

ON CULTIVATING TOLERANCE

By Dr. Bob Smith

From the editorial column of the July 1944 AA Grapevine

During nine years in AA, I have observed that those who follow the Alcoholics Anonymous program with the greatest earnestness and zeal not only maintain sobriety but often acquire finer characteristics and attitudes as well. One of these is tolerance. Tolerance expresses itself in a variety of ways: in kindness and consideration toward the man or woman who is just beginning the march along the spiritual path; in the understanding of those who perhaps have been less fortunate in education advantages; and in sympathy toward those whose religious ideas may seem to be at great variance with our own.

I am reminded in this connection of the picture of a hub with its radiating spokes. We all start at the outer circumference and approach our destination by one of many routes. To say that one spoke is much better than all the other spokes is true only in the sense of its being best suited to you as an individual. Human nature is such that without some degree of tolerance, each one of us might be inclined to believe that we have found the best or perhaps the shortest spoke. Without some tolerance, we might tend to become a bit smug or superior - which, of course, is not helpful to the person we are trying to help and may be quite painful or obnoxious to others. No one of us wishes to do anything that might act as a deterrent to the advancement of another - and a patronizing attitude can readily slow up this process.

Tolerance furnishes, as a by-product, a greater freedom from the tendency to cling to preconceived ideas and stubbornly adhered-to opinions. In other words, it often promotes an open-mindedness that is vastly important - is, in fact, a prerequisite to the successful termination of any line of search, whether it be scientific or spiritual.

These, then, are a few of the reasons why an attempt to acquire tolerance should be made by each one of us.

THE FUNDAMENTALS - IN RETROSPECT

By Dr. Bob Smith

September 1948, AA Grapevine

It is gratifying to feel that one belongs to and has a definite personal part in the work of a growing and spiritually prospering organization for the release of the alcoholics of mankind from a deadly enslavement. For me, there is double gratification in the realization that, more than thirteen years ago, an all-wise Providence, whose ways must always be mysterious to our limited understandings, brought me to "see my duty clear" and to contribute in decent humility, as have so many others, my part in guiding the first trembling steps of the then-infant organization, Alcoholics Anonymous. [AA began June 10, 1935, with the start of Dr. Bob's lasting sobriety. He died November 16, 1950.]

It is fitting at this time to indulge in some retrospect regarding certain fundamentals. Much has been written; much has been said about the Twelve Steps of AA. These tenets of our faith and practice were not worked out overnight and then presented to our members as an opportunist creed. Born of our early trials and many tribulations, they were and are the result of humble and sincere desire, sought in personal prayer, for divine guidance.

As finally expressed and offered, they are simple in language, plain in meaning. They are also workable by any person having a sincere desire to obtain and keep sobriety. The results are the proof. Their simplicity and workability are such that no special interpretations, and certainly no reservations, have ever been necessary. And it has become increasingly clear that the degree of harmonious living that we achieve is in direct ratio to our earnest attempt to follow them literally under divine guidance to the best of our ability.

Yet there are no shibboleths (which means "long-standing formula, doctrine, or phrase, etc., held to be true by a group) in AA. We are not bound by theological doctrines. None of us may be excommunicated and cast into outer darkness. For we are many minds in our organization, and an AA Decalogue (which means "Ten Commandments") in the language of "Thou shalt not" would gall (which means "irritate") us indeed.

Look at our Twelve Traditions. No random expressions, these, based on just casual observation. On the contrary, they represent the sum of our experiences as individuals, as groups within AA, and similarly with our fellows and other organizations in the great fellowship of humanity under God throughout the world. They are all suggestions, yet the spirit in which they have been conceived merits their serious, prayerful consideration as the guidepost of AA policy for the individual, the group, and our various committees, local and national.

We have found it wise policy, too, to hold to no glorification of the individual. Obviously that is sound. Most of us will concede that when it came to the personal showdown of admitting our failures and deciding

to surrender our will and our lives to Almighty God, as we understood him, we still had some sneaking ideas of personal justification and excuse. We had to discard them, but the ego of the alcoholic dies a hard death. Many of us, because of activity, have received praise, not only from our fellow AAs, but also from the world at large. We would be ungrateful indeed to be boorish when that happens; still, it is so easy for us to become, privately perhaps, just a little vain about it all. Yet fitting and wearing halos are not for us.

We've all seen the new member who stays sober for a time, largely through sponsor-worship. Then maybe the sponsor gets drunk, and you know what usually happens. Left without a human prop, the new member gets drunk, too. He has been glorifying an individual, instead of following the program.

Certainly, we need leaders, but we must regard them as the human agents of the Higher Power and not with undue adulation as individuals. The Fourth and Tenth Steps cannot be too strongly emphasized here - "Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves...Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it." There is your perfect antidote for halo poisoning.

So with the question of anonymity. If we have a banner, that word, speaking of the surrender of the individual - the ego - is emblazoned on it. Let us dwell thoughtfully on its full meaning and learn thereby to remain humble, modest, and ever conscious that we are eternally under divine direction.

Alcoholics Anonymous was nurtured in its early days around a kitchen table. Many of our pioneer groups and some of our most resultful meetings and best programs have their origin around that modest piece of furniture, with the coffeepot handy on the stove. True, we have progressed materially to better furniture and more comfortable surroundings. Yet the kitchen table must ever be appropriate for us. It is the perfect symbol of simplicity. In AA we have no VIPs, nor have we need of any. Our organization needs neither titleholders nor grandiose buildings. That is by design. Experience has taught us that simplicity is basic in preservation of our personal sobriety and helping those in need.

Far better it is for us to fully understand the meaning and practice of "thou good and faithful servant" than to listen to "When 60,000 members [in 1948] you should have a sixty-stories-high administration headquarters in New York with an assortment of trained 'ists' to direct your affairs." We need nothing of the sort. God grant that AA may ever stay simple.

Over the years, we have tested and developed suitable techniques for our purpose. They are entirely flexible. We have all known and seen miracles - the healing of broken individuals, the rebuilding of broken homes. And always, it has been the constructive, personal Twelfth Step work based on an ever-upward-looking faith that has done the job.

In as large an organization as ours, we naturally have had our share of those who fail to measure up to certain obvious standards of conduct. They have included schemers for personal gain, petty swindlers and confidence men, crooks of various kinds, and other human fallibles. Relatively, their number has been small, much smaller than in many religious and social-uplift organizations. Yet they have been a problem and not an easy one. They have caused many an AA to stop thinking and working constructively for a time.

We cannot condone their actions, yet we must concede that when we have used normal caution and precaution in dealing with such cases, we may safely leave them to the Higher Power. Let me reiterate that we AAs are many men and women that we are of many minds. It will be well for us to concentrate on the goal of personal sobriety and active work. We humans and alcoholics, on strict moral stocktaking, must confess to at least a slight degree of larcenous (which means "characterized by the wrongful taking of the personal goods of another") instinct. We can hardly arrogate (which means "to assume to oneself without right") the roles of judges and executioners.

Thirteen grand years! To have been a part of it all from the beginning has been reward indeed.