

2006 World Service Business Conference

Border Guards: Tradition Four Issues

Workshop Summary

The purpose of the workshop: “To provide members with an opportunity to discuss what issues affect other groups or OA as a whole as opposed to being a group issue.”

A favorite saying in Overeaters Anonymous is “There are no musts in this program.” As individuals we are responsible for ourselves and free to work (or not work) the Twelve-Step program however we wish. The same principle holds true for OA groups. Tradition Four—the Tradition of autonomy—gives OA groups the right and responsibility to operate as they see fit, free from any outside influence. Autonomy means that OA groups can have no affiliations other than with OA. It also means that no other group or service body—even inside OA—can dictate group action. There is only one limit to group autonomy in Tradition four: Groups should not do anything that will injure other OA groups or OA as a whole. (OA 12 & 12, p.137)

Di C. talked about how this Tradition came to be developed by the early AAs. She emphasized how the early AAs came to see that every group had a right to be wrong and that allowing groups the right to be wrong came to be seen as a great service to the AA fellowship. Di asked two questions:

1. Do we allow groups to be wrong?
2. Do we allow groups to make their own mistakes and learn from their own experience?

Teresa K. discussed the article in Second Quarter 2006 *A Step Ahead* titled “The Balanced Application of Tradition Four Throughout OA.” [The complete article follows]. The article was provided as a handout to the workshop attendees.

Charles A. and Marilyn A. shared some Tradition 4 experiences from their local OA communities. There were stories about newcomers’ meetings before a regular OA meeting that closed the door, and people were not allowed in once the meeting started. This meeting has up to 60 attendees and has been going on for seven years. There were stories of OA meetings that did not abide by the Traditions that eventually closed down. It was stressed that the Traditions are not rules, but distilled experiences that guide our Fellowship.

The workshop leaders then presented two propositions and the attendees were invited to come to the front of the room and share. A scribe captured all of the sharing and they are presented here:

Proposition 1: Share some examples where a group has been justifiably autonomous.

Attendees' responses:

- a. Cross talk redefined to include interruption for unsuitable language.
- b. Special interest groups okay if all OAs are included.
- c. Food allowed in meeting.
- d. Silent meeting – no attendance caused dissolution [of the meeting].
- e. Gender neutralization in introduction readings for meeting.
- f. Tools archaic – abstinence instead of food plan [used in the tools reading].
- g. Partial meditation meeting.
- h. Read only 12 Steps and not other readings such as “Our Invitation to You.”
- i. Dog-friendly meeting.
- j. Use of “Lord’s Prayer” as the closing prayer [unless anyone objects].
- k. Telephone, on-line meetings.
- l. Walking meeting.
- m. Meeting with children or without children.
- n. Calendar of restaurants for after-meeting meeting.
- o. Step meeting – each Step from different literature, some not OA approved.

Proposition 2: How can you help a group find a balanced approach to autonomy?

Attendees' responses:

- a. Discussion of issues and concerns and come up with solutions in a group conscience meeting.
- b. WSO literature and formats.
- c. Stronger unity as groups begin to look deeply at what being a part of OA means.
- d. Informed group conscience – Traditions meetings, use of old-timers' experience, etc.
- e. One-on-one discussions resolving Tradition breaks and educating each other.
- f. Abstinence requirements.
- g. Group inventories.
- h. Service and Traditions Workshop.
- i. Read “Beyond Our Wildest Dreams” [and learn from the experiences of OA from the beginning of the Fellowship].

The Balanced Application of Tradition Four Throughout OA

(From A Step Ahead, Second Quarter, 2006)

***Tradition Four: Each group should be autonomous
except in matters affecting other groups or OA as a whole.***

When I came to OA, I initially focused on the Steps. Considerable time passed before I involved myself in service and looked at the Traditions, and even more time before I considered the application of the Traditions to my recovery.

Members suggested I go to meetings, get a sponsor, work the Steps, give up the food, get a food plan, find a God of my understanding, try and help others, and much more. They emphasized I didn't have to do any of this, but if I wanted to get well, I would be wise to do certain things. In other words, I was autonomous within OA, free to do whatever I liked, make whatever mistakes I liked, but I might want to consider the wisdom in doing what others had done. In time I came to understand my responsibility to behave like a person in recovery and carry the message to others; compulsive eaters and others would judge Overeaters Anonymous by how members conducted themselves and how they reflected the program in action.

A healthy OA group, like a healthy OA member, is one that knows it has the freedom to do whatever it likes. Yet, the group understands its very survival depends on following certain principles, making an effort to study and apply these principles, and being a living example of them in all its affairs. And a healthy longtime member, like a well-established group, knows that sometimes we need to go out there and learn from life's experiences. We must be there for those compulsive eaters who come stumbling back after faltering along the way. The longtimer also understands that while we do our research, OA will not collapse, be it at the individual or group level.

At every service level, the key to Tradition Four is autonomy with responsibility—and Patience.

In May, delegates at the 2006 World Service Business Conference will discuss the meaning of Tradition Four. They will hear perspectives on how far autonomy should go and what really affects other groups or OA as a whole. Some of us would say Tradition Four leaves groups able to do pretty much whatever they like, learning whatever they need to learn in the process. Others would say that much of what we do can have wide impact, and we should be very careful in doing anything without consulting the wider Fellowship. The rest of us believe everything in between.

At the group level, what might affect other groups or OA as a whole? Perhaps very little. Some possibilities are:

- When we are doing PI work or working with institutions, we need to consult other groups.
- If we are setting up a meeting, we probably should make sure we don't have it on a night that will clash with a nearby group.
- When it comes to setting up a telephone line or distributing a local-meetings list, we may want to work with other groups to avoid duplication of service.

But regarding all else, what if we were to ask, "Does this action greatly affect OA as a whole?" (the words of the long form of Tradition Four). As mentioned, autonomy does bring responsibility. We must learn about the Traditions and speak up when we see them being broken. We must always ask, "Will our action hurt anyone? Are we helping the Fellowship as a whole?" But having asked those questions, perhaps we will learn more through tolerance (even of those we believe are breaking Traditions), through openmindedness, and above all, through accepting that there is more than one way to work the program.

AA's cofounder, Bill Wilson, wrote in *AA Comes of Age* (p. 105) that Tradition Four means "alcoholics could try for sobriety in any way they liked. *They could disagree with any or all of A.A.'s principles and still call themselves an A.A. group . . . If . . . they found something better than A.A., or if they were able to improve on our methods, then in all probability we would adopt what they discovered for general use everywhere*" (italics added).

Do we live by this belief in OA? Are we willing to allow groups to disagree with all of our principles and still call themselves an OA group? If a group were to find a way that worked better than what we are doing, would we embrace this new way, knowing it may help someone? Or do we in OA micromanage and overregulate, as some suggest? Have we lost sight of the fundamental faith that AA's early members had, that such liberty would have little risk because our disease itself would ensure that we would conform, or perish. Are we willing to look and see if some of those "mistakes" might even be right, be something we could learn from? Are we ready to welcome, even encourage, new ideas and ways of working the program, knowing they may benefit some; and if they don't, they will not last? Are we ready to believe the Fellowship is strong enough to take the risk?

— *Member of the Board of Trustees*