill emphasized that neutrality was essential for survival. A.A. was to be a safe harbor for all alcoholics, regardless of their politics, church affiliations, or opinions about alcohol laws. Just as John D. Rockefeller had cautioned that 'money might spoil this thing,' Bill cautioned that outside controversies could ruin A.A.'s unity.

Illustrative Story

Imagine if A.A. in the 1940s had joined forces with a temperance league to outlaw liquor. How many alcoholics would have avoided us, fearing we were another moral reform group? How many might have died without ever walking into a meeting? By refusing to join outside causes, A.A. kept its doors open to anyone seeking sobriety.

Practical Application (2025)

Tradition Ten continues to guide us today. A.A. members are free to express their personal opinions on politics, religion, and social issues. But once they invoke their membership—saying 'As an A.A. member, I believe...'—they violate the spirit of this



Tradition. Groups, districts, and intergroups avoid public endorsements, petitions, or campaigns. By steering clear of outside controversies, A.A. remains a place where Democrats and Republicans, Catholics and atheists, activists and bystanders can all sit together and share sobriety.

The Final Quarter Connection

As we move into the final three Traditions, think of them as A.A.'s guardrails. They keep us from veering off course. Tradition Ten reminds us: we do not fight outside battles. Tradition Eleven shows us: we attract, we do not promote. Tradition Twelve crowns them all: principles before personalities. Together, they protect A.A. and ensure its survival into the future.

Reflections

Do I ever bring my personal political or religious opinions into A.A. discussions? Have I been tempted to speak for A.A. on a controversial issue?
How does neutrality preserve unity in my group?

Can I see how this principle also applies in my home, workplace, or community?

Exercises

Group Inventory: Review your group's announcements and events. Have they ever crossed into outside issues?

Case Study: A member suggests the group endorse a petition to close local liquor stores. How should the group respond in the spirit of Tradition Ten?

Personal Reflection: Write about a time when you kept your opinions to yourself in order to protect unity. How did that feel?

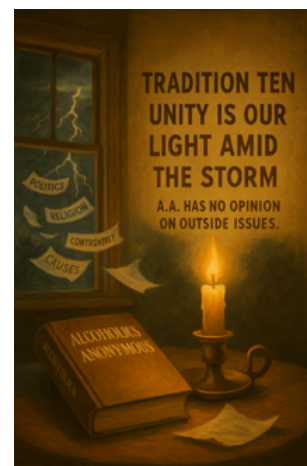
Suggested Resources

Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions — Tradition Ten essay

Language of the Heart — Bill W.'s Grapevine articles on avoiding controversy

Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age — stories about A.A.'s neutrality and unity

A.A. Service Manual — guidance on neutrality in A.A. service work.



Tradition Eleven: Attraction, Anonymity, and Responsible Public Relations

Short Form

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 need to praise ourselves. We feel it better to let our friends recommend us.

Long Form

Our relations with the outside world should be characterized by modesty and anonymity. We think A.A. ought to avoid sensational advertising. Our public relations should be guided by the principle of attraction rather than promotion. There is never need to praise ourselves. We feel it better to let our friends recommend us.

How Tradition Eleven Differs from Tradition Twelve

Tradition Eleven is about how we present A.A. to the public—quietly, modestly, and without self-promotion. It asks each of us to maintain personal anonymity at the level of press, radio, films, and, by extension today, social media and the internet. Tradition Twelve reaches even deeper: it calls anonymity a principle with 'immense spiritual significance' that helps us place principles before personalities and practice genuine humility. Think of it this way: Tradition Eleven governs our public relations; Tradition Twelve shapes our inner motives and tone.

Bill W.'s Emphasis

In the years leading to the 1950 International Convention where the Traditions were affirmed, Bill W. stressed that A.A.'s credibility rests on attraction rather than promotion. In Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions, he wrote: 'Our anonymity at the level of press, radio, and films is the greatest protection A.A. can ever have.' And in Language of the Heart, he reminded us: 'Attraction is the thing, not promotion; let our friends recommend us.' Bill understood that breaking anonymity publicly could shift attention from the program to personalities, putting both the Fellowship and the individual at risk.

Ego, Anonymity, and Safeguarding One Another

Tradition Eleven demands humility. Some members have been tempted to hold press conferences or to announce their membership as a way to help A.A. grow. Celebrities and public figures have at times broken their anonymity with the best of intentions. But the danger is clear: if they later relapse or face scandal, A.A. itself is blamed. This Tradition helps us keep our egos in check while protecting the Fellowship as a whole.

By maintaining anonymity at the public level, I am not only protecting myself—I am protecting the newcomer and every other member of A.A. When I refuse to allow my picture to be published or my name tied to A.A. in public media, I help ensure that the program remains a safe refuge for anyone seeking sobriety.



Practical Guidance in 2025

Members are free to speak about their personal sobriety as private individuals: 'I'm sober; I've been sober since...' What we avoid is publicly identifying ourselves as A.A. members in press, radio, films, or on social media. This protects the Fellowship and prevents personal missteps from being linked to A.A. as a whole.

On social media, share responsibly. Avoid hashtags or captions that tie posts to A.A. membership. If posting about recovery, keep it general—never claim to speak for A.A., and never use A.A.'s name to promote a personal brand.

Equally important is protecting others. Do not share photos of other members without explicit permission. Safeguarding the anonymity of others is a spiritual responsibility rooted in humility and respect.

A Story: Two Announcements, Two Outcomes

At a community forum, two people share about recovery. The first says, 'As a member of Alcoholics Anonymous, I support this new policy.' When the policy later becomes controversial, A.A. is pulled into the argument by association. The second speaker says, 'I'm a person in long-term recovery. Sobriety gave me my family back.' No organization is named, no controversy is tied to A.A. The message of hope remains, and the Fellowship is protected.

Reflections

When I speak about recovery publicly, do I avoid tying my words to A.A. membership? Do I protect other members' anonymity—especially in photos or social media posts? Am I letting attraction do the work, trusting that quiet example carries farther than promotion?

Exercises

Draft two versions of a public statement: one that breaks anonymity and one that shares recovery without naming A.A. Discuss with your group which version better reflects Tradition Eleven.

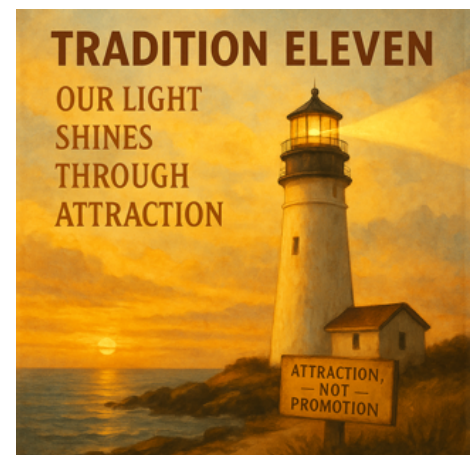
As a group, review your website or announcements. Do they align with the principle of attraction rather than promotion? Make any adjustments needed to ensure anonymity is respected.

Suggested Resources

Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions — Tradition Eleven essay

Language of the Heart — Bill W.'s Grapevine writings on anonymity and public relations

A.A. Service Manual — guidance on public information and anonymity
online Dr. Bob and the Good Oldtimers — background on early anonymity practices



Tradition Twelve: Principles Before Personalities

Short Form

Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our Traditions, ever reminding us to place principles before personalities.

Long Form

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.

Teaching Point

Tradition Twelve crowns the other Traditions. It teaches us that humility is not weakness but strength. Bill W. often spoke of the need for 'ego deflation at depth.' Anonymity is not secrecy; it is spiritual protection. It shields us from pride, ambition, and the temptation to put ourselves above the Fellowship.

Historical Context

At the 1950 International Convention, when the Traditions were first adopted, Bill W. closed with a passionate appeal to humility. He reminded members that all of A.A.'s blessings could become its undoing if ego and ambition ever replaced gratitude and service. The promise of anonymity was not just about avoiding publicity, but about keeping us anchored in love, humility, and unity.

The Golden Thread

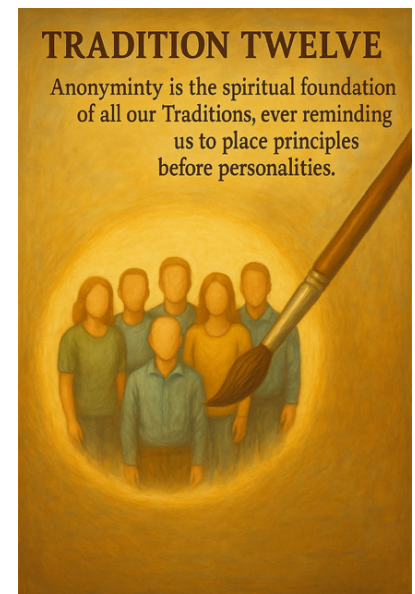
Looking back across the Traditions, we see a golden thread that runs through them all: humility, unity, and service. Each Tradition asks us to surrender something of ourselves for the good of the whole. Each Tradition points us toward love expressed in action. Tradition Twelve ties these threads together. It calls us to remember that what matters is principle, not personality; spirit, not spotlight.

Bill W.'s Reminder

Bill wrote in the Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions: 'We are sure that humility, expressed by anonymity, is the greatest safeguard that Alcoholics Anonymous can ever have.' This humility, expressed in service and gratitude, is what keeps us together and allows A.A. to thrive generation after generation.

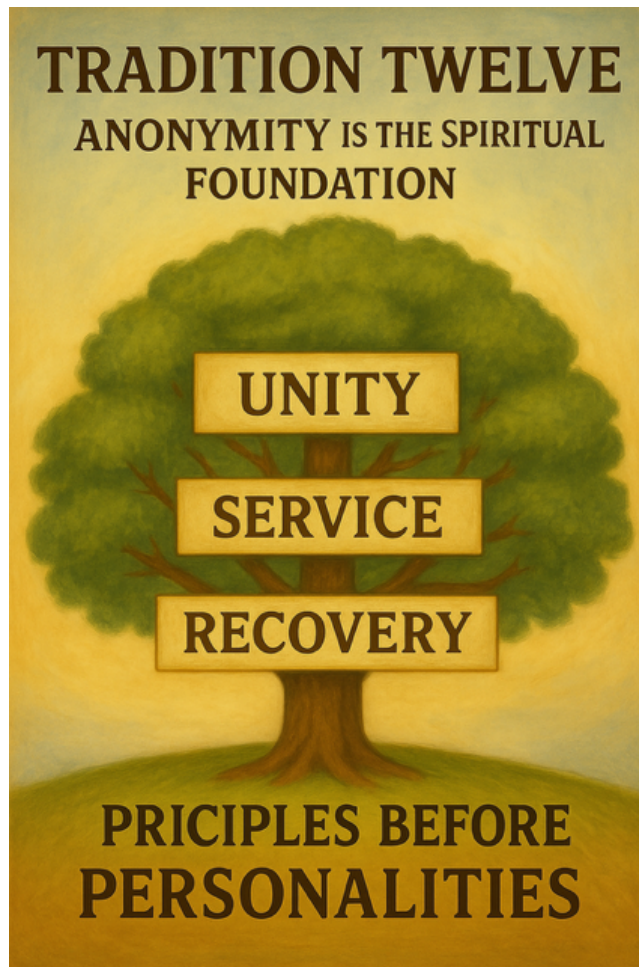
Practical Application (2025)

When my ego craves recognition, Tradition Twelve invites me to step back and let service, not self, shine. When conflict threatens unity, this Tradition asks me to put principles before personalities. In today's culture of self-promotion, it challenges us to model another way— humility, service, and gratitude.



Closing Thought

Tradition Twelve is the heartbeat of A.A. It keeps us grounded in humility, bound together in unity, and turned outward in service. Without it, the other Traditions could collapse under ambition or division. With it, we are free to carry the message - one alcoholic to another - with the quiet dignity and spiritual strength that has sustained A.A. for ninety years.



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Michael Fitzpatrick is a writer, historian, and curator who has devoted nearly four decades to preserving and sharing the history of Alcoholics Anonymous and the wider recovery movement. He is the founder and president of RecoverySpeakers.com, a nonprofit digital archive and educational platform that houses one of the largest collections of recordings, documents, and artifacts related to AA pioneers.

He is the author of four books published by Hazelden, including Dr. Bob and Bill W. Speak, Living the Twelve Traditions in Today’s World, We Recovered Too: The History of the Pioneers of the Family Groups, and 1,000 Years of Sobriety. His work draws from original source material—rare recordings, correspondence, and artifacts—ensuring historical accuracy while bringing the voices of AA’s founders and early members to life.

In addition to writing, Fitzpatrick has curated the William D. Silkworth Collection, one of the most significant private archives of early AA history, and has consulted with recovery organizations, historians, and media producers worldwide. His credibility, deep subject knowledge, and personal passion uniquely position him to tell the story of AA’s founders with authenticity and emotional depth.