

Our Vision for A.A.'s Future - Our Responsibility for Long Term Planning

General Sharing Session
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Our co-founders were pragmatists, students of the scientific method: Try something. Test it. Change it. Review it. Test it again. Change It again. Review it again.

As Oliver Wendell Holmes, virtually a contemporary of Bill W. and Dr. Bob, said of the law, "The life of the law has not been logic, it has been experience."

Likewise, the course of our history has not been logic, it has been experience. Our knowledge is not based on revelation. It is not based on authority. It is not even based on immutable collective decree. It is based on experience. It is based on "what works," and as such it is always subject to change.

So too is our basic vision for the future. It is simple. It is primary. It is to carry the message of recovery from alcoholism based on the Twelve Steps to the still suffering alcoholic - and to do so through the efforts of each and every one of our members - because without the opportunity to participate in carrying the message our members will not survive.

I had hoped to find a few brief quotes regarding vision and planning in our literature. However, the vast amount of just such material made selectivity impossible. A few quotations will have to suffice;

In April, 1959, Bill said: "Maybe we have a policy or plan that still looks fine and is apparently doing well. Nevertheless we ought to ponder very carefully what its longtime effect will be. Will today's nearby advantages boomerang into large liabilities for tomorrow? The temptation will almost always be to seize the nearby benefits and quite forget about the harmful precedents or consequences that we may be setting in motion." (pp. 290-291)

And further in November, 1960: "As we contemplate the Traditions we see that they have two main characteristics, and that each of these aspects reinforces the other. The first aspect of the Twelve Traditions is protection; the second aspect is progress. We are first reminded what our Fellowship's temptations really are and by what means we may best deal with them. This is our basis for a continuous moral inventory of our collective behavior -the first step to actively casting aside our road blocks." (p. 316)

A "continuous moral inventory of our collective behavior" is the challenge we face. We know that to grow and prosper, organizations need to look outward - to follow a vision. We know too that excessive introspection and focus on administrative detail often proves counter-productive in the long run.

Sometimes there comes a point in the life of a movement when most of its institutional energy is directed only toward preserving the administrative structure of the organization itself. We are not at such a point, but it may be hard to avoid in the long run. It can be avoided only by a "continuous moral inventory of our collective behavior."

Watch carefully now as I segue neatly from "our" vision to "my" views, which I offer solely as food for thought.

Let me just take a few minutes to talk about my views of the future, on (1) an International basis, (2) a Conference basis, and (3) a fellowship basis, bearing in mind that the object of service in A.A. is not just to get the job done, but to get the job done by working with others. Working with others may not always be the most efficient way to get things done, but for us it is the best way, because the benefit to us, as many of us as possible, is in making the effort to carry the message, whether or not the objective is ever attained.

1. INTERNATIONAL

Surely in an outburst of exuberance, in October of 1960, Bill stated the following regarding travelers and internationalists: They have already planted and nurtured AA all over the world. To them we all exclaim, "May your plantings increase and may your harvests bulge the AA granaries!" (p. 314)

The most exciting growth in A.A. today is occurring abroad. We have all been moved by the sharing of "mountain-top" experiences by those who have participated in, nurtured and fostered that growth. Perhaps we now need to build on the Fellowship's overwhelming interest in our international expansion to broaden the range of "mountain-top" experiences, and the numbers of recovering alcoholics to whom such experiences are available.

We cannot in this area be seen as a deep pocket. Nor project the image that we know best on all issues. Nor appear as expressing in any way an attitude of noblesse oblige. We must proceed with the same humble purpose of looking to each other for help in staying sober.

The Internet has brought us meetings without borders. It has served as a great resource to many. Perhaps it could lead to A.A. group-to-group partnering on an international basis. Not sponsorship, but partnering, so that "mountain-top" experiences are expanded to include the greatest possible number of institutional entities and the greatest possible number of individuals. But such things will happen only if we plan and work to make them happen. One way or another we need to creatively explore ways to use technology to decentralize and broaden service opportunities, rather than permit the reverse to happen by default.

2. CONFERENCE

A. Representation. Maybe we need to look again, difficult and painful as it may be, into whether our Conference is representative of our Fellowship, not just geographically or numerically, but by age and temperament.

B. Corporate Boards: We are now well served by two corporate boards. In the beginning those two separate boards served specific separate functions. AAWS dealt with services and publishing. The Grapevine dealt with the journalistic needs of the fellowship - a felt need for a means of communication that allowed for the free and open expression of views direct and unfiltered by the Board, or by anything else save for the bounds of editorial prudence. By and large the Grapevine's audience was limited to the Fellowship.

There is still a need for editorial independence, but over time some of the other functions of GSO and the Grapevine now over-lap to a considerable degree.

The General Service Office started out with publishing and services, but with its numerous newsletters and the like, it is now well into journalism.

The Grapevine is now beyond Journalism and into Publishing and Services. Moreover, to the extent the Grapevine previously reached primarily only our membership - the Internet, a new technology, has altered considerably its potential audience.

Bill W. argued that the need for two separate corporations was based on (1) a separation of function, (2) a need to avoid a concentration of power and (3) a need for an independent editorial voice. Those arguments are still basically valid. There is still a need, I believe, to maintain two active corporate boards. However, we have reached a point where we need to examine whether we can restore a separation of function (or, more specifically, avoid an overlap of function), and still observe the other two objectives noted above: avoidance of a concentration of power and maintenance of an independent editorial voice.

Rather than address these issues piecemeal, or in a reactive one-off manner, we need to consider the interrelationship of our corporate boards as a whole, and we need to do so at the level of the General Service Board and include the Conference as an Important part of our dialogue.

3. FELLOWSHIP

Let me discuss just briefly a few issues relating to our Fellowship.

- Every time we develop a new recovery pamphlet I believe we say "Welcome" to a whole group of people who might otherwise feel our message was not intended for them, or worse, that they would not in fact be welcome.

Every time we develop a "How to. . ." guideline, or the like, I believe we run the risk of implying that "This is the orthodox and only way to do things." In the process we may discourage innovation, or, worse yet, we may scare off new members from even undertaking important service work by creating the impression that vast training is necessary before the attempt can even be made.

I believe we need to produce more of the former type literature if appropriate, and less of the latter.

- At every Regional Forum I note how eager some of our members are to give us power. How eager some are to reduce service, which should involve as much contact as possible with other recovering alcoholics, to as few computer "key strokes" as possible.

How eager some are to avoid inconvenience in service even if it results in by-passing the service structure completely.

How eager some are to install ritual and orthodoxy even at the expense of setting our upside-down triangle seriously a-wobble.

To put it directly; while service should not be made unnecessarily difficult. it is not supposed to be easy or convenient - it is supposed to be service.

We need to seek a balance. As we would with a spouse, I think we need to constantly remind our members of the consequences of a softer, easier way, rather than strive to cater to every request just because we have the technology to do so.

- While I recognize the benefit of on-line meetings for those who must rely on them, and for whom they truly are a godsend, a web site these days, in itself, is little more than a billboard. It speaks at people, not to them. As our co-founders discovered, speaking at people does not really do the trick. Our Web site and other like activities over the last decade do not appear to have increased our membership, or lessened its average age. Maybe we should reconsider the resources we direct to it, or the assumptions we make about its effectiveness.
- Almost every act has an "unintended" consequence. Yet, often, we give too little thought is given to follow-up testing and assessment, to determine whether anything has, as Bill said, "boomeranged into a large liability for tomorrow." I have witnessed in my time on the board a number of changes in the way we communicate, a number of changes that threaten to by-pass the service structure and tying them more directly to GSO and the Grapevine, each done with the best of intentions and with the hope it would increase our members' ability to carry the message. It is not a question of being for or against technology, it's a question of communication in the largest sense - a question of focus, concentration and effectiveness. However, I think we now need to pause to determine if in the process the cumulative effect of these individual "minor" changes might make, over time, a significant change overall in our Fellowship and its service structure. If we usurp service opportunities - no matter how well intentioned or effective our actions in the short run - we will have ill-served our membership in the long run. We need to constantly review what will inspire our current members, and where our new members will come from.

CONCLUSION

I hope our vision for A.A.'s future includes an A.A. where we devote our considerable collective effort to emphasizing the A.A. group as the fundamental unit of recovery.

I hope our vision for A.A.'s future includes an A.A. where groups still have the right to be wrong.

I hope our vision for A.A.'s future includes an A.A. where service involving actual human contact with other recovering alcoholics remains a matter of emphasis.

I hope our vision for A.A.'s future includes an A.A. where talismanic organizational words like "speed" and "convenience" do not replace the basic service structure and the language of the heart, which often takes a long time and a good deal of effort, both to express and to "hear."

In short, I hope our vision for A.A.'s future includes a willingness to engage in a "continuous moral inventory of our collective behavior," and to include as many of our members as possible in every aspect of that exercise.