

## PRAASA 2011

Topic: Tradition Five: Our Primary Purpose

Panel Number: **#4 Diversity in A.A. We are Responsible for A.A.'s Future**

Day: **03/05/11** Time: **8:00 A.M.**

I'm Jeff, I'm an alcoholic.

I'm currently the area chair for Calif No. Coastal Area.

Thanks to the PRAASA 2011 committee for asking me to present.

Our primary purpose is to stay sober, and help other alcoholics. Sounds simple. But experience tells me that we all don't always agree on exactly how to accomplish this. So it gives us a chance to grow, learn, and acquire some humility.

Early in A.A.'s history, some AA'ers suggested that AA might spearhead a worldwide *spiritual* revolution. In hindsight most of us would say that would be prideful and spiritually arrogant of us. Bill W. didn't want to entertain that all.

## PRAASA 2011

In *AA Comes of Age*, Bill writes, “We might interest ourselves in fields of education, neurosis, and the like. But, as a society, should we? Our experience says that we should not. We can and we do help, as individuals in those fields. But , as a fellowship, we know we must not be diverted. Our experience as alcoholics makes us of unique value on *our sector* of the alcoholic front. We can approach sufferers as no one else can.” Hence, the strongest compulsion is upon us to do this & nothing more.

I was surprised to learn that A.A. didn't have opinions on political or legal issues about alcohol. There might be a legislative proposal that I support as an individual, but AA won't have anything to do with it, including and especially if it is regarding alcohol. Typically, I even keep my opinions about friend's drinking habits to myself.

## PRAASA 2011

There are basics that I think every A.A. member ought to know. When I was acting DCMC and hurricane Katrina hit, I found I shouldn't assume that AA members are familiar with applying our traditions, even if they're in service. A few members of the district were upset that A.A. wasn't taking contributions from members to assist hurricane victims, like a charity might do. They thought AA was being a coldhearted bureaucracy. I explained that there are many causes that many of us value. However, A.A. sticks to its purpose. We AAers may perform 12<sup>th</sup> step work, carry the message. And there are a few paid special workers that help make 12<sup>th</sup> step work possible. But that's all we should use AA for. As individuals, we may get involved in whatever cause we want; donate to charities, write to our Senators. But A.A. must stick to its purpose.

Bill writes in *AA comes of Age*: "Today we understand this paradox: The more A.A. sticks to its primary purpose, the greater will be its helpful influence everywhere."

We're not a secret society. Most of us have read accounts about our non-alcoholic trustees benefiting from the spiritual tenets of AA. We share our principles with myriad other fellowships. We are open to anyone who wants to learn them. AA cooperates but never affiliates.

## PRAASA 2011

Other traditions support our purpose. By not accepting outside funds, we don't owe favors, and aren't coerced to take sides on issues to get the next sack of gold. And so forth.

I suspect most in the room agree with what I've said so far. But here's where some disagree, where loving discussion begins.

I'm concerned that primary purpose is incorrectly abused as a tool to censure members. Good luck censuring members: Do we really think we can control what AA members say at a recovery meeting? Or even at a business meeting? When the blue card asks me to confine my discussion to problems as they relate to alcoholism, I still don't know how to respond. I'm kind of a dinosaur in that I didn't experience drug addiction—a minority where I got sober. But I asked my sponsor, "Does that mean I wasn't supposed to talk about excessive coffee drinking and insomnia early in sobriety?" Are people allowed to talk about cigarette addictions? If I went to any group, perhaps even your homegroup, and announced that I'd used recreational heroin over the weekend, would they still consider me sober, or would I be counting days again? People in my homegroup discuss all sorts of things; sometimes I laugh, other times I get bored or occasionally mildly irritated: Yet it's not up to me to judge what's relevant to *their* sobriety. I wouldn't expect someone from General Service or Inter-group to monitor what people in my homegroup are saying. I don't think any AA group needs to justify what's said or not said at its meetings. My homegroup conducts half-day long inventories every 2 yrs, and trust me, issues get flushed out there.

## PRAASA 2011

And, I do not think that how we announce ourselves at meetings diverts us. Using your full name, first name, or omitting your name should all be acceptable at the group level. Some members of my group add qualifications after saying they are an alcoholic: "I'm an alcoholic and a something else." I say, "so what? No big deal." We should announce ourselves however we want, or simply have the freedom not to announce ourselves. Dr Bob was concerned about peer pressure to conform oneself to announcing yourself a set, given way: He thought it was a joke that w'd say, "I'm so-and-so and I'm an alcoholic." A question: Is pressuring members into feeling they must announce themselves a certain way diverting us? I once attended a meeting where a lady was attending her first ever AA meeting. Overwhelmed, she succumbed to the pressure to take a newcomer's chip. She didn't know what to say. The audience screamed shrill, "Say your alcoholic! Say it!!!" Next, silence. Again, she succumbed to the pressure, indeed calling herself an alcoholic. I never saw her again. In a similar vein I wonder if making members feel they should chant in order to belong diverts us.

## PRAASA 2011

I'm reminded of a speech given by GSO manager Bob P. in 1986 in which he decried AA's growing rigidity. *"...And in this trend toward rigidity, we are drifting farther away from our cofounders. Bill in particular must be spinning in his grave, for he was perhaps the most permissive person I ever met."* Bob also said that if AA fails, it will be because of too much fear & rigidity, and not enough trust and common sense.

Bill was driven with making AA as accessible as possible to anyone who wished to recover from alcoholism. He spent much of his sober life trying to open the door wider. Bill strove to eliminate obstacles which prevented some drunks from absorbing the ego-deflating, spiritual principles of AA.

In my rigidity or egotistical desire to control, am I closing the door by being intolerant of people who aren't doing things *my way*? Or, am I striving for the inclusiveness that Bill practiced?

I learned *this* from a non-alcoholic: *A surplus of virtue is more dangerous than a surplus of vice.* I was on a love and tolerance phase, to the extreme. If anyone complained about what people were saying at their group I'd say, "**Get over it!**" proclaiming my love & tolerance to the world! A few yrs prior, and before I was GSR, I was Secretary for a huge gay group in SF. All my speakers qualified as AA members. But a few did not identify as being gay. Most were, but several were not. A few of my friends asked about this, but I wasn't going to hear any of it. Keep in mind that this group always had visitors, and there were often attendees who announced that this was the first time they'd attended a gay meeting. But never mind all that: I was doing it my way. *Get tolerant, people, come on.*

## PRAASA 2011

A few years later while traveling I attended a gay AA meeting. The speaker identified as being straight, and based on the share, I had no idea whether the person was an alcoholic. I left the meeting saying, "I went out of my way to attend a gay, AA meeting, but what was that?" Because of how I felt at *that* meeting, I more identified with those who express frustrations with *their* groups. This got me asking myself, "What's the purpose of an AA group?" Or, what's the purpose of Gay AA meeting, or a Women's meeting, or a Men's Stag? I was now less proud of my glib "**get over it**" remarks about other's frustrations with their groups. So I admit: There can be points at which *even I* sense that a group can drift so far off our primary spiritual aim that it's harmful. Thankfully, there are tools to help: choosing our trusted servants with care, group inventories, and so on.....Ideally with the absolute minimum guidelines. But if nothing else, this lesson taught me to exercise discretion and compassion when listening to another's concerns, before passing judgment on them. I save *my opinion* for *my homegroup*: That's where I have a voice and vote, along with some responsibility matched with authority. When I'm visiting other groups, I must learn to be a decent guest.

I view primary purpose as a humble expression of the limitation of our society. As a fellowship, as an AA group, we can do one thing. Tradition Five is one way of keeping our collective alcoholic ego in check.

Perhaps I've provided some questions to ponder. Certainly, I don't have all the answers. My ideas about Tradition 5 have changed over the years. I expect they might change over my lifetime.

## **PRAASA 2011**

As always in A.A and in life, more will be revealed. I must realize I only know a little.

THANK YOU HAWAII FOR HAVING US.