

AA As A Whole

Before I begin my comments on the topic of A.A. as a Whole, I wish to express my deep gratitude for several things. Before I received the kind invitation to be with you today I was in contact with two of your trusted servants, Xaviar Maza and Alberto Pascal

Xaviar was so very kind in responding to my phone call to your General Service Office requesting more information on the current situation. His response was unexpected and did much to impress me with the dedication and sincerity of your servants.

Alberto became my guide soon after that first contact. I have come to look forward to his calls and letters, and have been much impressed with his devotion to being of service to his fellows and Fellowship. It is my hope to do, in some small way, as well as Alberto and Xaviar have done. They have indeed set a fine example to follow.

As I noted, my task here is to comment on the topic "A.A. as a Whole." I often have difficulty speaking about success, and the world around us certainly sees Alcoholics Anonymous as a success. Early in my sobriety a man named Harlan became my sponsor. It was from him that I learned that any successes I might find in life were not mine to claim. They were actually the visible proof of a God working in my life. On the other hand, the difficulties in my life were truly mine to claim. They were the visible proof of self-centered fear. And so it was his suggestion that I pay close attention to the failures, and little attention to the successes. Due to the process we humans call death, Harlan has graduated to become my Spiritual Advisor. I continue to learn from his spirit and I have no doubt that he will be with us here today.

Alcoholics Anonymous has circled the earth in the last 59 years. It has overcome many kinds of difficulty and trouble. We have fought amongst ourselves about what to do most every step of the way. When one views our society from this point, it becomes amazingly clear that there is a Divine Presence which guides the direction. In each situation, and for each decision, there have been those who have sacrificed much to move us forward on our path. Some have given greatly of their time, others have contributed money, and still others have been willing to make the ultimate sacrifice – the approval of their fellow AA's.

The story is told, in our groups, about when Bill W. was asked to appear on the cover of one of our most famous magazines. Bill later recounted that he and Dr. Bob struggled many hours over the decision. They knew that numbers of alcoholics would die if they refused to let the magazine do this. These alcoholics would die because they would not be able to hear about our life-saving message. At the same time, Bill and Bob were certain that if Bill broke his anonymity others would also break theirs. The end result would be chaos and the destruction of our Fellowship. And so, Bill refused to be on the cover of the magazine. He made that decision also knowing that there would be AA members whose friends and family members would die as a result of the decision, and that those folks would not feel kindly toward him again.

Our worldwide history has many such stories. There were the Finnish AA members who smuggled the Big Book into Russia in the years before the Iron Curtain collapsed. They were willing to sacrifice their very lives in order to make sure that the drunks in Russia had a chance to hear about a way to find sobriety. This kind of experience has been repeated over and over again in our society. We have always risen to the challenges put before us to carry the AA message.

When my Spiritual Advisor, Harlan, advised me to remember who was responsible for the failure and who achieved the successes, he may well have known a very important thing. Success, even when it is only the *illusion* of success, is just as intoxicating for the alcoholic like me as any drink of alcohol. It leaves me with a false sense of power and a false sense of righteousness. I begin to think that both I and my action are perfect and that the world around me must follow my will. I believe this is also something Bill W knew, not only about himself – but about our society.

In a writing for AA's 25th Anniversary, our co-founder Bill W wrote the following, and I quote: "*For so long as we remain sure that our 'one world of AA' is God's gift rather than any virtue earned or created by ourselves; and for so long as our 'one world' continues to be ever more inclusive of those in need; and for so long as we speak and try to perfect the language of love—for lust so long may we count upon making whatever rendezvous with destiny that God would have us.*"

As we can tell from this writing, Bill was also very concerned about the problem of success. He knew, from his own experience, just how much trouble it can be. His greatest successes in the stock market had almost cost him his life. In some way this has been true for each and every one of us. In some strange way failure has been the path to freedom for us all.

It is this terrible personal failure each of us has lived through that stands out as the very foundation of our "one world of AA." Your country has many beautiful

places to visit, as does every other country in the world. Each of these countries also has places that are ugly and that people stay away from. You and I have been in some of these places, both good and bad. But the real reason we can live in our "one world of AA" is that there are places only we alcoholics have been. These are not places on earth – they are places of the spirit. It is because of this terrible darkness in which we have lived, that we are willing to do what is necessary to build toward the light.

It is this "building toward the light" which is the true topic for this weekend. It is Step by Step that we build for the future. To do this, we must have a vision to guide us. How we arrive at this guidance is of the highest importance. It has been my experience, and the experience of those I most admire, that the principles and practices by which we find our path is by far more important than the path or the goal. Let me now share with you the understanding I have come to as a result of that experience.

I will begin by quoting the first and second points in the original Conference Charter for the United States and Canada. I do this because I believe it clearly points the way for AA worldwide to function harmoniously. I quote:

"1. Purpose: The General Service Conference of Alcoholics Anonymous is the guardian of the World Services and of the Twelve Traditions of Alcoholics Anonymous. The Conference shall be a service body only; never a government for Alcoholics Anonymous.

2. Composition: The Conference (North American Section) shall be composed of State and Provincial Delegates, the Trustees of the General Service Board, Directors and staff members of the New York Headquarters and such ex-Trustees or foreign Delegates as the Conference may wish to invite.

Other Sections of the Conference may sometimes be created in foreign lands as the need arises out of language or geographical consideration. The North American Section of the General Service Conference will then become the Senior Section, related to other Sections by ties of mutual consultation and a cross linking of Delegates.

But no Conference Section shall ever be placed in authority over another. All joint action shall be taken only upon two-thirds vote of the combined Sections. Within its boundaries each Conference ought to be autonomous. Only matters seriously affecting A.A.'s world-wide needs shall be the subject of joint consideration

Just as our own recovery grew out of terrible personal failure, so too, our society marks the beginning of its service structure from the failures of other societies. Failures which, in some societies, has meant their collapse. While in others it has meant changes which have placed the changed society at odds with its beginning principles.

When I looked in the dictionary to learn what was meant by a principle, I discovered that a principle was defined as "a truth upon which other truths could be based". In using this definition, I have learned much from the writing I just quoted. These discoveries have clearly pointed to a path we can follow for a safe and secure future. Let me share them with you now.

In the first sentence I find that the General Service Conference is to be a guardian of both World Services and AA's Traditions for unity. It is important to see that the word guardian is used—not the word owner. This tells me two things. First, that our services and our Traditions are living, flexible things. Whenever and wherever you find a guardian you will also find that what is guarded is not something which can be possessed. Since Alcoholics Anonymous is, in fact a living, breathing, and constantly moving Fellowship, it is only possible for there to be a guardianship—never an ownership.

There is another aspect to guardianship that also helps to paint a picture for our service structure. Guardians, when acting in the best use of that concept, function in such a way as to ensure that actions taken do not prove harmful to the person or entity that is the focus of the guardianship. Therefore, they must have the ability to listen carefully to the wishes and plans of the person our group for whom they are guardians. Advising the best course of action and assisting in carrying it out. However, they are also responsible to see that learning takes place. In that capacity they must allow the person(s) they serve to fail in order for the learning to take place.

Almost in an attempt to make sure this understanding is reached, the second point is made that the Conference will never be a government for AA. We all understand, regardless of the country in which we live, what it means to have a government. Governments have officials who rule, laws that control, demands for money which must be met and authority which is difficult to keep in reasonable balance. We all know very well, from our own experience, how we rebel at the idea of being forced to do anything. And so Alcoholics Anonymous has decided to avoid these pitfalls in order to provide the most welcome opening for the alcoholic who still suffers. And so our newfound vision must come from our collective experience—not from an edict handed down by authorities.

Having decided to draw upon our collective experience in finding the path toward our future, how do we communicate and develop the new understanding? This is our first challenge, and is provided for in the second point of the Charter entitled "Composition."

The first five words clearly illustrate the "one world" vision that Bill talked about. It takes little thought to understand that the word "Conference" describes

the world-wide collective conscience. This would also be in keeping with the perspective of an old friend of AA, namely Dr. Carl Jung the noted psychiatrist. Dr. Jung figured heavily in the beginning of Alcoholics Anonymous and much of his thinking is reflected in our Twelve Steps, Twelve Traditions, and Twelve Concept for World service. It was a part of his perspective that when a collective conscience was developed, this conscience would naturally become the home for the basic principles by which those connected to it would function. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that Bill and Bernard Smith would include this concept in the basic framework of our society.

In addition to this, the idea of a collective conscience places everyone as equals. No single person, or collection of persons, holds any more sway or influence than any other. All are equal parts of the whole. If we understand little else, we ought to at least clearly see that just as alcohol treated us equally, so, too, the basis of our society must be equality. Equality in the opportunity for recovery, equality in the responsibility for our survival, and equality in the necessity to serve someone or something greater than ourselves.

As noted in parentheses, the groups in the U.S. and Canada would be considered the North American Section. It is easily understood, from this identification, that a section could be composed of any nations or groups that wished to become a "section." This emphasis also reinforces the idea that no part of the worldwide Fellowship of AA ought to be considered greater than any other. The only requirement, if it can be called one, would be that a need was felt. This is in keeping with our Third Tradition through which a member becomes one when he or she says so, and our Tradition Four through which any two or three alcoholics who are gathered for the purpose of sobriety can call themselves an AA group. So, too, it would follow in good order, that this principle (a truth upon which other truths can be based) would also hold true for a general service section. Unfortunately, in my country we have not followed this principle in the recognition of new general service districts or areas. This is a new understanding for me and will require more study and meditation. I share it with you so that you may also find your own understanding of it.

And finally, we find a few points of principle which, if thoroughly applied, can serve to promote the harmonious security that can be found through the contact with the Higher Power we know lives in our collective group conscience. Those points are:

- Equality – no person or group in authority over another.

- Collective conscience – a two thirds vote required in decision-making.
- Autonomy – You are one of us if you say you are.
- Participation – those affected by a decision are part of the voting body.

These points are the cement which can bind a society together, or when ignored, ensure that fragmentation and disintegration will be the experience. They simply cannot be ignored by anyone whose life depends on a unification with their brothers and sisters.

Today, AA as a Whole struggles with this question: "Can we leave behind the laws of human kind and trust the survival of our society on a God that each of us knows personally, but that aren't sure of collectively" The illustration is need

(Transcriber's note... the text is truncated; the end of the speech is unavailable)