

Little Rules, Mandates & Prohibitions (Tradition 9)

The threat to the spirit of the Ninth Tradition is marked by the gradual accumulation, at various service levels, of little rules, mandates, prohibitions, announcements, and rituals that seem to increase over time. An essentially spiritual movement can eventually become as organized and structured as the military. It doesn't happen on purpose and it doesn't happen overnight. It happens by degrees. It happens over time with sometimes little awareness that it's even happening at all, until it's almost too late.

Indeed, much of the pressure to organize comes from within. In a book dear to the history of our Fellowship, William James, wrote in The Varieties of Religious Experience: "A survey of history shows us that, as a rule, religious geniuses attract disciples, and produce groups of sympathizers. When these groups get strong enough to 'organize' themselves, they become ecclesiastical institutions with corporate ambitions of their own. The spirit of politics and the lust of dogmatic rule are then apt to enter and to contaminate the originally innocent thing..."

While Alcoholics Anonymous has no strictly religious orientation, the seduction of organization, rules, regulation, ritual, and dogma is such that each individual element of it usually appears quite harmless. It may, indeed, feel quite good in the beginning - not unlike alcohol itself.

The founders and early members of any social or spiritual movement enjoy the confidence of their own vision. The next generation enjoys the confidence of at least thinking they know what their predecessors had in mind. However, the third generation - about where we stand now - sometimes becomes fearful to the point of preferring the certainty of rules, regulations, conformity, and dogma to the simplicity of adapting a few basic principles and traditions to the ever-changing demands of staying sober in the world around us.

Such pressure needs to be resisted. Difficult as it may be - contentious, boisterous, problematic in outcome, frequently devoid of "perfect" solutions - our lack of organization is much preferable to its alternative. Paradoxically, in the long run, it is much more enduring, Alcoholics do not react well to rules. The desire to comply with AA's recovery program must come from within or there's a good chance it won't develop at all.

The Ninth Tradition focuses on the difference between the unorganized, part of Alcoholics Anonymous, and the minimally organized part necessary to maintain a service structure. The unorganized part obviously needs to remain. The organized part ought to be no more organized than necessary to do its job. Newcomers and outsiders alike, and occasionally old-timers, too, benefit from knowledge of the distinction.