

Unity and the Spirit of Sacrifice

(To be presented on Sunday, November 27th, 1994, Cuernavaca, Morelos State, Mexico. AA Third Forum. Regions: Center, North and South – Section Mexico)

I am an alcoholic and my name is Bob McElroy. My home group is called "Living our Traditions". We meet Friday nights in Raynham Massachusetts in the United States.

I currently have the privilege of serving Eastern Massachusetts, Area 30, as the Panel 43 Delegate to the US/Canada General Service Conference. My sobriety date is January 1, 1973.

This presentation was prepared before I came here this weekend, but I can tell you that I am as overwhelmed as I thought I might be at being even a small part of this forum.

I would be less than honest if I did not share with you that I have been filled with feelings of inadequacy. My wife Gail and I left home last Monday and drove about 1300 miles to Minnesota to connect with Denny, one of my service sponsors and his wife Maggie. We flew here together. Not bad. Travel about 2000 miles to an AA meeting! Distances never stopped me from drinking.

I would like to thank Alberto and the committee for this invitation. This has been quite an adventure.

Trust does not come easy to me, even after almost 22 years of sobriety. When Alberto called my home in September, I was 250 miles away visiting with a fellow AA that I have come to trust.

John H. is the Panel 43 Delegate to the US/Canada Conference from Northern New Jersey. He has become a good friend. When the special lady in his life died, I drove the 250 miles to stand beside him through this painful time. The 12 Steps teach us to do this – to stand united in fellowship and love. You might call it a long distance 12th Step "call".

I had been joking each time I received a letter or packet from you here in Mexico that perhaps the next letter would be an invitation to come here and speak. I was only kidding! So when my wife Gail called New Jersey and told me about Alberto's invitation, I thought she was teasing me. I guess the joke was on me!

Over the last two days, we have all had the chance to learn a little more about each other. With your patience, I would like to briefly share who I am and how I came to be standing in front of you today.

When I surrendered and came to AA 22 years ago, I certainly never expected to be here!

I was taught from the very beginning by the oldtimers that my life and that of my group had to be built around AA's 12 Steps and 12 Traditions. Concept I warns us that: "We know that the penalty for extensive disobedience to these principles is death for the individual and dissolution for the groups". Our Common welfare had to come first.

I understood these principles. Before I got sober, I used to race cars. My life and the lives of other drivers depended totally upon the unity of the pit crew. Disobedience and disregard to basic safety rules could mean death. I understand about the importance of our common welfare – about the importance of surrendering my wants for the better good of the many. A simple principle, but not always an easy road for me.

Before I was sober one year, my sponsor guided me into carrying AA's message of hope into prisons, something I still do today. My service to AA beyond the home group included being a representative to our intergroup and some participation in general service at the District level.

And that's where I was at about the 14 year mark in sobriety. Not drinking, going to meetings – getting on with life. I'm a loner. Crowds and groups are not my favorite places to be. I was and still am my happiest when I am alone and riding down the road on my motorcycle. Just me and the wind.

At about 14 years sober, a doctor sat behind his desk and told my wife and I that he knew what my medical situation was but unfortunately there was nothing he could do to help.

There was no thought of drinking, but I did lose my will to live. God works through people. I went home and in reality knew I would be dead by morning. The phone rang. It was another AA member that I had not heard from in a long time. He asked if I would go into the local prison to do a 12 Step meeting with him with the "lifers" that night.

Our common welfare must come first. If we did not go that night, the inmates would have no meeting, no hope. I put aside my own feelings of despair and went to the prison. These men knew me well and they knew something was wrong. They challenged me to live the principles that I had shared with them for so many years. The unity of their spirit got me through the night.

The next day I called someone in AA that I had watched walk through a similar situation – being handed a medical diagnosis that said "No Hope". She told me that I had a choice. I could sit around and wait until this other disease killed me. By then most of the people around me would be glad I died. Or, I could get up each day and thank God that I could still breathe and go about my business and help other drunks. You might say this was a turning point in my life.

This woman, who is my other Service Sponsor, asked both myself and my wife Gail to come back to the local General Service District and help her. That is not what I really wanted to do, but our common welfare came first. The District's unity and future depended on some of us stepping back into service to lend a hand. So Gail and I jumped in. I got involved with the Treatment Facilities and Gail with Public Information.

God has a sense of humor! Each time I completed my service term and thought to myself – "OK, now I'm out of here! Back on the road! Me and my motorcycle." I would find myself in yet another service position.

I have served Area 30, Eastern Massachusetts as the Chairperson of the

Treatment Facilities Committee and in 1991 and 1992, I served as the Panel 41 Alternate Delegate to the US/Canada Conference. In 1992, with about 4 hours notice, I was informed that I would be attending the General Service Conference in place of our Area's Delegate.

At our Area's Election Assembly in late 1992, I was elected to serve as the Panel 43 Delegate. My wife Gail, who has been sober as long as I have, was elected to serve as our Area's Alternate Delegate. This certainly made for an interesting two years!

Just as I began my term as chairman of the Area's Treatment Facilities Committee, our assembly voted to alter the structure of this committee. Instead of just being a general service committee of a cooperative effort with one Intergroup as our other committees are structured, the Assembly voted to have the Treatment Facilities Committee a cooperative effort with all the Intergroups in Eastern Massachusetts. This action was taken without asking the Intergroups if this is what they wanted. There was a serious split in our fellowship.

We went through weeks and months of sub-committees, assemblies, and often very heated and argumentative debates. I sometimes wondered if we would ever see an end to the fighting and disunity.

As Chairman of this committee, I became painfully aware that every word and action became a living example of the Steps, Traditions and Concepts. I was no longer an autonomous individual. I was no longer a loner.

As our 4th Tradition cautions us, my actions would affect my committee members and the Area Assembly as a whole. The solution was compromise. Under the guidance of our then current Panel 39 Delegate, radical differences in viewpoint found a middle ground of compromise without anyone feeling that they were settling for less. Compromise did not come easy, but somewhere along the line, everyone involved realized that if we did not find a solution, some middle ground to work from, AA's hand would not be there for the still suffering alcoholic.

AA's Declaration of Unity reminded us that we owed to AA's future finding a way to work together. The common welfare of those to come was more important than personal agendas.

Finally, after 7 months, as Chairman of the Treatment Facilities Committee, I had the unenviable task of presenting our newly hammered out Policies and Procedures to our Assembly for approval. I would not wish on anyone what I went through. Every word, every recommendations was challenged again and again. Every part of my body was screaming to throw the papers in the air and tell everyone to go do something profane. With the love and support of many, we did get through that day. The new policies were accepted. It took time, but unity was restored. The committee is working well today.

When this all started; when we all went to that first Assembly, there were only 2 options presented. Neither group would compromise. After hours of discussion and no side able to achieve a 2/3rds vote, this third option was presented. It was no one's bright idea. God did for us what we were unwilling to do for ourselves and the still suffering alcoholic. Everyone surrendered their own personal agendas and we worked for the common welfare. It was a hard lesson for all of us. We go so trapped in which way was best, we almost lost sight of what our primary purpose as sober alcoholics truly is – to carry AA's message of hope and recovery. Who carries the message is not important. That the message gets carried anywhere, anytime, anyplace is what is important.

As a member of the 42nd, 43rd, and 44th General Service Conferences, I have witnessed many things. At this point I need to tell you that more often than not I have been a minority voice. Not always, but much of the time.

We in the US/Canada Conference are definitely walking down a road of unrest. I am not alone in my concern that our Conference structure and flow of communication is in need of adjustment. I do not mean to imply that our current Conference structure needs major change. The structure

as designed is fine if – a big if – if it is followed. Our Conference Charter and Concepts give us excellent guidance and directions if – if all levels of AA service are adhering to them.

My home group often reads and discusses the AAWS pamphlet "AA Tradition – How it Developed". To quote: "But AA unity cannot automatically preserve itself. Like personal recovery, we shall always have to work to maintain it. Here, too, we surely need honesty, humility, and open-mindedness, unselfishness and, above all –vigilance. So we who are older in AA beg you who are newer to ponder carefully the experience we have already had of trying to work and live together."

In these past 2 years, as a member of the US/Canada Conference, I have had to look back on these words often. It has been a less traveled road to stand up and as Concepts V (five) and IX (nine) state, challenge the "tyranny of the majority" from time to time.

I do not suffer from an overabundance of self-confidence. The softer, easier road would be to stay quiet or just walk away.

My service sponsor has guided me to apply the same principle to my service as a Conference Delegate. To echo what Denny said about the definition of the word "principle" – "a truth upon which other truths could be based."

One of the "truths" that I was taught was that the principles outlined in the General Service Conference Charter, the 12 Traditions, the 12 Concepts for World Service and the Warranties contained the solutions. As with my personal recovery, being a part of the solution prevents me from being part of the problem.

You may or may not be aware of one of the more controversial issues that the US/Canada Conference has been debating over the last few years. Rather than go into great detail, allow me to simplify the issues by saying that it comes down to the Concepts, Warranties, and Traditions. Do they apply to everyone equally or not?

When I was elected to serve, my sponsor gave me some points to consider:

- this is a once in a lifetime opportunity to be of service to AA; she told me to celebrate every day, no matter what happened.
- It was vitally important to be able to put my head on my pillow at night and know that I had done my job
- one of the hardest lessons to learn is that, as Delegate, I am responsible to give a full report. I am not responsible as to how that report is received. I still struggle with that.
- She also warned me that nothing but my best was acceptable.

In January, because I was the chair of my committee at the Conference, I was invited to attend the Quarterly Meeting of the General Service Board in New York. Several of the trustees complimented me and said they had never seen a Delegate so well prepared and well informed. I have to thank my service sponsor for that.

Which brings me to how I ended up standing in front of you today. A favorite phrase of one of our past General Service Board Chairmen was "Trust in the process" Michael Alexander, our immediate past General Service Board Chairman, would often tell Delegates that we were all responsible to keep the "process" healthy. In order to correct what may need correcting in our US/Canada Conference "process", I need to stay a part of it. Simple; but not always easy.

We have as saying in AA in the US that resentments formed most of our groups. People got angry, bought a coffee pot and started another meeting to do things their way. I used to belong to a group in North Middleboro, Massachusetts. It was a good AA group founded on AA's

Traditions. Many of us gave service to AA as a whole. Other groups sprung up in this small town without considering how that might affect us. Our group had a heated debate over AA's 3rd Tradition and eventually some members, who believed we should bend the Tradition to fit them, left and formed another group.

Three years later, the original group closed its doors, unable to stay self-supporting. In Eastern Massachusetts, we are listed as the 4th largest AA population in the US and Canada. Yet I can tell you that we have stretched ourselves to the limit. Our 5th Tradition, singleness of purpose, is being challenged as never before. The seeming good is becoming the enemy of the best. Starting new groups seemed OK at the time. Now we are seeing the negative consequences of this action. AA's unity will not preserve itself. Our common welfare must come first.

I am not stupid, but I'm no genius. I've been a tradesman all my life. I share this with you in the hope that you may understand that being a part of a minority grievance that included a Statement of Censure, a censure of our US/Canada Board of Trustees, did not come easily. It was a very difficult decision, but the only decision and action I could take and still live within me.

Those of us who signed the censure are working within our Conference process and structure. We have no idea what will happen next. We do know that the only chance that we have to affect any change is to stay within our structure. Sounds simple. It is not.

I did not initiate this minority grievance, not did I write it. It was the result of a "series of compromises" among those of us involved. I did agree to have my name as the only signature on the original correspondence because, unfortunately, we were well aware that all hell was going to break loose in spite of what our Concepts and Warranties say about having no fear of reprisals.

As with my experience with the Treatment Facilities Committee, I would not wish anyone to go through what I have gone through these last few months. Don't misunderstand, I willingly did this, fully aware of what might happen. It was still unsettling. The comments have not all been negative.

In fact there is growing support. The primary cause for this support is that we have requested a reaffirmation of the entire manuscript of the 12 Concepts as originally accepted at our 1962 Conference. If this happens, the Conference is, in effect, making a policy statement. Our Trustees, Directors, and General Service Office Staff would then be obligated to amend those behaviors and actions that go beyond the boundaries outlined in the Concepts, particularly Concepts III and VII.

I very strongly disagree with many actions that have been taken by AAWS or the US/Canada General Service Board primarily because the General Service Conference, the active voice and effective conscience of AA, has been repeatedly by passed. I do not believe that we in the United States and Canada would survive a fracture in our structure – 2 separate Conferences. Our only hope is to not give up – to not walk away – to work within the structure until we can have enough of an impact to see that we all follow the same principles. In the end, this is the only way to preserve AA for those to come.

That is not to say that our future unity will not withstand changes. In 1989 and 1990, there was some discussion about de-centralizing the General Service Office in New York and establishing regional offices to better serve our groups. The committee I chaired, the Conference Committee on Trustees, is looking at the size of our regions. New Delegate Area applications are being evaluated. Change is in the air.

Locally, in my own Area, we just experienced a change. We elected our new Panel 45 Delegate and Alternate and Area Officers. Many of these AA's do not agree with the Statement of Censure or my part in it. I

could easily dismiss their comments by pointing out that they have not yet taken the time to carefully study all of the background material and wrapped up in my own self-righteousness walk away. The future unity of my Area demands that I stay within the structure and work through this, basing my actions and words on the spiritual principles of our Steps, Traditions, Concepts and Warranties.

Referring again to "AA Tradition – How it Developed", I quote:

"May we never forget that without permanent unity we can offer little lasting relief to those scores of thousands yet to join us in their quest for freedom."

"The future may well depend on how we feel and act about things that are controversial and how we regard our public relations."

I assume that I am here with you because I was part of this Concept V minority grievance. This action has been very controversial. Some have called it divisive. I sincerely believe that the censure pointed out that there was already disunity and dissatisfaction with some of the actions or inaction of our General Service Board and AAWS, Inc.

My term as a current Conference member is quickly coming to an end. A week ago, at my home group, we were reading Concept IX and the essay on leadership. Never before have these words had such an impact on me. I quote:

"Nothing, however, can be more fatal to leadership than opposition for opposition's sake. It never can be "Let's have it our way or no way at all." This sort of opposition is often powered by a visionless pride or gripe that makes us want to block something or Somebody."

"Another qualification for leadership is "give and take", the ability to compromise carefully whenever a proper compromise can cause a situation to progress in what appears to be the right direction. Compromise comes hard to us "all-or-nothing" drunks. Nevertheless, we must never lose sight of the fact that progress is nearly always characterized by a series of improving compromises.

I learned long ago that doing what is right does not always feel good. It does not always "stroke my ego". I do not particularly like the word "compromise". Yet, I have no doubt that a "series of improving compromises" is what will bring unity to Alcoholics Anonymous in the United States, Canada and world wide.

We speak different languages, but I have felt the language of your hearts this weekend. I hope you have heard mine.

You can take a persons money and that is all that you have. You take their time, you have part of their life. I would like to thank you for the part of your time that you gave me this weekend and the part of my life you let me share with you.