

# Indelible Humility

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As a newcomer in AA, I had a lot of ideas about needed changes. Even in 1970, I thought the Big Book was too sexist and I couldn't understand why none of the AA meetings served decaffeinated coffee. And I was absolutely certain that the biggest mistake was keeping Alcoholics Anonymous anonymous.

In fact, I made an emotional plea to that effect when I had six months sobriety under my belt, holding the Fellowship responsible for my father's death from cirrhosis of the liver. It embarrasses me to recall saying that if AA weren't so anonymous, my father would still be alive, which was, of course, an absurd statement. My father knew of AA and chose not to go.

Since then I have seen example after example proving why anonymity is so vital for our Fellowship. For instance, a few years ago I was in a country in the Caribbean when AA was celebrating its 25th anniversary there. At that time, it was their feeling that anonymity was fine for AA in the United States but not for them. The Fellowship was getting a great deal of publicity because of the anniversary convention. There was media coverage. One active member, a teacher by profession, was being interviewed live by a local talk show host. He was identified by full name as an AA member and was plainly recognizable. In the course of the interview, he was asked what percentage of the country's teachers were alcoholic. Not anticipating the question and being nervous in front of the cameras, our friend answered, "About fifty percent." The headline in the newspaper that evening shouted, "Half of Country's Teachers Alcoholic According to AA." Our non-anonymous member had become an AA spokesman.

As expressed in a letter to Sam D., Bill W. had some thoughts on the subject of anonymity at the public level. Sam, an AA member who was also a minister, had written to Bill stating that he thought, in his case, it would be helpful to reveal his AA membership before the general public by name and picture. Here are excerpts from Bill's response, from a letter dated June 22, 1946. Our Fellowship was eleven years old: "As a fact, there are few principles or AA attitudes about which I have a more definite conviction than that of 'anonymity before the general public.' I find support for my conviction among the vast majority of AA members despite the fact that there seem to be a considerable number of AAs in our southeastern chapters who agree with you. But in discussing this matter I would rather not rely too much upon the numerical support my own view has. Which of our views is the better policy, the finer spirituality, that's the question, isn't it?"

"Though less well schooled than you, I, too, regard myself a follower in the tradition of the Master. Perhaps as a layman, I have not much standing to interpret him. Yet my own observation is this: that sometimes Jesus advanced propositions seemingly contradictory. He lambasted money changers and people who stoned whores, yet I believe he said 'resist not evil.' He preached in public, and this to such great effect that millions wish they could see him and hear him today. Yet, did he not reprove those who made a public show of giving alms, and did he not say that a prayer in a closet was better than a prayer in public? What did he have in mind when he said such things? If,

as one who doesn't know the Bible very well, I were asked to answer, I would say that he was trying to throw a heavy emphasis on modesty and humility; that he was deeply conscious of the human tendency to exhibitionism. So, if I hear him aright, he is now saying to us AAs 'go and preach these principles to all the world. But beware of parading yourselves in the process.'

"Just as you are now searching your soul about anonymity in public, so did I have to go through that very process in 1939, the year our book *Alcoholics Anonymous* went to print. I was then called upon to make a decision, perhaps the most far-reaching one I have ever taken. Had it not been for the wise counsel of my friends in AA I must humbly confess that I probably would have abandoned my anonymity before the general public. Two courses were then before me because two titles for the book had been proposed, and both were equally popular. Here they were:

"1. *The Way Out* by Wm. G. Wilson

"2. *Alcoholics Anonymous*

"I don't mind saying, Sam, that the first one looked mighty attractive to me. To justify myself I used to say 'Well, Bill, you have surely learned enough about humility by now. So the mere signing of this book will never go to your head. The leaders of every other movement are publicized. All movements have to be personalized. They have to have personal symbols to lend them power and character. So why shouldn't I sign this book? A good title too, *The Way Out*!

"I almost succumbed to these rationalizations but my friends tipped the scale the other way. 'What if you got drunk and Bill, what kind of an example do you think you would be setting for the rest of us egocentrics? Even if you could stand a lot of newspaper publicity, we couldn't. Lots of us would get drunk and let our movement down. And anyhow, isn't the American public pretty well fed up on personal ballyhoo, however good.' Well, Sam, my friends wouldn't let me do it, and how right oh how very right they were."

The spiritual value of anonymity has been recognized for a long time. The ancient Greeks had a word for it and Christ spoke in praise of the humility that fosters anonymity when he said, "Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth."

We will now take a big jump in time and space and atmosphere from the Sermon on the Mount to the second day of April, 1840, and Chase's Tavern in Baltimore, Maryland. On that date, six drinking friends made a decision to stop their drinking and took a pledge to do so.

They called themselves the Washingtonians and in a year's time they had reformed 1,000 drunks and had 5,000 other members and supportive friends. On their second anniversary one of their groups in the Midwest was addressed by a young U.S. Congressman from Illinois named Abraham Lincoln.

So rapid was the group's rise that it soon had 600,000 members. Along the way, however, it became so involved even concentrated on promotion of its aims and success that its main original purpose began to evaporate. Many of its members became embroiled in public activities, giving voice to and taking sides in outside matters such as abolition and temperance.

By the end of 1847, just seven years after it began its original noble venture, the Washingtonians had faded out of existence and ceased activity except in Boston where,

in all too brief a time, it vanished altogether.

About seventy years later, another movement surfaced that was to be remarkably effective for a couple of decades. This was the Oxford Group. Interestingly, its founder Frank Buchman saw great virtue in anonymity and there was a considerable length of time that he preferred to be known as Frank B. This was to change, however, along with the overall tone of the original Oxford Group movement. Before too long ordinary membership purposes were shunted aside and eventually overwhelmed by increasing cases of personal ambition, campaigns for funds, and eager public searches for support, endorsement and participation of wellknown personalities.

AA's earliest members, chief among them Bill and Dr. Bob, were associated with the Oxford Group and were on hand, it is reported, for a gathering in New York City where Buchman revealed for the first time his personal hopes for dealing with the problem of alcoholism. "I'm all for alcoholics getting changed," he announced, "but we have drunken nations on our hands as well."

It was 1938 and before long the Oxford Group was transformed into what was called Moral Rearmament with Frank Buchman still at the head of it with a purpose to bring the nations of the world together by strictly peaceful means.

By 1939, AA and the changing Oxford Group drifted apart. But in talking later about AA's infancy, Bill said of the Oxford Group: "They had clearly shown us what to do [and] we also learned from them what not to do so far as alcoholics were concerned too authoritarian, aggressive evangelism, absolute concepts, which were frequently too much for drunks, dependence upon the use of prominent names (mighty hazardous for us). Because of the stigma (at that time) of alcoholism, most alcoholics wanted to be anonymous."

Commenting on this still further, Bill said: "Anonymity was not born of confidence: the bare hint of publicity shocked us . . . we were afraid of developing erratic public characters who. . . might get drunk in public and so destroy confidence in us. . . ." No look at anonymity as practiced by AA can be truly complete without including the question: is it possible for an AA member to be too anonymous? Too anonymous for the good of the individual and the Fellowship? The answer is "yes." And there are more than a few examples of this: members who feel they must not tell their families or their friends or coworkers or doctors or ministers or lawyers that they are members of AA. There have even been instances when members have sent requests for information to the General Service Office in New York and not included a last name or have sent checks to GSO unsigned!

There is indeed such a thing as an AA member being too anonymous: where it can mean failure to extend the helping hand when the need arises; where it can mean failure to correct misconceptions about AA both inside and outside the Fellowship; and where it can stifle even stop the flow of AA knowledge and sobriety from one person to another.

This is anonymity at the personal level and can indeed be carried too far in Bill's words to "the point of real absurdity." Anonymity at the public level, however, is another matter and no member of the AA Fellowship has shown the genuine humility to practice anonymity at the public level more dramatically and in a more truly selfsacrificing manner than our co founders, Bill and Dr. Bob.

I've quoted Bill a lot in this article because he was a prolific writer. Dr. Bob also provided us with many illustrations of living the Tradition of anonymity. The example I cite took place soon after his wife Anne had died and nearly a year after he learned he had terminal cancer. It is from his biography, *Dr. Bob and the Good Oldtimers*.

"This was at a time when AA members were thinking about a monument for Anne and Bob. In fact, a collection had been started. Hearing this, Dr. Bob promptly asked that the money be given back and declared against the Fellowship's erecting for Anne and himself any tangible memorials or monuments. He told Bill, 'Let's you and I get buried just like other folks.' Later, while shopping for a stone for Anne's grave, he was asked, 'Surely you're going to have something on it about AA?' He replied, 'Mercy, no!'"

Another example: in his farewell to the Fellowship at AA's first International Convention in Cleveland, Ohio, in July 1950, Dr. Bob said: "I get a big thrill out of looking over a vast sea of faces like this with a feeling that possibly some small thing I did a number of years ago played an infinitely small part in making this meeting possible." This from a co founder of what some have called the greatest social and spiritual movement, the most farreaching crusade for health and mental well being, of the twentieth century an organization with a couple million alcoholics who have lived or died sober as a direct result of Dr. Bob's and Bill's determination and dedication. This is humility. This is anonymity.

Considering the size of today's AA population, the number of public anonymity breaks discomfoting when they do occur and sometimes potentially dangerous are comparatively few and infrequent. This may be because as AA matures, its members more fully understand the value to themselves for anonymity at the public level. It may also be because of Bill's remarkably powerful example of personal sacrifice for the good of all. As a demonstration of anonymity in action, this is for all to follow:

- Bill discouraged any Nobel Prize possibility for himself.
- He declined awards from several colleges (suggesting they be offered instead to the Fellowship itself).
- He turned down the inclusion of his name and a brief personal history in "Who's Who in America."
- He said thanks but no thanks to an honorary degree from Yale University.
- He rejected a Time magazine story that would have included his picture on the cover.
- He refused the Lasker Award (which was given to AA instead).
- And posthumously (through his wife Lois), he declined a degree from his old school, Vermont's Norwich University.

When Bill died, his anonymity was broken by the press (as was Dr. Bob's at the time of his earlier death). Yet both Bill and Dr. Bob were buried without fanfare and, as they wished, there is no mention on their tombstones of their great indelible contributions to Alcoholics Anonymous.

*Anonymous, New York, New York*

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