

Our Code: Love & Tolerance

***“Most of us sense that a real tolerance of other people’s shortcomings and viewpoints and a respect for their opinions are attitudes which make us more useful to others”
Alcoholics Anonymous pg. 19***

***“We do talk about each other a great deal, but we almost invariably temper such talk by a spirit of love and tolerance
Alcoholics Anonymous Pg. 125***

***“Love and Tolerance of others is our code”
Alcoholics Anonymous pg. 84***

One of God’s first gifts to us was the gift of free will. God, in his infinite wisdom, gave us the ability to love freely, to give freely, and to live in fellowship and community. But God also knew that with the gift of free will came a reverse truth – that this great gift could also be used for hate, greed and divisiveness if wrongly used.

It is my belief that God’s great hope is that we will eventually come to the realization that are all his children and thus all brothers and sisters, and with this understanding, we will realize how much alike we are and how much we have in common. Yes, we are similar in many respects, but we are also very different. Each of us has our own ideas, opinions and viewpoints that are uniquely ours, made up of our past experiences, beliefs, morality and our own ideas about right and wrong.

AA members today have an image of the pioneering days of AA. That the early members were all great souls that floated around with angel’s wings, playing harps all day and that everything we have today is that way because those “saints” of early AA all got along with and agreed... on everything.

In this vision, God himself guided every detail of the early days, so surely there would be no need for contention, disagreement, or argument. Suffice it to say, this picture of the early days of our fellowship that so many hold dear is fiction rather than fact. Any in-depth study of AA history reveals that the members of those days struggled with many of the same problems and challenges we see in AA and in the world today.

Prohibition had just ended in the mid 1930s, the US was in the midst of the Great Depression and unemployment was at an all-time high. There was racial tension and riots in the early 1940s, and most significantly, the most violent war every fought (WWII) was going on in both Europe and the Pacific as the fledgling fellowship was in its infancy stages.

Like many of us today, the members of those days all had their own ideas, viewpoints and opinions about the events of their time just as we do ours. Some supported war in Europe... others did not. Some supported President Roosevelt's approach to diplomacy while others wanted a more aggressive approach. These differences of opinion and viewpoints were seen in AA just as they were in the world at large. In fact, Bill would later reflect in the forward to the second edition, "Would there be schisms which would split AA apart? Soon AA was beset by these very problems on every side and in every group."

If any of the events of the late 1930s and early 1940s sound eerily familiar to what we are facing in the world today, then let's dig a little further. The early members of AA represented a fair cross section of the country. As the Big Book says, "All sections of this country and many of its occupations are represented, as well as many political, economic, social and religious backgrounds" (pg17). He goes on to make a most remarkable statement: "We are people who normally would not mix. BUT there exists among us a fellowship, a friendliness and an understanding which is indescribably wonderful." (Emp. added)

Bill points out that despite the differences in political beliefs, backgrounds, or religious ideology, and the fact that under normal circumstances they would not mix, that somehow they were able to lay all of that aside and work and coexist together for the common good of the fellowship and each other. I know what some of you are thinking: "What an order... I can't go through with it!"

What was their secret? With so much going on in the world at that time how could a group of newly sober drunks find a way to live with and work together? How would they survive and function effectively when they had such differing ideas and viewpoints? It is at this point that I am reminded of the great guiding principle, or "Code" of AA. There is only one...

They could have selected another, but the one they chose to represent what AA would stand for was this: "**Love and tolerance of others.**" Love is affection, care and concern for others, and tolerance is defined as "a respect and concern for ideas, beliefs, opinions and practices that differ from one's own." And this is the great commission of AA.

While there are many similarities between us and the early members of AA, there are also important differences. The world we live, work, and exist in is very different in many ways. So too is the fellowship we enjoy.

In those early days there were only a handful of alcoholics scattered across the country with 3 main groups (Akron, Cleveland, New York). Today AA is in every city in the US and more than 150 foreign countries. There have been advancements in medicine and social causes. We can communicate as never before via the internet and social media. Like all things, these advancements if properly and responsibly used can enable us to serve and help others as never before. On the other hand, we live in unprecedented times with a global health crisis, racial injustice and tension and a political

climate that has become so polarized that it seems there is an ever shrinking "common ground" in the middle.

With all that is going on in the world today and the controversy and division it has created, the questions I have asked myself recently are: How well do I apply love and tolerance of others in my life in a real meaningful way? How well do I show concern and respect for the opinions and beliefs of those who see things differently than I do? Am I doing this both inside and outside of AA? Since I am called to "practice these principles in all my affairs," do I do this with my friends? My family? Other members of AA? And what about on social media?

"Everywhere he sees people filled with anger and fear, society breaking up into warring fragments. Each fragment says to the others, "We are right and you are wrong." Every such pressure group, if it is strong enough, self-righteously imposes its will upon the rest. And everywhere the same thing is being done on an individual basis. The sum of all this mighty effort is less peace and brotherhood than before." (Twelve Steps & Twelve Traditions pg. 37)

I spent many years in conflict with people around me. At the time, I thought I was applying the principles in all my affairs. In fact, I would swear to it! And as long as you agreed with my opinions and viewpoints about AA, God, and current affairs, we were fine! Without realizing it my message to everyone around me was clear: "Do as I do...Believe as I believe... or be prepared!"

Even if we could agree on most things if I could find one or two points that we didn't agree on I would unconsciously use that as a basis for contention or argument. I would then climb up upon my throne of judgment and launch into a diatribe about what I viewed as the "right perspective" on things. Then set out to convince you why my thinking was correct and yours was faulty. Unfortunately, I spent a long time letting the 10% we didn't agree on detract from the 90% we did agree on. In retrospect, my inferred message was always the same: "I am right and you are wrong." Or even worse: "I am the enlightened one and you are clearly not!"

As you can imagine this approach did not endear me to the people around me and, in many cases, the cost of my inability or unwillingness to apply the principles love and tolerance to other people's ideas and viewpoints was losing valuable friendships, or at best, having strained relations with family and friends. I would like to say I learned the lesson quickly... but I did not. It was only after seeing this same pattern happen over and over again that I was finally able summon the willingness to change my approach, which in my case meant applying the 12th Tradition correctly and putting THESE principles before MY personality rather than before yours. And applying the action steps to the problem so I could uncover, discover and discard things in myself that were simply not working and causing conflict with others.

Through this painful process, I began to see that the only people I could live and coexist with were people who thought and believed exactly as I did on any number of subjects. The unfortunate reality was that some people agreed with me on some things and not on others, and some people

didn't agree with me at all! Then I realized that if I could only get along with and coexist with people that thought, felt and believed exactly as I did then it would be limiting me to an extremely small pool of people... or none at all. And that the end result of my intolerance, antagonism and needing to be right would find me once again isolated and disconnected from those around me because I would effectually alienate them from me and my life. In the end, I would be right... and alone.

Thankfully, AA literature as well as other spiritual books offer us insight on this dilemma and a possible solution. Page 19 of the Big Book (quoted above) tells us that showing tolerance and respect for other people's viewpoints and opinions (which may be different from mine) actually make me more useful.

Why? Because no one likes to be told anything by someone who "knows it all" so I start by giving the respect I want in return. If I want others to hear my point of view, then I need to start by being willing to listen to those who think and believe differently than I do. The text also infers is that if I don't apply love and tolerance it actually diminishes my usefulness to others because It creates animosity, hurt feelings, and a desire to retaliate.

On page 118 of the Big Book, Bill gives us another great principle to apply: "Live and let live is the rule." There aren't many "rules" in the AA (alcoholics hate rules), but this one is apropos for people like us. The best way I can define "live and let live" would be: I live my life... and I let you live your life... without meeting my standards of what you should do, think or believe. That's it. It's simple.

We may not always agree, but what we learn by applying love and tolerance is that we can "agree to disagree" and we can do so without being disagreeable to each other. We can see things differently without being mean spirited, condescending, or divisive and letting our differences of opinion create hurt feelings, contention, or animosity. Or taken to the extreme, to use our differences to justify judgement, slander, and gossip. This is something the early members believed and practiced that we could probably learn a lesson from today.

The world at large does not have the same kind of motivation that we alcoholics have. As Bill states in the long form of the first tradition, **"AA must continue to live, or most of us will surely die. Hence our common welfare comes first."** There is no greater asset to protect than the unity of AA.

When you weigh the price of leaving controversial issues outside of AA, to the cost of an alcoholic death, then the choice becomes simple. For me, that means I leave my personal opinions on things like religion, politics, and medicine outside of AA. It also means that I try to show love, tolerance, and respect for those views that are different from my own and remain open minded so that my ideas may change as I continue to grow, change, and trudge the road of happy destiny. And it means that I am careful about what I choose to post on social media, seeking to avoid posts that may create animosity or aversion to some, and thus diminish my usefulness to those around me.

For most of us, AA has just always been there. We have always had ample access to meetings, literature, and a local intergroup office. It's natural that we take these things for granted and believe that it will just always be.

Bill himself having seen other great social movements rise and then as quickly disappear, warned against this type of apathy. He would later say that if anything were ever to threaten AA, it would not be forces from outside AA, but rather from within. It's easy to think that this could never happen to AA, but a look at what happened to that Washingtonians just a century ago is proof that even great movements can implode if its membership allows controversial issues to stand in the way of its unity.

As for me, I would not want my opinions or viewpoints (and selfishness) to threaten the unity of AA. The answer for me is love first and tolerance close afterwards.

Each night when I kneel before my Creator, I ask myself: "Was I kind and loving toward all? Did I show patience and humility? Did I carry the vision of Gods will into all my activities? Did I carry Gods light into the world?" And most importantly: "What could I have done better?"

In these moments I often reflect on the words of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that."

I am hopeful in these difficult and troubling times that we in AA can be the lodestar that Bill always envisioned, and that we can be the example to those around us of patience, tolerance, kindness, and love. This to the end that our great blessings may never spoil us; that we shall forever live in thankful contemplation of Him who presides over us all.

In Love & Service,
Rob M.

July 24, 2020

"When an alcoholic applies the Twelve Steps of our recovery program to his personal life, his disintegration stops, and his unification begins. The Power which now holds him together in one piece overcomes those forces which had rent him apart. Exactly the same principle applies to each A.A. group and to Alcoholics Anonymous as a whole. So long as the ties which bind us together prove far stronger than those forces which would divide us if they could, all will be well. We shall be secure as a movement; our essential unity will remain a certainty.

But A.A. unity cannot automatically preserve itself. Like personal recovery, we shall always have to work to maintain it. Here, too, we surely need honesty, humility, open-mindedness,

unselfishness, and, above all—vigilance. So we who are older in A.A. beg you who are newer to ponder carefully the experience we have already had of trying to work and live together. We would like each A.A. to become just as much aware of those disturbing tendencies which endanger us as a whole as he is conscious of those personal defects which threaten his own sobriety and peace of mind. For whole movements have, before now, gone on benders, too!

The future may well depend on how we feel and act about things that are controversial and how we regard our public relations. Our final destiny will almost surely hang upon what we presently decide to do with these danger-fraught issues!

May we never forget that without permanent unity we can offer little lasting relief to those scores of thousands yet to join us in their quest for freedom.

***Excerpts from: AA Tradition How it Developed
Bill W. 1955***