

Panel 3

“Is rigidity in AA our greatest danger?”

Good morning, my name is Thad and I am an alcoholic. My sobriety date is September 9th, 2004. My home group is named the Thursday Night Men’s Group, we meet Thursdays at 7:00pm in Ketchum, ID. I am honored to currently serve Idaho Area 18 as Area Secretary, and I get to serve with enthusiasm. I would like to thank Joe and the PNC committee for giving me the opportunity to serve. Every time I volunteer to do a presentation at an event like this, receive the topic, how much time I am asked to fill, I have to remind myself of the advice I have new sponsees write on the back of their big books, in large letters with a big black marker, DON’T PANIC !

The presentation topic I have been given today **“Is rigidity in AA our greatest danger?”**

What is Rigidity, Merriam-Webster defines the word rigidity as:

1. The quality or state of being rigid
2. One that is rigid (as in form or conduct)

Not much help

So, I then went to look up the word rigid, Merriam-Webster defines rigid as:

1. Deficient in or devoid of flexibility
2. Appearing stiff and unyielding
3. Inflexibly set in opinion

This is not a new issue in Alcoholics Anonymous and does not lend itself to absolute, black and white answers. I had difficulty in putting something down on paper when, in doing my research, too many other people’s words are far better than my own. So with this in mind, I would like to read an excerpt from Bob Pearson’s farewell speech at the 36th General Service Conference.

“Let me offer my thoughts about A.A.’s future. I have no truck with those bleeding deacons who decry every change and view the state of the Fellowship with pessimism and alarm. On the contrary, from my nearly quarter-century’s

perspective, I see A.A. as larger, healthier, more dynamic, faster growing, more global, more service-minded, more back-to-basics, and more spiritual—by *far*—than when I came through the doors of my first meeting in Greenwich, Connecticut, just one year after the famous [July 1960] Long Beach Convention. A.A. has flourished beyond the wildest dreams of founding members, though perhaps not of Bill himself, for he was truly visionary.

I echo those who feel that if this Fellowship ever falters or fails, it will not be because of any outside cause. No, it will not be because of treatment centers or professionals in the field, or non-conference-approved literature, or young people, or dually-addicted, or even the “druggies” trying to come to our closed meetings. 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 A.A. today, I would have to answer: the growing *rigidity*—the increasing demand for absolute answers to nit picking questions; pressure for G.S.O. to “enforce” our Traditions; screening alcoholics at closed meetings; prohibiting non-conference-approved literature, i.e., “banning books”, laying more and more rules on groups and members. And in this trend toward rigidity, we are drifting farther and farther away from our co-founders. Bill, in particular, must be spinning in his grave, for he was perhaps the most permissive person I ever met. One of his favorite 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 A.A. were self-correcting. “

Some of these perceived points of rigidity include:

Newcomers pressured to identify as an alcoholic, and being made to feel uncomfortable

Treatment slogans

AA slogans

Chanting

Ritualizing our meetings, formats, in effect creating a kind of Dogma

“Drill Sargent” sponsorship

Using or not using the word GOD

The Big book

Our own Traditions that are meant to protect us, but on occasion, get used as a club

Little “t” traditions, “This is how we’ve always done it”!!!

The concept of Anonymity and its various aspects

Our Literature, used as weapons

Resistance to social media, modern communication methods and technology in general

Outside issues of every sort

I have been both the victim and the perpetrator of this kind of rigidity. Love and tolerance of others is our code. This should include my fellows in Alcoholics Anonymous whether they be day counters or old timers, AA scholars or the blissfully uninformed. Our concepts however speak to the possibility that occasionally I may need to stick flat footed to my convictions. It’s not black and white, sometimes theirs a lot of grey.

The recurring theme that comes to my mind in pondering this topic, in reality, is nothing more complicated that FEAR, and to a minor extent maybe complacency. That question of, what am I afraid of? May need to be asked of myself more often when it comes to looking at change in our fellowship and how we continue to carry our message.

In my research for this topic and talking with some of my fellows, some possible solutions have come to light

-Pray for willingness to embrace change, and reconnect on a regular basis with the idea that I don’t know what I don’t know!!

-Tradition 3 – The **only** requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking

-Be open to new ideas and actions, this should be applied at all levels of General Service and the Fellowship as a whole, its all about how best to carryout our primary purpose, to help the alcoholic who still suffers.

-Bill W's writings on open mindedness, flexibility and humility are also very helpful.

-Remembering that we were all new at one point in time or another, and exercise compassion and empathy – I believe this perspective is key. I am one of those guys who has been adamant about not wanting the first 164 pages or the doctor's opinion messed with, but I have to remember that it is not about guys like me who already have this precious gift of recovery but about the brand new men and women struggling to get it for themselves.

-Being democratic in thought and action and strive for substantial unanimity. Taking the time to build consensus before making a decision and, if it turns out to be a bad one, whether as a Group, District, Area or our entire fellowship, it is easier for us to say "oh well, better luck next time", learn from the experience and move forward. Our Concept 12 and warrantee 4 speak well to this.

-Be willing to take risks and try something new. In my opinion, (unlike the rest of this!) Through no ill motives of our own, we have become very **risk averse** in General Service and in our fellowship. In my opinion this may be a natural result of not wanting to hurt or damage something so precious to us, our recovery and the recovery of those to come. We have often been accused of being **rigid** or just plain **slow** when it comes to change, The General Service Conference's struggle with social media comes to mind as an example. We should have **Faith** however, and be willing to take some risks, even if only on a trial basis, because beyond a certain point there is no more information to be gained until more experimentation takes place. Case in point, the General Service Conference was first done on a trial basis - seems to have worked out ok!

-Availing ourselves to outside help – From a Grapevine Article in 1961 Bill wrote:

“if we are fooling ourselves, a competent adviser can see this quickly And, as he skillfully guides us away from our fantasies, we are surprised to find that we have few of the usual urges to defend ourselves against unpleasant truths. In no other way can fear, Pride, and ignorance be so readily melted. After a time, we realize that we are standing firm on a brand-new foundation for integrity, and we gratefully credit our sponsors, whose advice pointed the way”

Just as we often ask trusted outside advisors to help with group inventories, maybe we ought to consider District and Area inventories with outside help, not because we are necessarily doing anything bad but maybe there are aspects about our primary purpose and carrying our message that we can do better.

“Fight for the things you care about but do it in a way that will lead others to join you”. This is not a quote from AA, (don’t want to be too rigid here). Because of Alcoholics Anonymous, my weapons of choice are patience, tolerance, deference and love. How we treat each other is more important than what we get done.

If rigidity is our greatest danger, it has close company with apathy and complacency. These three blights on our fellowship seem to have some common solution.

We should have Faith in that none of us are going to break AA, and, as long as we stick to our principles and just as importantly, **keep showing up**, Alcoholics Anonymous will continue to be self-correcting. With regard to service opportunities, one of my favorite solutions is to try to have a little **FUN** with it, this is a rigidity solvent in an of itself. Whether its clown noses for a full body Assembly or Chicken Curry for a District Inventory, I have yet to find anything in our service literature that says we have to be boring.

Did I mention that I get to serve with enthusiasm?

In closing I will leave you with the Arab proverb that Bill quoted in his last message

“I thank you for your lives, for without your lives, I most certainly would have no life at all, much less the incredibly rich life I have enjoyed”

Alcoholics Anonymous and people like you have given me the eyes to see and the ears to hear so much more than I ever thought possible, and I am forever grateful.

Thank you for allowing me to serve

Love and Service

Thad N.