

WORLD SERVICE BUSINESS CONFERENCE 2002

Cofounder's Address by Rozanne S.

Good morning, my friends. My name is Rozanne, and I'm a compulsive overeater. Next Sunday, I will have been coming back to OA meetings for forty-two years and four months. That's what I mean by "Keep Coming Back." I've been abstaining from compulsive overeating for fifteen years, six months, and six days. I'm five feet tall, and I'm maintaining a fifty-pound weight loss.

Before I begin, I urge you all to read our history, *Beyond Our Wildest Dreams*. All of the historical information I will give you today is described in detail in the pages of that book. In addition, this speech was written two weeks ago before all the discussion and votes that we've had in the last few days. And, I think it's important to know that except for the historical facts that the opinions I offer are my opinions. They don't reflect the World Service Board of Trustees, they may or may not reflect yours, and I'm not representing OA as a whole when I give my opinions. I think you need to know that these are my opinions as the founder/cofounder of Overeaters Anonymous.

Those of you who attended the Traditions workshop Thursday night will remember that we began with Tradition One, "Our common welfare should come first. Personal recovery depends upon OA unity."

That statement is as true and vital today, this moment, as it was when the members of AA first drafted their version of the Twelve Traditions nearly half a century ago. Yet, as Michael said in his chairman's report for this year's Conference, over the past seven years we have seen a split in our Fellowship. Numerous OA members, groups, and entire service bodies have not only "split" but literally left us. Michael is right. Looking today at the state of Overeaters Anonymous, the "strength that comes from our union of many" seems to be in question.

There is a teaching that comes from ancient spiritual faiths which says, "Sticks in a bundle are unbreakable, but sticks alone can be broken by a child." As human beings, we need to be bundled, and our bundles protect us best if they are bigger than just our family, or a small circle of friends, or one rigid and clique-ish twelve-step group oriented toward a single way of eating.

I am holding up a bundle of sticks wrapped together. As you can see, this bundle is difficult, if not impossible to break apart. You've each been given one stick, the kind we used to play with as children. Pick it up and hold it. It wouldn't take much pressure to break it into splinters or pieces, would it? Now put your stick together with others at your table. Can you see how much stronger your **group** of sticks is? Can you see that, how much more difficult to break apart?

The bundle in my hand represents Overeaters Anonymous as it grew into a cohesive whole by the time of our first National Conference in August 1962. Now I'll pull one stick out of the bundle. This represents Irene B.'s idea for an eating plan free of refined carbohydrates, which she introduced to our newly unified Fellowship in 1963. It was printed on gold paper and called

the “gold sheet.” Irene and her supporters insisted, “This is the only way to eat for everybody!” Fierce arguments began among us immediately.

Here’s the next stick splintering off the original bundle. It represents the Low-Carbohydrate Maintaining Abstinence Sheet, for those who had lost their weight on the gold sheet. In the late 1960s, when the cheapest paper the printer offered was gray, the low-carbohydrate plan became the “gray sheet.” In 1970, Marilyn Moore, a licensed nutritionist in East Los Angeles, California and a supportive OA friend, helped us create a Basic Four food plan, which we printed on orange paper.

Now let’s remove another stick. This represents the Las Flacas Maintainers Group, formed in 1972 in Orange County, California, south of Los Angeles. (Las Flacas is Spanish for “The Thin Ones.”) Next, more sticks splintering off the original, strong bundle of Overeaters Anonymous point to Westminster, OA Plus, OA Minus, and Cambridge. At that time, all of these splinter groups still functioned as special interest OA groups with increasing requirements for participation and a single eating plan for all their members.

By 1977 our common welfare was threatened, our precious unity a victim of fighting factions. In an attempt to heal our wounds, we printed another suggested plan of eating, which became known as the “blue sheet,” because it was printed on blue paper. When that didn’t do the job, the delegates to the 1978 WSBC approved a booklet of eight different food plans called *Dignity of Choice*.

Let’s now remove another stick from our OA bundle, which is getting weaker...really weaker. This stick represents a 1985 attempt in Phoenix, Arizona, USA to bring to their meetings discipline, structure, and many elements of the old gray sheet. These meetings were still under the umbrella of Overeaters Anonymous, and they called themselves OA-HOW. As you know, HOW stands for “Honesty, Open-Mindedness and Willingness.” Our original OA bundle, the one I’m holding up, began to be called “regular OA.”

In an attempt to strengthen OA and re-emphasize our Twelve Steps, the delegates to the 1987 World Service Business Conference debated and approved a policy which resulted in removing food plans from OA meetings and discontinuing the publication of the Conference-approved pamphlet, *Dignity of Choice*.

Seven years later, in 1995, the black clouds moving over OA unleashed a violent storm. One of the founders of the Phoenix, Arizona HOW groups walked out of OA and formed his own organization. Let’s remove the stick for that Fellowship, which is called CEA-HOW. It was incorporated separately. These initials stand for Compulsive Eaters Anonymous-HOW. Soon after, another former OA World Service trustee began FAA, Food Addicts Anonymous. Following that, Graysheeters Anonymous and other twelve-step eating disorder organizations were formed. Now we have several more sticks splintering off from our OA bundle, and the bundle is getting smaller and weaker.

Our own beloved Fellowship is in grave danger of going the way of the Washingtonian Society, organized for alcoholics in the mid-1800s. That society had over 100,000 alcoholics at its peak, yet for a variety of reasons, it collapsed after only a few years. What happened to all those

alcoholics? Did they all drink again? Could this happen to Overeaters Anonymous? Of course it could. The figures in Michael's report show that we are in serious danger of losing Overeaters Anonymous. What would happen to each of us then? Is that what you want? To be alone again...in the dark of night...standing by the cold light of the open refrigerator...eating? It's a terrifying prospect, isn't it?

Within the confines of Overeaters Anonymous, we are not alcoholics, we are not drug addicts, we are not gamblers. While some of us may also suffer from these addictive substances and behaviors, when we declare our OA membership, we are talking about our relationship to food. Unlike alcohol, which we can give up completely, food is necessary to sustain life. Unfortunately, to the practicing compulsive overeater, food is necessary to face life. Therein lies our paradox. In order to be free of both compulsive overeating and compulsive eating behaviors, we must first choose which foods and quantities will start us on the road to sanity and a healthy body weight.

Of course, we all know that an eating plan alone is not enough. That's where the Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions come in. Without them, OA would be just another diet club. An appropriate eating plan for each of us is just the first step along our road of happy destiny. But it is implied in the first half of our OA Step One, "We are powerless over food." I want to emphasize that on this subject I haven't always felt the way I've felt today.

I remember how upset I was when *Dignity of Choice* was approved by the delegates in 1977. Twenty-four years ago, I believed OA should not endorse any food plans, that our recovery lay only in the Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions. Over the years I came to realize that we have a three-part illness and that we must pay attention to the physical as well as to the emotional and spiritual elements in order to learn a new way of eating.

Today, after considerable thought and prayer, as well as extensive discussions with long-time OA members, I am making this suggestion: **Let's bring back the original *Dignity of Choice* with the food plans nutritionally updated.** Nothing in life is permanent. Let's try it for a year and see if it helps us! There are eight different plans of eating in this booklet, as well as lists of foods in various categories such as fruits, vegetables, etc. This pamphlet will offer the newcomer some initial guidance at his or her first meeting. It might even refresh the old timers' memories as well. It's a very simple, very clear pamphlet. No two bodies are alike, so the specific kinds and portions of foods needed for healthy nourishment will vary from person to person. They may also change for me and for you during different stages of our lives. What I could eat when I started OA at 30, I can't eat anymore because I'm 72.

Reinstating our pamphlet may also shine a brighter light on OA's definition of abstinence, a word that comes from the Greek and means "to stay away from." In OA the word "abstinence" does **not** indicate an eating plan. It means simply, "staying away from compulsive eating." The aim of abstinence is not only to attain a healthy body but also to achieve a brand new way of life by practicing the Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions. Underlying everything, of course, is surrender to a Higher Power as expressed in Step Three.

Bill W., AA's cofounder, states in the AA "Big Book," "Here are the Steps which are **suggested** as a program of recovery." Remember OA's Tradition Three: "The only requirement for OA membership is a desire to stop eating compulsively." That's what sets OA apart. We have no other requirements for membership or participation in our meetings. That's what the title, *Dignity of Choice*, offers all of us...the opportunity to respect an individual's choice of an eating plan, a healthy body weight and a Higher Power.

It's exciting to know that OA, no matter what its failures in the past, and in times to come for that matter...that OA can be a place where people can come together and where no one gets left behind...no one gets left behind!

Tradition Ten states, "Overeaters Anonymous has no opinion on outside issues; hence the OA name ought never be drawn into public controversy." Within the framework of this discussion today, I'm referring to non-OA eating disorder groups and organizations. Stop whispering about them, snickering about their different approaches, fighting about whose method is more effective. Respect their humanity and leave them alone!

Bill W., AA's cofounder, always said, "Shoemaker, stick to thy last." Therefore, we in OA must turn our attention toward ourselves and our faltering Fellowship. It has been said that adversity introduces us to ourselves. What kind of person will we find as we look within? Can we give up trying to be always right and give others a chance to contribute?

At this moment OA is at a crossroads. What path should we take to reinforce our recovery program and reinvigorate Overeaters Anonymous? The *Dignity of Choice* pamphlet is a small start. Let's try it for a year and see if it helps us. Let's also remember Bill W.'s urging, "Love and tolerance is our code." He also emphasized, "The essence of our program is sacrifice." Submergence of the ego for the good of the group.

Remember what I asked you earlier about being all alone again? In the dark of night...standing in the cold light of the refrigerator...eating? Let's not forget bathroom bulimia, groveling in garbage cans, stealing food from stores and all those other sad eating disorder behaviors. Do we really want to return to all that?

We don't have to take that unhappy path. If we **really** want OA to survive and flourish, we have a lot of work to do, both individually and bundled together. Maybe your group needs to change its format, add more structure to your meeting, put more emphasis on sponsorship, call newcomers and those who have drifted away. Maybe you have to face your own gluttony, both in food and by insisting on getting your own way. Don't fight abstinence or keeping track of your food intake or reaching and maintaining a healthy body weight. Embrace these actions instead. Compromise, sacrifice...submerge your own ego for the good of the group and all of Overeaters Anonymous. Do it for yourself, for your own recovery. Apathy abounds in OA. Let this be the time, the moment, the year, when you raise your hand to volunteer. You'll find that service will save your life.

There really is hope for OA, but it's up to you and me to make that hope a reality! With the help of our Higher Power, let's transform ourselves and OA this day, this year. Let's put an end to

hurtful behaviors toward ourselves and other people in our lives. With the Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions as our foundation, let's begin today. Let's honor each other and respect our individual choices of eating plans. Let's value all opinions in group and board meetings, **knowing that there is no one right way to do anything!**

Surely we can do it again as we did in the beginning when our eyes looked toward the heavens for help...and now, as we reach inward toward our souls, as we reach outward toward each other, and with our outstretched fingers...touch the face of God.