

Sword or Shield? Dangerous Dogma and How the Traditions are Weaponized.

My name is Sammy and I'm an alcoholic. My sobriety date is November 9th 2009, and since I currently don't have a physical home base my homegroup is the Lopsided Triangle Group, an online meeting that I like to say is from Area 95 - the internet.

My presentation today is titled - Sword or Shield? Dangerous Dogma and How the Traditions are Weaponized. I will not do this topic justice in just 12 short minutes, but my hope is that I touch on some subjects that you will continue to talk about in your home groups and Areas, especially as AA moves towards the 21st century and today's digital age.

In Tradition 3 of the 12x12, Bill wrote that the early members were, "scared witless that something or somebody would capsize the boat and dump us all back into the drink," So great was the sum of our anxiety and fear. "We were resolved to admit nobody to A.A. but that hypothetical class of people we termed 'pure alcoholics.' Well, we were frightened. After all, isn't fear the true basis of intolerance?. . . How could we then guess that all those fears were to prove groundless?" More than half a century later, those words still do not sound comical.

Today fear still grips much of our membership. As the fellowship makes changes such as gender inclusive language in our preamble, to a plain language translation of our big book, as we become more inclusive and more modern, I watch as these same fears arise - that something or somebody or some change is going to capsize us and dump us back into the drink. It saddens me to watch people say horrible things out of fear. I've watched people say in response to the preamble change - next they are going to take out god, this is the end of AA, the liberal left is forcing their PC culture on everyone, if it ain't broke don't fix it, and things as horrible as - trans people are mentally ill and shouldn't be given a space here. And when people speak up, especially against blatant hate in the rooms, I watch as people use tradition 1 and tradition 10 to silence people especially people from marginalized groups. Some of these views I believe represent some of the dangerous dogma that exists in our fellowship. Ideas like - if you want sobriety bad enough you won't let someone chase you out of the rooms and on the flip side - if you don't like the way that a group or AA does something you can go start your own meeting or start your own fellowship. In these moments I wonder if we value people's right to be wrong more than people's right to be safe and welcomed in this program.

I've been thinking alot lately about the sword and shield analogy. I heard a speaker once talk about how the traditions are used as a sword, to cut down dissent or stop short important uncomfortable conversations. Conversations about bigotry and bias in the rooms, representation, or about safety. Conversations deemed controversial because they deal with identity and for some reason people consider identity political. I've seen people throw around the 10th tradition as a way to silence people of color when they bring up their experiences in regards to race, or want to talk about why there aren't people that look like them in the rooms or in our service structure. Or tradition 1 like my desire to belong and see myself represented in the rooms somehow is going to destroy the unity of the group to the point of implosion. Like these things don't affect our sobriety or our ability to get sober. Being called a racial slur messes me up as bad if not worse than losing a job or experiencing a break up, especially when it happens in the rooms, yet we let people talk about pets dying or divorces in meetings. Sometimes I see people use the minutiae of the tradition while forgetting the spiritual principle behind them. My service sponsor says that we don't get involved in outside controversy, but if the controversy is in the rooms we better be talking about it. And when I think of the traditions now, I think of the spiritual principle behind tradition 3 - welcome. Looking at inclusion, bias including racism, and safety in the rooms is not an accessibility issue. I believe it's a fundamental principle behind the 12th step work we are supposed to do. If we are going to grow in usefulness and effectiveness when it comes to reaching the still suffering alcoholic, we are going to have to start having these hard uncomfortable conversations.

The speaker I heard talked about using the traditions as a shield instead of a sword. That they are meant to protect us. In the Service Manual under Concept 12 it says “The Conference, as we know, is the “guardian” of the A.A. Traditions. There has always been some confusion about this term “guardianship,” and perhaps we should try to clear it up. To the minds of some A.A.’s, “guardianship” of the A.A. Traditions implies the right and the duty on the part of the Conference to publicly punish or sue every wilful violator. But we could not adopt a worse policy; indeed such aggressive public acts would place the Conference in the position of having violated one A.A. Tradition in order to defend another. Therefore aggressive or punitive action, even in this area, must be omitted.

I want to add another analogy. Maybe it’s our responsibility to stop seeing ourselves as the guardians of the traditions with our swords and shields but rather the custodians with our mops and buckets. In the pamphlet “AA Tradition How it Developed” it says “The Alcoholic Foundation (our A.A. general service committee) know themselves to be simple custodians, custodians who guarantee the effectiveness of the A.A. General Office and The A.A. Grapevine and who are the repository of our general funds and Traditions—caretakers only.

I think if we start looking at ourselves as caretakers only, maybe many of us would start to chill out. We would stop thinking that any little change is going to destroy AA, have more trust in the process and our servants, give people the space to make the mistakes they need to, and sometimes the things we think are going to be mistakes are going to turn out to be the solutions we couldn’t see. In AA Comes of Age Bill reminds us that - “In the years ahead we shall, of course, make mistakes. Experience has taught us that we need have no fear of doing this, providing that we always remain willing to confess our faults and to correct them promptly. Our growth as individuals has depended upon this healthy process of trial and error. So will our growth as a fellowship. Let us always remember that any society of men and women that cannot freely correct its own faults must surely fall into decay if not into collapse. Such is the universal penalty for the failure to go on growing. Just as each A.A. must continue to take his moral inventory and act upon it, so must our whole society do if we are to survive and if we are to serve usefully and well. Bill says in The Language of the Heart - The process [trial and error] still goes on and we hope it never stops. Should we ever harden too much, the letter might crush the spirit. We could victimize ourselves by petty rules and prohibitions; we could imagine that we had said the last word. We might even be asking alcoholics to accept our rigid ideas or stay away. May we never stifle progress like that!

Yet I see alcoholics do just that. Force their rigid ideas on people or suggest they stay away. We see this manifest in the dangerous dogma that exists in our rooms that we often perpetuate ourselves. I’ve had friends be told they were going to drink because they didn’t attend a meeting for a month while participating in spiritual Sundance or native ceremony, alcoholics tell each other that “acceptance is that answer” without acknowledging that action is a very valid and pretty powerful spiritual tool, use the big book as an absolute instead of a tool of guidance, or the thing I struggle with the most - the idea that this program is the only solution, that people shouldn’t seek solutions outside of it, and that those who leave are going to drink and die. Like I know God's plan for people. Bill says in Language of the Heart - It is an historical fact that practically all groupings of men and women tend to become more dogmatic; their beliefs and practices harden and sometimes freeze. This is a natural and almost inevitable process.... But dogma also has its liabilities. Simply because we have convictions that work well for us, it becomes very easy to assume that we have all the truth....This isn’t good dogma; it’s very bad dogma. It could be especially destructive for us of AA to indulge in this sort of thing.

Bob P said in his 1986 Closing talk “I echo those who feel that if this Fellowship ever falters or fails, it will not be because of any outside cause.... If we stick close to our Traditions, Concepts, and Warranties, and if we keep an open mind and an open heart, we can deal with these and any other problems that we have or ever will have. If we ever falter and fail, it will be simply because of us. It will be because we can’t control our own egos or get along well enough with

each other. It will be because we have too much fear and rigidity and not enough trust and common sense. If you were to ask me what is the greatest danger facing AA today, I would have to answer: the growing rigidity – the increasing demand for absolute answers to nit-picking questions; pressure for GSO to “enforce” our Traditions..... Bob reminds us that Bill “was perhaps the most permissive person. One of his favourite sayings was, “Every group has the right to be wrong.” He was maddeningly tolerant of his critics, and he had absolute faith that faults in AA were self-correcting.”

I know the ways I have been judgmental, intolerant, and full of fear. How those things close me off to new experiences and solutions. I think of my AA grandpa Monty. When I first met him, I had just spoken on a panel about the barriers I have experienced medically transitioning from female to male in AA. He approached me after and the fear welled up in me. I was convinced he was going to say something horrible because I have had horrible experiences in AA. Instead he thanked me for sharing my truth and giving him a perspective that he has never had to face. 2 years later at a PRAASA he approached me again. I had requested a single stall/ gender neutral bathroom as an accessibility need. The facilities didn't have one, and he found me to give me a key to his room so I would have a safe place to pee. 9 years later this man regularly welcomes me into his home in Utah, and has been a man who I continually look up to. He and his family give me so much love and I would have missed out on all of that if I had shut myself off to a new experience or judged the messenger based on my perceptions of him.

Monty's behaviors and actions, to me, were the spiritual principles of this program in action. He never questioned my experiences or told me I was exaggerating, never told me I needed to toughen up or change my perspective, never told me that the problem was me, which has happened repeatedly to me and countless others. Instead he listened, heard my struggles, and then made an effort to make me feel welcomed and safe. Because of people like Monty and Dave who scooped me up, welcomed me, and got me involved in service I've been able to stick around. Today with the help of these men I recognize that I am uniquely useful, and not terminally unique. And because I stuck around I got to experience the miracles of this program. Communication dies when we aren't willing to open up our hearts to each other.

I want to end with one last quote from Responsibility is our Theme - “Our pains and our necessities first called us reluctantly to responsibility. But in the latter years, a joyous willingness and a confident faith have more and more permeated all the affairs of our Fellowship.” As long as we keep the door of communication open, the hope for a solution to any problem will always persist.