

Practicing Our Traditions in a Digital Age

Aloha! My name is Bob and I am an alcoholic.

In case you are wondering why I'm up here. I've been playing with computers since I was eleven and I started drinking at about the same age. I'm pretty sure they're not related though.

When I got sober seven years ago I remember promising myself that I wasn't going to become the webmaster for Hawaii Area 17. I just stepped down from that position after four years on the job.

When I received this topic, "Practicing Our Traditions in a Digital Age", my first thoughts were of Traditions Eleven and Twelve and social media sites such as Facebook. However many of you will remember that at PRAASA 2010, Joel C. from San Diego Imperial did a great job on the topic of "Anonymity in the Digital Age" specifically covering social media.

Joel reminded us that ultimately the responsibility of safeguarding our Traditions "needs to reside with the whole Fellowship." The GSO Guidelines on the Internet, MG-18, are a great resource for this, especially the section on social media.

I'm not going to rehash or repeat his fine talk, but I do want you to remember my favorite quote :

To be honest, I believe there is something inherently narcissistic about Facebook. If Tradition Twelve is really about humility, then it might be virtually impossible to practice Tradition Twelve on Facebook at all.

So if individually we sometimes fall short, especially when it comes to humility, how are we as a Fellowship doing with some of our other Traditions in this Digital Age? I'm happy to report, the sky is not falling. In some areas we are doing quite well. Let me give you some examples.

The long form of Tradition Three says in part:

Any two or three alcoholics gathered together for sobriety may call themselves an A.A. group...

As early as the 1980's A.A.'s were getting together online using Bulletin Board Systems. Back then these computers were not linked together by the internet. Instead you called them over the phone, logged in, read new messages and left your own.

Today there's an internet Online Intergroup and you can find meetings pretty much anywhere, anytime in languages from Czech to Swedish.

One caveat I must add is that no matter how wonderful our technology is or may become, we must not forget that we aren't gathering together for the sake of that technology.

We come together for recovery, for unity, and in service, our Legacies, to pass on what we have been given. Individually and collectively, we must always remember that not everyone has or wants access to our "Digital Age." It's not good enough to say, "oh, it's on our website."

Moving on.

The Long Form of Tradition Five says:

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.

Carrying that message online is more than simply having meetings or chatting. It's making our literature available, putting meeting schedules online, and making sure a host of other resources are available. How are we doing there?

Now I'm not going to talk about unofficial or personal sites; some are fine places to visit and others are not. I'm talking about recognized A.A. websites that are responsible to the groups they represent.

Our own AA.org website began in 1995 and has, over the years, made more and more information available. Interestingly the Big Book was not part of that original website and as late as 2002 there was still discussion putting it up. This is from the October 2002 issue of the Grapevine:

"The question of whether the GSO website should publish the Big Book online also has come up among the Fellowship. While some are concerned that doing so might keep people from turning to local A.A.s or affect a central office's self-support, others feel it would help carry the AA message further. Again, GSO is letting caution be its by-word and has no plans to do this, for today."

I called GSO to double check the date and sure enough, we put the Big Book online in January 2004, just over a year later.

By the way, that quote came from the A.A. Grapevine Digital Archive, another wonderful online resource making generations of knowledge and information

available. Now we can carry the message not only across town but across time as well.

And the Grapevine itself has had to adapt to the Digital Age too. In the April 1999 issue I found :

Let me just say, we've got nothing against the Internet; in fact, we've got a website at <www.aagrapevine.org>. But when it comes to having a meeting in your pocket, close to your heart, you just can't beat the "meeting in print."

Of course today we are being asked to switch to the digital edition to save the cost of printing and mailing. Times do change.

Again a word of caution is in order. There are some places that a "meeting in print" is always going to be welcome and a computer is not: prisons and treatment centers come to mind. Let's be sure that in carrying the message we make it available to everyone who suffers from alcoholism and not just those with access to technology.

Also on AA.org I found links to all the Area websites in the US and Canada except Area 31, Western Massachusetts. I did a search for Area 31 online and, sure enough, came up with a website that is part of their local Intergroup.

So how well do our websites practice our Traditions? Well when our Area Web Standing Committee was creating our usage guidelines, we stole, I mean adapted, those guidelines from other Areas. We read a lot of them. I can't say all 93 Areas have website guidelines, nor can I say they all follow them. We didn't check them all. But every one we checked did and appeared to be following them well.

Still there are a few things out there that give pause. Once in a while you'll find a website with a footer naming a web design company or specific software, which brings me to:

Tradition Six - An A.A. group ought never endorse, finance, or lend the A.A. name to any related facility or outside enterprise...

One could even question the GSO site on this. When delivering the Big Book online one may install a plug-in to view the text. Clicking on the FAQ for the plug-in brings up a document on the software company that created it. Here's how it starts:

FileOpen Systems is a software development company based in New York..

Are we lending our name to this company? It is a fair question: one that must be asked in any discussion of Practicing Our Traditions in a Digital Age.

We had a similar situation involving some postcards we had made with our website address as well as the mail address for our area contributions. In a corner the postcard carried the manufacturers name. It was decided to move forward but I thanked the person who questioned it.

Moving from Tradition Six to Seven:

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

Recently it became possible to make donations online at AA.org. I gave it a try and discovered that I had to create a confidential user profile and state categorically that I am an alcoholic before I could donate. Clearly this is to be sure that we do not accept money from outside sources.

How are other A.A. websites doing? It's hard to know as I'm not quite ready to make a donation on every possible A.A. website. At my local intergroup we did have a discussion about this very topic though. We wanted to accept contributions and a link had been put up for that purpose. At first there was no disclaimer or instructions, just a button allowing contributions. After discussion, and a visit to AA.org, we made some changes and now the link brings up a page which gives the Seventh Tradition in the long form and states that, "In keeping with Tradition Seven, you must be an A.A. Member to make a contribution."

Is this good enough or should we require confidential profiles like GSO? I don't know.

I could go on and discuss each of our Traditions in light of the "Digital Age" and it is my sincere belief that we must have those discussions. I'm out of time but I hope I've shown that there's a lot more to Practicing Our Traditions in the Digital Age than simply being careful on Facebook.

And now I'll leave you where I started. The sky is not falling. If we are careful, if we have informed discussions and especially if we rely on Tradition Two, "For our group purpose there is but one ultimate authority—a loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience," eventually, to paraphrase the words of Greg M. our past General Service Office Manager when we discussed this at PRAASA 2010, "we will work it out".

Mahalo for letting me be of service.