

History Corner

The Eight Secrets of A.A.'s Survival

William L. White

Alcoholics Anonymous, due to its membership size, worldwide dispersion, historical longevity and adaptation to other problems, has established itself as the standard by which all other recovery mutual aid societies are measured. Past History Corner columns have referenced such pre-AA recovery support groups as the Native American recovery circles, Washingtonians, Ribbon Reform Clubs, Keeley Leagues, Drunkard's Club and, one of my personal favorites, the United Order of Ex-Boozers. This column will answer the question: Why did AA survive and thrive when most of the pre-AA recovery societies failed to outlive their founding generation?

A.A.'s Close Call

In the early 1940s, A.A. came close to sharing the fate of its predecessors. A.A. was undergoing its first period of explosive growth and the growing pains were widely evident. At least one group drank beer at their meetings, and members of a San Francisco A.A. group, upset with the lack of communication from A.A.'s central office in New York, threatened to establish an alternative society called Dipsomaniacs Incognito. Conflict abounded over proposals for A.A. hospitals and paid missionaries, the operation of A.A. clubhouses, the founder's use of A.A.'s name in their involvement in outside organizations, and questions regarding the inclusion of women, gay men and African Americans. (See Wally P.'s (1995) *But, For the Grace of God...: How Intergroups & Central Offices Carried the Message of Alcoholics Anonymous in the 1940s*. Wheeling, WV: The Bishop of Books). A.A. could have self-destructed in the early 1940s. That it didn't is attributable to unique factors that distinguish A.A. from its predecessors.

A.A.'s Eight Protective Factors

As an addiction and recovery historian, I am often asked why A.A. escaped the fate of its predecessors. There is no evidence that early A.A. leaders were aware of earlier recovery societies before a July 1945 *A.A. Grapevine* article brought the experience of the Washingtonians into A.A. consciousness. Discovery of the Washingtonians at a time AA was experiencing its own internal struggles played a significant role in A.A.'s future. Within a year of learning of the rapid growth and sudden demise of the Washingtonians, A.A. co-founder Bill Wilson formulated the Twelve Traditions that came to govern the group life of A.A. Listed below are the eight factors, including the traditions, that I most frequently cite as the secrets of A.A.'s survival.

Program Codification. A.A. was the first recovery society to refine and codify its program before it experienced explosive growth. The publication of A.A.'s basic text in 1939 minimized the future corruption of its program during periods of explosive growth.

Program Content. A.A. shifted the historical emphasis from sobriety initiation (how to stop drinking) to recovery maintenance (how to not start drinking). It broke from its predecessors by defining sobriety as something qualitatively different than not drinking, e.g., a

new philosophy of living, a reconstruction of one's identity and character, and a reformulation of one's interpersonal relationships.

Organizational Autonomy and Singleness of Purpose. A.A. refused to tie its fate to any other organization. It separated from the Oxford Group and refused to align itself with any other organization. These twin principles helped A.A. escape early episodes that could have altered A.A.'s identity and mission, e.g., Bill's offer of employment as a lay alcoholism therapist and the offer to bring A.A. under the financial sponsorship of Towns Hospital.

De-decentralization of Leadership. A.A. avoided linking itself to a single charismatic leader. It pledged itself to a system of rotating lay leaders, a minimalist approach to organizational structure and governance by a Higher Power expressed within a group conscience. By eliminating permanent leadership positions and pledging itself to corporate poverty, A.A. eliminated the booty over which earlier groups had fought.

Cell Structure. Eschewing hierarchy, A.A. developed a highly de-centralized cell structure. The central essence of A.A. became members sharing their experience, strength and hope within small groups. A.A. transformed factors that had wounded earlier groups (conflict, and unmet needs) into catalysts of growth and cell division.

Alcoholic-to-Alcoholic Identification. A.A. was the first recovery mutual aid society that refused to compromise its closed (alcoholics only) meeting structure. The single but required membership criteria ("a desire to stop drinking") enhanced group cohesion and assured that no member could claim moral superiority over another.

Anonymity. A.A.'s principle of anonymity protected A.A. members from social stigma, protected A.A. from any public downfall of its members and evolved into a spiritual exercise in humility.

Duration of Participation. By creating an expectation that members would continue to participate long after stable sobriety had been achieved, A.A. assured organizational continuity and assured that the hand of A.A. would remain extended to the still suffering alcoholic.

Creating a sustainable alcoholic mutual aid society takes more than a workable framework of personal recovery. A.A., through its Twelve Traditions, found ways to manage those things that had destroyed its predecessors: conflicts over purpose, position, property, politics, personalities, and, of course, money.

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