

Pacific Northwest Conference -- 2019

Panel: "Yesterday's World – Our Legacies Begin"

Topic: "Carrying the message using the 12 Concepts, then and now."

Good afternoon, I'm Gary and I'm an alcoholic. I currently serve as the Panel 68 Alternate Delegate and Registrar for Washington State East Area 92.

Thank you to Joe S., and the PNC 2019 Program Committee, for the opportunity to participate on this panel.

This presentation has two components. First, a snapshot of my personal introduction to A.A. and receiving its message. Second, a brief overview of the evolution of A.A.'s General Service Manual and the 12 Concepts, which ensured that our service organization would carry the A.A. message for over eight decades.

In December of 1987 I arrived at the doorstep of A.A. in Area 44, Northern New Jersey. The immediate cause of my arrival was a conspiracy, not known by me at the time, of my ex significant other, my estranged children, my sister, my attorney, the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation, a lifelong business associate and a physician with decades of experience working with alcoholics and addicts. By the end of that first day, I survived an emotional, one-on-one intervention with my non-alcoholic business colleague, met with a remarkably insightful doctor who convinced me that I needed to **ask for help**, signed up for IOP and met my counselor who had 20+ years of sobriety, attended my initial AA meeting and found myself drawn to the first of many A.A.'s, that I've had the good fortune to bond with along the road of happy destiny. What a day!

Among the meetings attended that first week, was an 8:30 pm, Tuesday open speaker meeting...held in Verona, New Jersey in the basement of the Presbyterian Church. The meeting leader, the readers and the speaker, stood behind a large, impressive oak podium. One feature was particularly memorable. This podium had a blocked letter inscription carved prominently on its face in a circle. The inscription read **"THOSE WHO FAIL TO REMEMBER, ARE DOOMED TO REPEAT."**

At 4½ days sober, those words struck a chord of absolute truth. After drinking, virtually every single day for 22 consecutive years, in ever-increasing quantity and consequence, I

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arrived at AA with a gift -- of being in a state of suicidal depression, or as I learned, “pitiful and incomprehensible demoralization”. After, “*I can quit anytime, I just don’t want to*” the second most frequent and insidious lie that I told myself during those drinking years was, “*this time it will be different*”. “*...the persistence of this illusion is astonishing.*”

The A.A. men who “adopted me” during those early weeks and months, had recovered. They shared their stories, and the principles embodied in A.A.’s Twelve Step program that worked for them. They inquired about my life and pointed me to key, useful ideas in A.A. literature. This information was supplemented by the education received at IOP and a constant exposure to numerous alcoholics sharing their experiences, at just a few of the thousands of meetings held across metropolitan New York. The messages that held me, including the one carved into an oak podium, had “weight and substance”. I slowly learned **what to do**, to achieve and maintain sobriety.

Our 12 Concepts and the A.A. Service Manual have their origins in the first draft of Bill W.’s “***A.A.’s Legacy of Service***”. This draft, circulated in early 1951, was Bill W.’s effort to document lessons learned and codify the **service principles & procedures** that he, Dr. Bob and a couple AA friends had developed and refined over the previous 15 years.

In his opening paragraph, Bill writes, “*Our Twelfth Step – carrying the message – is the basic service that the A.A. fellowship gives; this is our principal aim and the main reason for our existence. Therefore, A.A. is more than a set of principles: it is a society of alcoholics in action. We must carry the message, else we ourselves can wither and those who haven’t been given the truth may die...“Hence, an A.A. service is anything whatever that helps us to reach a fellow sufferer...*

...The sum total of all these services is our “Third Legacy of Service.”

By 1951, realities of scale, in numbers of groups, total membership and expanding geography, proved daunting. Consider this trajectory. In early 1939 when the Big Book was published, there were about 100 members in perhaps half a dozen groups in two locales. By January of 1941, there were 2000 members and by 1948, 100,000. Indeed, Bill’s “*A.A. Legacy of Service*” document states “*To maintain all these ever-lengthening service lifelines, the office had to go on expanding ...*”

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So, as Bill's early draft was being reviewed, it also became abundantly clear, that A.A. needed an organization that was scalable, affordable, non-perishable, and with operating practices that protected our hard learned, vital service principles. The "Birth" of the General Service Conference and A.A.'s 12 Concepts was underway.

Here are just a few of the challenges that Bill identified at the time; *"...How on earth were we going to cut down destructive politics, with all its usual struggles for prestige and vainglory? How many delegates would be required and where should they come from? Arrived at New York, how could they be related to the board of trustees? What would their actual powers and duties be?"*

These "weighty considerations" along with numerous other concerns led to a concerted effort by Bill and a couple of trustees and staff, to begin composing a plan to address them.

Then came the reality check -- the first General Service Conference. Given the "weighty considerations" it is easy to imagine that this April 1951 meeting was undertaken with significant apprehension. However, here is what unfolded, as excerpted from Bill's report after it concluded.

"In came the delegates. They looked over the offices, cellar to garret, got acquainted with the whole staff, shook hands with the trustees. That evening, we gave them a briefing session, under the name of "What's on your mind?" We answered scores of questions of all kinds. The delegates began to feel at home and reassured. They inspected our finances with a microscope. After they had listened to reports from the board of trustees, there was warm but cordial debate on many a question of policy. Trustees submitted several of their own serious problems for the opinion of the conference.

*So went session after session, morning, afternoon and evening. The delegates handled several tough puzzles about which we at GSO were in doubt, sometimes giving advice contrary to our own conclusions. In nearly every instance, we saw that they were right. **Then and there they proved, as never before, that A.A.'s Tradition Two was correct. The group conscience could act safely as the sole authority and sure guide for Alcoholics Anonymous.***

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Nobody present will ever forget that final session of the first conference. We knew that the impossible had happened, that A.A. could never break down in the middle, that Alcoholics Anonymous was safe from any storm the future might bring...

...As I watched all this grow, I became entirely sure that Alcoholics Anonymous was at last safe—even from me."

By 1962, the 12 Concepts were being formally composed...and **not surprisingly**, the first and foundational Concept I states, *"The final responsibility and ultimate authority for A.A. world services should always reside in the collective conscience of our whole Fellowship."* This was supplemented by numerous other renowned policies and concepts. You know them well...Third Legacy Procedure, Alternating Panels, Principle of Substantial Unanimity, Right of Decision, Right of Participation, Right of Appeal, etc. etc.

In closing, please consider this. The experience highlighted in my personal A.A. snapshot... is not unique! Nor does it take much thought to realize, that carrying A.A.'s message to tens if not hundreds of millions of alcoholics, just like us, across the globe, through numerous diverse channels, using multi-faceted media, and within a myriad of cultures and languages, is deliberate! **We choose to do it.**

So, from my 3 decades of the 68 years since that first General Service Conference, it seems to me, that the wisdom and relevance embodied in the **"A.A. Service Manual Combined With 12 Concepts for World Service"**, have stood the test of time. Together, they solidly established and fortified a specifically commissioned A.A. service organization. Through this organization and those enlightened principles, we have been able to successfully execute the same, deliberate, primary purpose for 84 years. Again, as Bill stated in 1951, ***"...an A.A. service is anything whatever that helps us to reach a fellow sufferer --..."***

Thank You.