

# **A Personal Study of The Twelve Traditions**

**from the perspective of a member of  
Overeaters Anonymous**

These essays are not OA-Approved Literature. They represent the interpretation of one member of Overeaters Anonymous. They originated as a Traditions Study for an OA group, and, in the author's opinion, are the absolute equivalent of an OA Traditions Study and should therefore not be thought of as literature.

# Chapter 1:

## Introduction\*

Our Twelve Traditions are read at virtually every OA meeting. Although we may not be able to recite them by heart, we're familiar with their words. Along with the Twelve Steps, they are at the heart of our fellowship. Practicing the Twelve Steps and the Twelve Traditions is a minimum requirement for a group to be identified as an OA group (OA Bylaws Subpart B, Article V, Section 1).

The OA Twelve Traditions are essentially identical to the original AA Twelve Traditions. Of course "Alcoholics Anonymous" and "AA" have been substituted with "Overeaters Anonymous" and "OA." In addition, Tradition Eleven has been updated to include "television, and other public media of communication." But these are the only changes.

This Twelve Traditions Study is based not only on OA's *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* (the OA 12&12), but also on OA-Approved Literature from Alcoholics Anonymous: the *AA Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* (the AA 12&12), *Alcoholics Anonymous* (The Big Book), and *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*. These AA books provide an important background for understanding the Twelve Traditions.

As well, the group conscience of Overeaters Anonymous, expressed through the *World Service Business Conference Policy Manual Summary of Continuing Effect Motions* (the WSBC Policy Manual), provides the most current expression of our fellowship's interpretation and application of the Twelve Traditions.

The Twelve Traditions differ in many ways from the Twelve Steps. The Twelve Steps are taken in order, one after another, build upon each other, and change us from suffering addicts to recovered addicts. The Twelve Traditions, on the other hand, do not flow from one to the next in order, or take us on a journey from one state of mind to another. Taken as a whole, the Traditions all fit together, but the order they are in is less significant than what each one of them stands for.

Bill Wilson, the co-founder of AA and author of most of its major literature, developed the Twelve Traditions in the mid-1940s. They were originally framed in a longer form than we now recite them, and then shortened to the current version. These Long Forms of the Traditions are found in Appendix I to the Big Book, and are also part of OA-Approved

---

\*\*These essays on our Twelve Traditions were written by a long-time OA member who has been active in a service capacity at all levels of OA. It is based on that member's experience within the structure of OA and is respectfully submitted to the OA membership for its consideration.

Copyright © 2024 by Joseph Securities Ltd. The copyright is asserted solely to ensure that the document not be changed. Reproduction rights are granted freely on the following conditions: no changes without permission; sold at cost (except for fundraising by OA groups); no personal attribution of authorship; notation that this is not OA-approved material.

The author believes that even though these essays are not OA-Approved Literature, there are ways by which they can be used in OA meetings. For more information, to download free PDF copies of these essays, and to communicate with the author, please email [info@oabigbook.info](mailto:info@oabigbook.info).

Literature. We will be quoting the AA Long Forms; in some cases they will help us understand the real meaning behind the shorter version we know now.

It is important to remember that the Traditions are *not* rules. If they were, they would be framed as rules. They are traditions—a way of operating, a method of organization, a system of principles. The operative words are “should” or “ought,” not “must” or “shall.” The early history of AA shows that. They are guides, not cut-and-dried rules. They were deliberately written that way. The Tradition One chapter in the AA 12&12 explains this explicitly.

The Twelve Traditions represent the lessons learned by the AA fellowship as it experienced tremendous growth in its first 10 years, as it dealt with issues of anonymity, decision-making, membership, economic stability, and publicity. Building on the spiritual basis established by the Twelve Steps, they are practical guides for moving forward as a fellowship. They are clearly meant to be interpreted in the spirit of the connection with a higher power achieved through working the Twelve Steps. They can only work in that context.

Bill talks in many of his writings about the importance of establishing guidelines rather than creating rules. Tradition Four of the AA 12&12, for example, tells the story of a group that had developed 61 rules and regulations for its governance and then blew up over the controversies created. The person who wrote most of the rules then wrote the famous Rule #62: “Don’t take yourself too damn seriously.”

The whole point of the Twelve Steps is to have us develop from people who want to be in charge of life into people who want to be guided by their deepest values, their higher power. Being guided by our higher power means that we live in the present and accept that the outcome of our decisions is simply not in our hands.

As we study the Traditions we will see that they are to be interpreted liberally, not rigidly, that there is no one right interpretation, that in all things we must rely on the power greater than ourselves which has restored us to sanity.

In this Traditions study we will study the Traditions in the following order:

- ✓ **The Guiding Tradition:**
  - ✓ Tradition *Five* (our primary purpose) is the paramount tradition—why each OA group exists. The contention of this Traditions Study is that every other tradition has to be interpreted with Tradition Five always in mind.
- ✓ **How OA groups fulfill their primary purpose:**
  - ✓ Traditions *One* (need for unity), *Two* (how we reach decisions), *Nine* (we remain unorganized), *Four* (autonomy of each group), *Seven* (self-supporting), *Eight* (non-professional), and *Three* (OA membership).
- ✓ **How OA groups deal with the outside world:**
  - ✓ Traditions *Six* (no endorsement), *Ten* (no opinion on outside issues), and *Eleven* (public relations policy).
- ✓ **The spiritual life of the OA groups:**
  - ✓ Tradition *Twelve* (spiritual principle of anonymity) brings everything full circle.

But even before we start to study the Traditions, let us first look at the essential focus of our fellowship—the Twelve Steps of Overeaters Anonymous.

## Chapter 2:

# How the Twelve Steps inform our understanding of the Twelve Traditions:

Step One describes our basic dilemma—that on our own we cannot control our compulsive eating and compulsive food behaviors. Step Two describes the basic solution we have found—that a power greater than ourselves will give us sanity.

What does that “sanity” consist of? No more and no less than a clear mind that says to us, “Don’t indulge in the foods and the eating behaviors that have caused you so much trouble. They are poison for you, because once you start you won’t be able to stop. So don’t start.”

We must never forget that this is the great miracle that millions of addicts with dozens of addictions, including so many in OA, have been granted. We are not tempted to return to that from which we have abstained.

Compulsive eaters don’t come to our fellowship to heal themselves. They come to our fellowship to deal with their compulsive eating.

When we work the Steps to the best of our ability, we find a power greater than ourselves. In OA, as well as in AA, this power is often referred to as God or Higher Power, but at its basic level it is simply a reconnection with what we most deeply believe in.

When we work the Twelve Steps, therefore, we live in harmony with our deepest values. We are inherently serene. We have had a spiritual awakening. We are now living according to what we deeply believe in, rather than—when we were addicted—living contrary to what we deeply believe in.

This is indeed the guarantee of Step Twelve—that we have “had a spiritual awakening as *the* result of these Steps.” *The*, not *a*. *The* guaranteed result of working the Steps is a spiritual awakening. Step Two explains that this spiritual awakening gives us our sanity. Step One explains why that sanity is essential to overcoming our compulsive eating.

So when Step Twelve says that we try “to carry this message to compulsive overeaters,” the message we have to carry to compulsive overeaters is:

- We used to be addicted compulsive eaters who could not stop returning to behaviors and foods that caused us uncontrollable cravings.
- We abstained from those behaviors and foods and worked the Twelve Steps of Overeaters Anonymous.
- As *the* result of those steps, we have had a spiritual awakening.
- This spiritual awakening has provided us with a power greater than ourselves.
- This power greater than ourselves has given us sanity over our compulsive eating.
- This sanity is such that we are no longer tempted to return to what we have abstained from.

Step Twelve is as vital for us as all the other Steps. We *must* carry this message to those who still suffer. If we don’t, we run the great probability that we will return to our compulsive eating. The Twelve Steps may be “suggested” as a path to recovery, but they are a whole program of recovery, and we can’t pick and choose from among them. They are all or they are nothing.

“Half measures availed us nothing,” says the Big Book. But neither do eleven-twelfths measures. *All* Twelve Steps must be followed if we are to achieve and keep this great recovery of sanity.

There are both practical and spiritual reasons for working Step Twelve. The practical reasons include:

- We constantly remind ourselves of what we used to be like so we don’t forget the despair of living in our addiction.
- We constantly remind ourselves of how grateful we are to those who helped us recover.
- We occupy our time with others rather than dwell in isolation.
- We can transform our difficult history—for some a history of terrible suffering—into a message of hope for others who have suffered.

The spiritual reasons include:

- We are living consistently with our deepest values; we are living a spiritual life.
- The feeling of trying to help others gives us a sense of the best of what we can be.
- We have a purpose for living.

Since Step Twelve is not optional for us, then how do we best do this? How do we do it effectively so that each compulsive eater who still suffers can hear the message of recovery through the Twelve Steps?

The answer is obvious. We do it as part of our fellowship. If we did it alone, searching out one compulsive eater after another, we would find, as the early AAers did, that eventually a group forms that is more efficient and more effective than we as individuals can be, in finding other compulsive eaters and in carrying our individual message of recovery to those compulsive eaters.

So that is why Overeaters Anonymous exists—to help individual members working Step Twelve to carry their individual message of recovery through the Twelve Steps to those who still suffer. Overeaters Anonymous deserves to exist only so long as it provides an effective gathering place for members to carry their message of recovery to those who want to recover.

And that is why our Twelve Traditions Study will start with Tradition Five, which reflects our Step Twelve responsibility: *Each group has but one primary purpose—to carry its message to the compulsive overeater who still suffers.*

## Chapter 3 (Tradition Five):

### Why the group's primary purpose should be at the heart of all the Twelve Traditions:

***Tradition Five:*** Each group has but one primary purpose—to carry its message to the compulsive overeater who still suffers.

*AA Long Form of Tradition Five:* Each Alcoholics Anonymous group ought to be a spiritual entity having but one primary purpose—that of carrying its message to the alcoholic who still suffers. It is well worth remembering the concept of “a spiritual entity” when we think of how, within our groups, we fulfill our primary purpose. Our decisions should be made spiritually.

Each phrase of this Tradition deserves discussion.

#### “Each group:”

This Tradition applies to every single grouping of members of Overeaters Anonymous—whether that is an individual group or an intergroup or a region or the World Service Business Conference, or a meeting of a committee or an ad hoc group of OAers who are planning some sort of event. The purpose of each of those groups is to carry its message to the compulsive eater who still suffers.

#### “Has but one primary purpose:”

*There is only one primary purpose.* Any other purpose is clearly and absolutely secondary. This is discussed in the AA 12&12 as singularity of purpose. We stick to that and don't try to be all things to all people.

That means that although a group might provide unconditional love and hugs to people who come to us in pain, our purpose is not to provide unconditional love and hugs; although a committee might be formed to discuss fund-raising, its purpose is not to raise funds; although a World Service Business Conference might be discussing by-law changes, its purpose is not to change by-laws.

The purpose of every grouping of OAers is to carry our message to those who still suffer. We are therefore not a therapy group, a healing group, a listening group, a hugging group, a fund-raising group, a social group, or even a support group, even though in the course of our work we might provide these conditions. *We must stick to our purpose—to carry our message.*

#### “To carry its message:”

What is our message—the message of each group of Overeaters Anonymous?

It is the same message that we identified in our discussion of Step Twelve:

- We used to be addicted compulsive eaters who could not stop returning to behaviors and foods that caused us uncontrollable cravings.
- We abstained from those behaviors and foods and worked the Twelve Steps of Overeaters Anonymous.
- As *the* result of those steps, we have had a spiritual awakening.
- This spiritual awakening has provided us with a power greater than ourselves.
- This power greater than ourselves has given us sanity over our compulsive eating; and
- This sanity is such that we are no longer tempted to return to what we have abstained from.

Tradition Five thus spells out our awesome responsibility as a fellowship. Any time we meet as OA members, we have “but one primary purpose,” one obligation, one responsibility—to carry our message of recovery to those who still suffer from our addiction.

We will come back to our primary purpose when we discuss the other traditions. But briefly, it’s important to point out here that *each of our decisions must be made on the basis of whether what we do will help or hinder carrying the message*, whether those decisions concern the format of our meetings, the spending of our money, or even the method of reaching a decision.

The lives of compulsive eaters who still suffer are on the line! If we don’t make our decisions by focusing on how each decision will help us to carry our message of recovery, then we run the grave risk of undermining our ability to do so. It is the solemn duty of each OA member to consider that issue. That is why each policy motion proposed for the World Service Business Conference must explain “how this motion will help carry the message of recovery to those who still suffer” (Policy 2005c amended 2017).

**“To the compulsive overeater:”**

Even though Tradition Five talks about the “overeater,” the group conscience of OA as found in WSBC Policy 1991c, amended 2018, says: “The terms ‘compulsive overeater, compulsive eater’ and ‘compulsive eating, compulsive overeating’ be used interchangeably in OA literature, as determined to be appropriate to the topic and context by the Literature Committee during the regular literature writing, editing, and approval process.”

So we will use the term “compulsive eater” in order to include both compulsive over- and under-eaters, since we are an umbrella fellowship that welcomes anyone with an eating addiction. We will discuss this in more detail when we get to Tradition Three.

**“Who still suffers:”**

The most important person in the room of every OA group, therefore, is the compulsive eater who is still suffering, whether a newcomer or a long-time person who has not yet achieved the recovery promised by the Twelve Steps. *Our groups exist for them so that they can hear the message of recovery that we have to offer.*

It is too easy to forget this in the comfort of an OA meeting, too easy to talk to those we feel comfortable talking to about things we feel comfortable talking about. OA meetings are wonderful opportunities to be with friends, to get out of our isolation, to feel understood, to feel good about ourselves. And we can often feel shy or fearful of speaking to someone we don’t know, of getting involved in someone else’s life.

The OA meeting is, for most suffering compulsive eaters, the first contact they have with the hope of recovery. They *must* hear that hope in each meeting they go to. They *must* know that the Twelve Steps—not the meeting, not the Traditions, not reading or writing or anonymity or a particular food plan, but only the Twelve Steps—constitute the path to recovery from their addiction. They *must* hear that from the meeting itself. Everything we do or don't do in our meetings influences their understanding of our message.

So if we don't treat them as the most important people in the room; if we don't make certain that someone is available to talk to them after the meeting; if we don't take the time during the meeting to acknowledge their presence and our need to carry our message to them; if we don't do these things, we are failing to fulfill our primary purpose.

All this is why this Tradition takes priority over all other Traditions. We will discuss this further as we study the rest of the Traditions.

## Chapter 4 (Tradition One):

### Why carrying the message means that the common welfare of OA is a priority for the group.

***Tradition One:*** Our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends upon OA unity.

**AA Long Form:** *Each member of Alcoholics Anonymous is but a small part of a great whole. A.A. must continue to live or most of us will surely die. Hence our common welfare comes first. But individual welfare follows close afterward.*

*Our common welfare is based on carrying our message of recovery:*

In order to continue our recovery, we need to work Steps Ten through Twelve. In order to fulfill our Step Twelve responsibilities we need a continuous supply of compulsive eaters who still suffer.

We could do what is suggested in the chapter *Working with Others* in the Big Book, where a few pages are devoted to finding an individual who suffers from alcoholism through contact with hospitals, doctors, ministers, psychologists, and how to speak to the family to prepare that person for speaking with you.

But how much simpler and more efficient it is to have an OA meeting which people can attend to hear the OA message of recovery through the Twelve Steps! We can find and help so many more people when, as recovered compulsive eaters, we work together in groups.

More than that, we can carry our message in so many creative ways. Not only can we find an individual to carry our message to; but we can also carry our message during a meeting, through events organized by our group or intergroup, through getting publicity for OA in our local area. We can help many more compulsive eaters who still suffer. The opportunities expand when we work within our groups.

So all our various kinds of OA groups provide us with the opportunity to fulfill our individual Step Twelve responsibilities.

Will OA continue to exist? Well, the answer is simple: so long as OA continues to fulfill its primary purpose, it will thrive, because its existence will depend on people whose very sanity depends in turn on carrying their message to the suffering compulsive eater.

For those of us compulsive eaters who have found the miracle of recovery through the Twelve Steps, the continued existence of OA as a means of carrying the message of that miracle is absolutely essential.

If we do not act in unity then we end up at spiritual cross-purposes. If OA as a whole, or individual OA groups in particular, stray from our primary purpose, then we have disunity, we have spiritual confusion, and we run the great risk—really the high probability—of losing our individual miracle of recovery.

*Unity takes different forms:*

There are different kinds of unity.

**Unity of purpose:** We lose our focus as individuals if our meetings do not present a sense of their purpose—to carry the message of recovery to those who still suffer. We have discussed this at greater length in our previous discussion of Tradition Five.

**Unity of action:** Although each one of us may have different ways of carrying our individual message, our group must act in unity on our group purpose, and to be united in that action. How we make decisions is as important as the decisions we make. We will discuss this in great detail in our discussion of Tradition Two in the next chapter.

*And finally, Unity within diversity:*

The Big Book says that we are people who would not normally meet, and how true that is. So unity includes not only accepting, but really celebrating, those differences among us.

We are all unique individuals, with very different histories and backgrounds and languages and reading levels and genders; and what resonates with one person may not resonate with another.

We may each have different behaviors or foods we have to abstain from. Not everyone has to abstain from what someone else must abstain from. In every OA room there are people who can indulge in what other people cannot indulge in, and vice versa.

Other Twelve-Step fellowships may be single-focus fellowships, where members all abstain from the same substance (alcohol, cocaine) or the same behaviors (gambling, co-dependency). This is also true for other eating addiction Twelve Step fellowships, who have reached consensus on what their members must abstain from, or how to work the Steps. Our fellowship, however, is different.

*Overeaters Anonymous includes all persons who suffer a spectrum of eating addictions:*

Overeaters Anonymous, however, spans a huge spectrum of eating behaviors (purging, restricting, volume addiction, night grazing), single substances (sugar, fat, flour, specific foods like ice cream or pizza), combinations of ingredients, and specific foods.

The group conscience of OA, as expressed in our literature, is that we have no right to tell anyone else what they must abstain from. They must work that out for themselves. We must celebrate those differences in order to include the suffering compulsive eaters whose addictions manifest themselves in so many ways.

And we have had different ways of working the Twelve Steps to recovery. Some are Big Book, or OA 12&12, or Back to Basics, or HOW, or 90-days, or . . . .

How we work the Twelve Steps, however, is less important than some basic facts about ourselves—again, that Tradition Five message of recovery through the Twelve Steps.

A group that says there is only one way of doing anything risks the grave danger of excluding a suffering compulsive eater, and thus acting contrary to its primary purpose. Obviously meetings can and will focus on specific ways of working the Steps. What can be dangerous, however, is to have that meeting assert that its specific way of working the Steps is the **ONLY** way the Steps should be worked.

In her book for and about OA, *Beyond Our Wildest Dreams*, our founder, Rozanne, details the many factions that have existed within OA since its beginning. People can be very passionate about their own recovery, and think that everyone else should recover the way they recovered, whether it's through a particular Plan of Eating or a particular way of working the Steps or a particular way of structuring meetings. Their passion can give rise to meetings that are dedicated to particular ways of recovery and that exclude, either by implication or sometimes by clear statement, other ways of recovering.

In addition, although that same passion might give a group a sense of unity, it can easily create disunity within an intergroup and within OA as a whole. Yet our existence depends upon unity within OA as a whole.

We must learn not to project our own recovery onto other people. What we might have to abstain from might not be what others have to abstain from. The method by which we recovered might not be what others need to recover.

So unity is all about acceptance, humility, and care for others—the essence of the Twelve Steps. If we are to carry our message of recovery to those who still suffer, we must live that recovery in all our affairs, including our meetings.

## Chapter 5 (Tradition Two):

### **Tradition Two tells our groups how to make decisions, and where true authority derives.**

***Tradition Two:*** For our group purpose there is but one ultimate authority—a loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience. Our leaders are but trusted servants; they do not govern.

***AA Long Form:*** For our group purpose there is but one ultimate authority—a Loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience. The only change is the addition of the second sentence, and that sentence is best discussed under Tradition Nine, in the chapter following.

*Tradition Five is at the heart of Tradition Two:*

OA groups meet for all kinds of reasons:

- ✓ To approve budgets.
- ✓ To discuss policy motions or by-law amendments.
- ✓ To decide whether to allow foods to be mentioned at meetings.
- ✓ To decide the format of our meetings.
- ✓ To develop plans for the coming year.

Sometimes our discussions can get quite heated. Anyone who has ever attended a World Service Business Conference can attest to that.

It is all too easy to get involved in the passion of the moment. Tradition Five, however, always has to be kept in mind. Will our decision help or hinder OA's ability to carry the message of recovery through the Twelve Steps to those who still suffer? This is the essential question, not the wording of a motion, not the specifics of an issue, but whether we are truly fulfilling our primary purpose.

We sometimes forget this in our meetings. We get so involved in issues that we lose our direction. We sometimes argue heatedly about what we should do by simply expressing our opinions on what we as individuals think is right; or we make our decisions based on our respect for individuals who put forward certain positions; or we make our decisions based on not wanting to be different from others.

*What group conscience really means:*

Opinions are important, but they are not what Tradition Two is about. Tradition Two is all about a search to find a *group* conscience, a sense of what the *group* thinks is best. Our own opinions are just part of that search. Trying to persuade others of the rightness of our opinions can in fact deter the ability of the group to find its true group conscience,

Too often the more forceful speakers among us sway the opinions of those who don't feel comfortable speaking their opinions or concerns. Many of us are people-pleasers. Many of us generally feel isolated, look to our OA group as our "family," and don't want to feel as if we are differing from the majority of people. Many of us haven't been taught to express our opinions articulately, or with conviction. We worry about what others might think. We tend to go along with others.

But the essence of Tradition Two is that, as Bill Wilson expressed it, the lone dissenting voice in a meeting might be the voice of God.

Those of us who speak with certainty ought to be encouraging others to speak, even with uncertainty, because we may be hearing the most important words about the issues we are dealing with.

People who have difficulty expressing themselves ought to be encouraged and helped to express their feelings, because they may be the true voice of the group conscience.

As a matter of fact, we ought to listen more to the "hesitant" rather than to the positive or negative. They are the ones who might have concerns that could go beyond one side or the other, and help us arrive at transformational ideas that others have not thought of.

#### *Substantial Unanimity:*

In 1955 AA adopted a Charter which basically created the structure of the fellowship. Within this Charter were six ideas. These ideas were later incorporated into Concept Twelve of the Twelve Concepts of AA, adopted in 1962. (The history of all of this can be found in the AA publications, *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age* and the *General Service Manual and Twelve Concepts of World Service*, both OA-Approved literature.)

Although some of our Twelve Concepts differ from AA's Twelve Concepts because our structures differ, the six ideas originally adopted in 1955, and then incorporated into Concept Twelve of the AA Twelve Concepts in 1962, are exactly the same as OA's Twelfth Concept.

Concept 12(d), the fourth idea, reads: *The spiritual foundation for OA service ensures that . . . all important decisions shall be reached by discussion, vote and, whenever possible, by substantial unanimity.*

*Substantial unanimity.* Is that how many of our groups, including our World Service Business Conference (WSBC), make our decisions?

#### *How a decision-making process can stand in the way of group conscience:*

Instead of working out ways to develop consensus, many of our service structures, including the WSBC, use *Robert's Rules of Order*, a complicated method of decision-making (based on an over 800-page book) which was designed to help large groups make decisions on controversial issues. Robert's was not designed for spiritual fellowships to reach a group conscience based on the ultimate authority of our higher powers working together.

The use of Robert's often requires hiring a professional parliamentarian to help the chair of a meeting decide what's in order, what's not in order, and what order the in-order issues should be decided on.

WSBC not only has a professional parliamentarian, but it also has a Robert's-trained Center Microphone position to act as a filter for people who want to raise issues, and a Reference Committee whose job is to take controversial motions and try to find some agreement. New delegates are asked to attend a lengthy training session so they can understand the rudiments of Robert's and the complicated way that decisions are made at the WSBC.

At our WSBC, people who want to speak on a motion have to speak on either a "Pro" or a "Con" microphone, and speakers on motions are limited in both time and numbers. Since many motions elicit high passion, often many more people want to speak on a motion than is allowed, so they have their own discussions next to the Pro or Con microphone as to who will speak and what that person will say. The people having those discussions cannot often physically hear the people speaking for or against the motion. They are too busy deciding what they will say.

How can people learn from each other in such a situation? How can they develop substantial unanimity?

And remember that the whole point of the Pro and Con speakers is to convince those who are NOT taking part in the debate to vote their way, not to develop a group conscience through substantial unanimity.

Those people who might think that the Pro and Con speakers are maybe both wrong OR maybe both right, that the discussion has not concentrated on our primary purpose as expressed in Tradition Five, or that something else should and could be considered, don't really have an opportunity (other than using points of order and points of personal privilege and amendments) to have everyone come together to find a more spiritual approach. There is no room for transformational ideas that could spur the group on to fulfill its primary purpose.

This is not a spiritual environment. Where is the Loving God as He may express himself in our group conscience? Where is the substantial unanimity?

With respect, OA's primary method of reaching decisions does not encourage the ideals behind Tradition Two and Concept 12(d). There ought to be a complete re-examination of how we develop our group conscience, especially at the WSBC level.

*Humility and tolerance are at the heart of substantial unanimity:*

There are many ways of developing substantial unanimity, and Bill discusses some of these in *The General Service Manual and Twelve Concepts of World Service*. OA also has a Guideline and sample format for group conscience for small OA meetings.

At the heart of all these ways, however, is an essential trust in the spiritual status of those who participate in the decision-making. It is assumed that Tradition Five is paramount in the minds of those who are making the decision, and Tradition Five, as we have discussed, is the direct consequence of living in Step Twelve.

Newcomers and those in relapse or who are not yet living in recovery have much to contribute to a discussion, because they can provide their personal experience of what message might work for them. Their voice must be heard, because they are searching for a spiritual awakening, and can provide their own experience as to what might work or might not work in having the message of recovery carried to them.

Ultimately, however, the assumption behind the Traditions is that *any decision-making will be dealt with by persons who have had a spiritual awakening as the result of the Steps*. They are the people who have been given the sanity promised by Step Two and who are connected to their higher power. They are the people who can, and must, carry the message of recovery to those who still suffer.

## Chapter 6 (Tradition Nine):

### Why our groups should not be structured but can delegate responsibilities.

**Tradition Nine: OA, as such, ought never be organized; but we may create service boards or committees directly responsible to those they serve.**

*AA Long Form: Each A.A. group needs the least possible organization. Rotating leadership is the best. The small group may elect its secretary, the large group its rotating committee, and the groups of a large metropolitan area their central or intergroup committee, which often employs a full-time secretary. The trustees of the General Service Board are, in effect, our A.A. General Service Committee. They are the custodians of our A.A. Tradition and the receivers of voluntary A.A. contributions by which we maintain our A.A. General Service Office at New York. They are authorized by the groups to handle our over-all public relations and they guarantee the integrity of our principal newspaper, the A.A. Grapevine. All such representatives are to be guided in the spirit of service, for true leaders in A.A. are but trusted and experienced servants of the whole. They derive no real authority from their titles; they do not govern. Universal respect is the key to their usefulness.*

*The spiritual basis of Tradition Nine:*

Tradition Nine flows from the spiritual importance of Traditions Five and Two. The ultimate authority of an OA group is a loving God expressed through a group of spiritually-minded persons whose purpose in gathering together is to carry a message of recovery through the Twelve Steps to the compulsive eater who still suffers.

Given that, there is and can be no other authority over anyone. Each one of us, and each group, is subject only to the authority of our higher power.

In so many cases, however, we need to delegate responsibility to others, individually or collectively, in order to fulfill our primary purpose of carrying our message of recovery to those who still suffer.

*The picture of our service structure:*

We can look at the formation of our service structure in this way. It's not chronologically accurate, since OA adapted the structures of its parent (Gamblers Anonymous) and grandparent (Alcoholics Anonymous) at an early stage in its development. But the *idea* behind Tradition Nine is this:

- One person recovers and Step Twelve requires them to carry their message of recovery through the Twelve Steps to the compulsive eater who still suffers. That person helps other people recover.
- Those recovered persons come together to form an OA group which will attract compulsive eaters who still suffer and help those recovered persons to carry their message to others more effectively and efficiently.

- More OA groups are formed, and they come together to form an intergroup or service body to help them to fulfill their primary purpose of carrying their message of recover through the Twelve Steps to those who still suffer. These groups affiliate themselves according to how they think their message can be best conveyed to the still-suffering compulsive eater; usually it's geography (a city, an area, a country), language, occasionally a specific approach to working the Steps, most recently the method of meeting (virtual).
- A number of intergroups/service bodies who see commonality and effectiveness affiliate with each other into a region or national or language service body in order to help all those groups carry their message of recovery through the Twelve Steps to those who still suffer.
- All those regions or national or language service bodies create a World Service Office that can pool all their resources to help the compulsive eater who still suffers. The World Service Office does this by providing the forum through the World Service Business Conference for approving literature, helping the suffering compulsive eater to find meetings that will help carry the message of recovery, and providing helpful guidelines for carrying the message.

That is the structure envisioned by Tradition Nine, especially the original Long Form. The actual “work” of carrying the message of recovery to those who still suffer is done by individuals, as always, in their Step Twelve work. Those individuals usually meet those who still suffer through the meetings they attend. *The whole large structure of OA therefore exists simply to help individuals carry their message!*

*No authority, no ability to govern:*

The Long Form makes clear that any representatives of OA groups—whether they are group representatives to intergroup, intergroup representatives to regional or language service boards, or delegates to World Service Business Conference—have no authority and cannot govern. The concept of no authority is now found in Tradition Two, but for our purposes it is best discussed here, in dealing with Tradition Nine.

In the chapter on Tradition Nine in the AA 12&12, Bill writes about how carefully the AA headquarters had to craft opinion letters when asked, because they “found they could do no more than make suggestions, and very mild ones at that.” They would provide the experience they had, but would always say “Of course, you are at perfect liberty to handle this matter any way you please.” This is spiritual humility at its best.

Bill also points out in this chapter that this does not encourage anarchy for a very simple reason: disunity will result in return to the addiction for those involved in the dispute. The spirituality required for individual members to maintain their recovery can be lost easily if there is discord and disunity. The Traditions are based on trust in a group of people who *know* that:

- if they do not carry the message of recovery to those who still suffer they will return to their addiction;
- working together as a group will help them as individuals to carry the message of recovery to those who still suffer; and
- the unity of the group, therefore, is far more important than their opinions.

Because of this, the lack of authority of anyone in OA over anyone else in OA is essential both to the freedom of the individual, and to the spiritual basis of the group. The more freedom given to a person in recovery, the more desperate that person is to keep spiritually fit. To keep spiritually fit means to continue to rely on a higher power and not on anyone else. This requires, as we have said, humility and tolerance.

*The importance of listening to our representatives:*

Still, the opinion of those who have been delegated responsibilities within OA is important. It is important in two ways.

First, if—and only if—they have been delegated certain authority, they have the duty and right to exercise that authority. This is made clear in our Twelve Concepts; if we delegate responsibilities, then we have to trust in those to whom we delegate those responsibilities. Even then, however, their authority ought to be exercised from a spiritual basis, always with Tradition Five—our primary purpose—in mind.

Second, their opinion is to be respected, although not necessarily agreed with or followed, because they as individuals have received some measure of respect for their spiritual status from others by being elected to their positions, and that means we have the right to expect that they have exhibited recovery and spiritual connection.

*The danger of obeying our representatives:*

OA, like AA, has an image of the inverted triangle, where the individual members and the individual groups are at the top of the OA hierarchy, and the Board of Trustees sits right at the bottom.

OA does not always act consistently with this. Individual OA members and groups often can give far too much authority to our Board of Trustees or Region Trustees or Region Chairs or even Intergroup Chairs on the basis of their position rather than their experience or the reasonableness of what they say. These are people who end up having responsibility, even though they have no authority.

When we act because we think these people have told us what to do (sometimes they've simply made suggestions or given their opinions, but sometimes, no doubt, they *have* told us what to do), we have prevented the creation of a group conscience based on the ultimate authority of a higher power, premised on the need to carry our message of recovery to those who still suffer.

We therefore have to be vigilant to maintain the image of the inverted triangle. We have to remember that no matter what their position, an OA member who has been elected to represent us at any level of OA service should be doing just that—representing us rather than leading us. It is their job not to tell us what to do, but to do their best to understand the true group conscience of the group they represent, as developed through substantial unanimity and consensus.

## Chapter 7 (Tradition Four):

***Group autonomy means exactly what it says; but with autonomy comes responsibility.***

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

**AA Long Form:** *With respect to its own affairs, each A.A. group should be responsible to no other authority than its own conscience. But when its plans concern the welfare of neighboring groups also, those groups ought to be consulted. And no group, regional committee, or individual should ever take any action that might greatly affect A.A. as a whole without conferring with the trustees of the General Service Board. On such issues our common welfare is paramount.*

*The group has the right to make its own decision:*

The Long Form, even more clearly than the form it has now, places the responsibility for deciding what to do *in any situation* squarely into the hands of those who are deciding what to do. A group or an intergroup can make their own decision and cannot be told what they can or can't do. The Long Form points out that if other groups might be affected by the decision of a group or intergroup, then those other groups should be consulted, but not that they must be consulted, and certainly not that they have any power over the first group.

This is consistent with the inverted triangle of representation. At the top of the triangle are the individuals and the groups. They do the actual work of OA—carrying the message of recovery through the Twelve Steps to those who still suffer. Since they do that actual work, they are the ones who have the responsibility to make decisions that affect their ability to do that work.

*What might affect other groups or OA as a whole?:*

Tradition Four tells us that every group that makes any decision should always consider whether the effects of that decision might affect other groups or OA as a whole.

Groups might not recognize decisions, however, that could in fact affect other groups or OA as a whole. This is especially true for groups that are composed of people who happen to share many common characteristics, such as gender, religion, compulsive overeating (as opposed to undereating), similar ways of working the Steps, similar kinds of Plans of Eating.

Such groups can often take for granted that the similarities that they share are common to everyone in OA, and thus present those similarities as part of what OA is to the compulsive eater who still suffers. But the compulsive eater who still suffers may not share such similarities, and may feel that OA in general excludes them because this one particular group has made them feel excluded.

So let's take a brief look at decisions made by groups in their formats or in their general discussions at their meetings which could affect the understanding of OA within the general community:

- *Taking for granted that “God” means a deity that can effect changes in this world; this can easily exclude other religions and atheists and agnostics.*
- *Taking for granted that a particular Plan of Eating is the only appropriate Plan of Eating for everyone; besides being contrary to the explicit opinion of the group conscience of OA as a whole, it also excludes people who have different eating behavior addictions, and/or who have different food addictions.*
- *Taking for granted that compulsive eaters are compulsive overeaters; this can make people who have to eat more in order to achieve a healthy body weight feel excluded.*
- *Taking for granted that there is only one way of working the Steps, sometimes even saying that explicitly; this can make people feel forced to work the Steps in a way that simply does not fit for them.*
- *Taking for granted that the reasons they have used for returning to compulsive eating (such as emotionally-deep trauma) are common to everyone else; this can make people who have not suffered in the same way feel as if they don’t qualify to be in OA.*
- *Not emphasizing the Steps but rather other aspects of our fellowship; this can make the still-suffering compulsive eater look away from what our primary purpose is—to carry the message of recovery from compulsive eating through the Twelve Steps to those who still suffer—and embrace a social life based on attending meetings and talking to people about how they feel, or just using some Tools of Recovery, or having daily phone calls with people.*

So groups should look very carefully at how they conduct their meetings so that the compulsive eater who still suffers feels included, feels that they have options, feels that hope lies in the Steps rather than in the individuals who attend the meeting.

*Ideally the decision-makers ought to be those who are spiritually fit or at least striving to be spiritually fit:*

The assumption behind all the Traditions is that they will be used by people who are bound together by the common mission of helping the compulsive eater who still suffers to recover from their addiction through the Twelve Steps of Overeaters Anonymous. This means that these people are fulfilling their Twelfth Step requirements.

Thus the persons who apply the Traditions should be those who have worked the Steps and have achieved the neutrality in relation to their compulsive eating, that is guaranteed by working the Steps—in other words, persons who have recovered their sanity through a spiritual awakening.

It is only in this context that the autonomy of individual groups can be viewed. Of course, persons who have recovered their sanity through a spiritual awakening would never want to harm OA as a whole, or any other group in OA. Of course, if there is the slightest question as to whether any actions they might talk might affect other groups, such persons would consult with the other groups before taking any action. Of course, as Tradition One has told us, the unity of OA is more important than an individual’s or individual group’s preferences.

*The humility necessary to understand Tradition Four:*

Persons who have recovered their sanity through a spiritual awakening have a built-in humility. They know that their very life and serenity depends upon their connection with their higher power. And they also know that connection depends entirely on continuing to

search for ways in which their defects of character might be re-emerging and making amends for any harm that might have resulted (Step Ten), continuing to search for direction in their lives (Step Eleven), and helping those who still suffer from their addiction to recover through the Twelve Steps (Step Twelve).

There is an inbuilt humility in this. They cannot have absolute confidence in themselves and their own opinions, because they have to place their trust on a power greater than they are, whether that power is a specific kind of deity or simply their deepest values.

Furthermore, they make any group decisions based on careful and humble listening to others, knowing how much they can learn from others, knowing that a group conscience derived through substantial unanimity is more important than their own opinion, no matter how strongly held, always keeping in mind their obligation to uphold the primary purpose of the group—carrying the message of recovery to those who still suffer.

And those who have not yet had a spiritual awakening that has restored them to sanity ought to think carefully about how they participate in the decision-making. Their humility ought to come from their own situation—that they still suffer from their addiction, but are working hard on the Twelve Steps, and that they have a lot to contribute because of their first-hand experience of needing to have the message of recovery carried to them. They have not, however, yet had the opportunity to experience the sanity of a deep connection with their higher power.

So both those who have recovered and those who have not both have good reason to approach any group decision with humility.

*A spiritual life requires that we accept a group's decision:*

Thus Tradition Four exemplifies the trust that we should place on individual group decision-making. A spiritually-derived decision is made with the best of intentions and with humility, always keeping Tradition Five in mind. We can trust this kind of decision—even if it turns out to be wrong. The people who made that decision can and will learn from their errors and their next decision will be even better. After all, that is what we have learned from Steps Four through Nine.

Bill Wilson makes this entirely clear in his writings. Ultimately groups have to learn from their own mistakes, just as individuals we have learned from our own mistakes in working the Steps. In this way the Traditions flow directly from the Steps. Remember that famous Rule 62: “Don’t take yourself too damn seriously!”

*What about a decision made by persons who are not spiritually fit?:*

Of course, there is a concern that a specific group might not be populated by people who have that humility, that it might be dominated by people who are so certain of their opinion that they hold no room in their heart for others’ opinions. Other members of that group might be people-pleasers, introverts, people afraid of voicing their own concerns. So the decisions of a group like that might not be spiritually-derived and might not be focusing on the group’s primary purpose.

Even if we think such a situation exists, however, we still ought to give each group the autonomy set out in Tradition Four. Our journey through Steps Four through Nine has taught us that.

We have no right to judge others' intentions. We might disagree with their actions, but it is not spiritual to judge the intentions of others. We have learned from our own experience that we are spiritually sick and that our best intentions have harmed others. We have learned to treat those who have harmed us or others with tolerance, pity, and patience, because they are spiritually sick (Big Book, page 67).

We have every right to indicate our concerns, to ask them to reconsider, to exercise caution, to look at every angle. Not only do we have that right, if we think the group's decision will affect other groups or OA as a whole, then we have a responsibility to do so, because Tradition Five makes us individually, as well as collectively, responsible for the well-being of those who still suffer from our addiction.

We have learned to learn from our mistakes. We have learned how important it is for our spiritual development to have the opportunity to rectify those mistakes. We have no right to deprive others of that same opportunity.

*Our ultimate authority is not another group of OA members:*

If we are truly spiritual, we trust that living our lives under the care and direction of our higher power is the best that we can do. We can't run other people's shows. Isn't that the point of the Twelve Steps? We can't know what is right for others. And we can't afford to run the show.

As Bill Wilson says in his comments on Tradition Four on page 205 of *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, "we found we need no human authority whatever." He goes on to point out that Twelve Steppers have two more effective authorities, one good and one bad. One is our higher power, to which we must devote our will. And the other is our addiction, which we will turn to if we do not devote our will to our higher power.

These comments are made within a certain context. At times some groups within OA, including the Board of Trustees, have taken action which have resulted in the disappearance of some OA groups, usually through de-registration. While these actions were not taken lightly, and were no doubt undertaken with the best of intentions, they raise serious Tradition Four issues. Tradition Four does not say anywhere that other groups, including OA as a whole (as represented by the Board of Trustees), have the right to determine whether actions taken by one group would affect other groups. And the Long Form of Tradition Four makes that crystal clear.

*Tradition Four means living the spiritual life:*

So Tradition Four represents the highest point of spirituality. "Besides, we have stopped fighting anybody or anything. We have to!" says the Big Book at page 103.

We have to learn to trust our higher power. That is the essential message of the Twelve Traditions, and Tradition Four exemplifies the need to have that trust.

## Chapter 8 (Traditions Eight and Seven):

**Groups should carry their message without hope of reward, property, or prestige while being self-supporting through contributions of their members.**

**Tradition Eight: Overeaters Anonymous should remain forever non-professional, but our service centers may employ special workers.**

*AA Long Form: Alcoholics Anonymous should remain forever nonprofessional. We define professionalism as the occupation of counseling alcoholics for fees or hire. But we may employ alcoholics where they are going to perform those services for which we might otherwise have to engage nonalcoholics. Such special services may be well recompensed. But our usual A.A. "12 Step" work is never to be paid for.*

**Tradition Seven: Every OA group ought to be fully self-supporting, declining outside contributions.**

*AA Long Form: The A.A. groups ought to be fully supported by the voluntary contributions of their own members. We think that each group should soon achieve this ideal; that any public solicitation of funds using the name of Alcoholics Anonymous is highly dangerous, whether by groups, clubs, hospitals, or other outside agencies; that acceptance of large gifts from any source, or of contributions carrying any obligation whatever, is unwise. Then too, we view with much concern those A.A. treasuries which continue, beyond prudent reserves, to accumulate funds for no stated A.A. purpose. Experience has often warned us that nothing can so surely destroy our spiritual heritage as futile disputes over property, money, and authority. (You will note that the ideas behind this last sentence are incorporated into Tradition Six, which will be discussed later in this Study. And the notion of prudent reserves is incorporated into Concept Twelve, which we will not be discussing.)*

*These two traditions are intimately connected:*

These two traditions deal with the issue of finances from two perspectives, and are best dealt with together. They both emphasize the spiritual foundation of our fellowship.

As individuals who have experienced a spiritual awakening through the Twelve Steps which has given us the sanity not to be tempted to return to that which we abstain from, we know that the Twelfth Step requires us to carry this message to those who still suffer.

If we do not carry this message to those who still suffer, we will lose our spiritually-created sanity, and we will return to that which we abstain from. And when we return to that which we abstain from, we will not be able to stop. If we aren't able to stop, we will die of our addiction. So we *must* carry this message.

*Carrying the message must be without hope of reward, property, or prestige.* If we expect to receive something in return for carrying the message, some payment or recognition or reward, then we are not giving of ourselves. That is the essence of our Step Twelve work.

The theme of usefulness runs throughout our Twelve Step literature. We transform the mistakes we have made into ways of helping others learn from those mistakes and recover

from their compulsive eating. We cannot be useful to others if we do not give away what we have—our recovery. As a matter of fact, it is through freely *giving away* what we have that we are able to *keep* what we have!

*Carrying the message is different from service work:*

OA exists, as Tradition Five says, solely to carry the message of recovery from compulsive eating through the Twelve Steps to those who still suffer. It must mirror that message and therefore it cannot rely on payments from anyone other than those who must also carry that message, and those who carry that message cannot be paid for carrying that message.

On the other hand, there are functions required by an OA group that could just as easily be done by non-OA members as by OA members—depending on the size of an OA group (region, language service body, World Service Office), the group might require janitorial or secretarial work, writing, or graphic or web design, nutritional or legal advice. Those services can be paid for, since they are not directly carrying the message to the compulsive eater who still suffers. That is what Tradition Eight is about.

This idea applies also to the kind of volunteer work often done at assemblies, conventions, and even individually or in groups. Making coffee, setting up chairs, decorating rooms, making posters, participating in committees, listening to people talk about their day or their food, make carrying the message easier for the individual OA member who is doing direct Step Twelve work, but they clearly do not in themselves constitute carrying the message of recovery to those who still suffer.

This kind of work is service work, work that provides a service to OA groups. It is important work, of course. It is not, however, Twelfth Step work.

Some decades ago, OA had a slogan that “Service is slimming,” putting forward the idea that getting involved in the structure of OA somehow kept people at a healthy body weight. That slogan is thankfully no longer used. If Tradition Five is to be respected, characterizing that kind of service as a solution to compulsive eating misses the essence of the Twelve Steps.

Step Twelve is essential to keep an OA member who has experienced a spiritual awakening through the Twelve Steps abstinent, and therefore at a healthy body weight.

Nowhere in the Steps, however, is there a requirement to get involved in service to OA groups. That puts the cart before the horse.

OA does not exist to help its members keep abstinent. It exists to help its members carry the message of recovery through the Twelve Steps to those who suffer.

If OA did not exist, persons who had recovered from their compulsive eating addiction through the Twelve Steps would still have to carry their message of recovery through the Twelve Steps to the compulsive eater who still suffers.

With this in mind, Tradition Eight becomes clear. We can’t be professionals when we carry the message of recovery through the Twelve Steps. We must do that without hope of reward, property, or prestige. And we have to distinguish that Step Twelve work from work that helps keep OA alive, which can be paid for.

*Self-supporting through our own contributions:*

What is self-supporting? The Long Form of Tradition Seven makes it clear that we ought to be fully supported by the voluntary contributions of our own members. We do not accept contributions from non-OA members who may want to make such contributions to thank us for helping a family member or a friend.

As chronicled in *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age* and other of Bill's writings, Tradition Seven has a wonderful background. One of the richest men in the world took an interest in the poverty-stricken early AA fellowship and organized a dinner with a number of other wealthy persons to introduce the fellowship to them. Bill and his fellows were excited at the possibility of all the money they could raise, but after providing all the amazing testimonials they could, and impressing all the moneyed people there, the host told everyone that putting money into the fellowship would ruin the spirit of giving that it represented. And all the money, Bill said, walked out of the room. Bill said that although initially disappointed, this decision was for the best. It provided tremendous publicity that got more suffering alcoholics to recover, and it established the idea that AA should forever be poor, existing on its own ability to raise money.

We should learn from this that the only money we need to raise is an amount sufficient to carry our message of recovery to those who still suffer.

*Is OA self-supporting?*

Until recently the majority of OA's income has come from the sale of literature, not from contributions of its members. Even now a very large portion of OA's income comes from literature. There has been a built-in incentive to publish more literature in order to provide more income. Our literature is expensive, and every piece sold is sold at a profit.

Yet our literature is available to anyone to purchase, not simply members, so that purchase of OA literature cannot be considered contributions by OA members. Purchases are transactions in which we receive value for money spent, not contributions in which we donate money.

Why is OA literature expensive? In order to provide income. The cost of printing and distributing literature is miniscule compared to the amount OA charges for it.

What if we emphasized the importance of Tradition Seven and raised money to lower the price of our literature? What if we emphasized Tradition Five and made certain that every suffering compulsive eater could afford our literature? What if we made our essential books free online, as AA has done with The Big Book and the AA Twelve and Twelve?

*Could OA survive without making a profit on our literature?:*

The concern is, of course, that our World Service Office then wouldn't have enough money to continue in operation. This concern has even given rise in the past to efforts to create and sell more and more OA literature, to aggressively assert copyright issues, and to diminish if not cease the use of AA literature within OA, because the sale of AA literature doesn't generate income to OA. This concern has put emphasis on money rather than Tradition Five. And it requires some analysis.

We cannot forget that the purpose of the World Service Office, consistent with Tradition Five, is to support OA members, through smaller OA groups (regions, service boards, intergroups, individual groups), in carrying the message of recovery through the Twelve Steps to those who still suffers. That is its sole purpose, and it should exist so long as it performs that purpose.

World Service Office does its job well. WSO's website is a treasure-trove of resources to help the compulsive eater who still suffers, from its very helpful "Find a Meeting" search engine, to its Resources and Documents sections, to its Bookstore. The WSO has skilled editors and graphic designers who help our literature read well and look great. The WSO itself coordinates conventions, conferences, assemblies. It is the central clearing-house for all OA activities.

And so long as it performs that purpose, then those who have recovered, and those who want to recover, will want to support the services that the World Service Office offers. This is, of course, true for the services offered by intergroups and regions and service boards as well.

We have to have faith in our own Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions. If we are truly a spiritual fellowship, then fear has no place in how we make our decisions. The criterion, the sole criterion for our decision-making as a fellowship, is how best to carry the message of recovery to those who still suffer.

Of course OA can survive without making a profit on our literature. And how better to carry the message of recovery through the Twelve Steps than to make our literature available at cost? It's time to reconsider how we conduct our "business" and to take the bold step of relying on our own contributions completely!

*Other Tradition Seven issues:*

Many issues arise from the idea of being self-supporting. Since the World Service Office owns its building and lands, is it being self-supporting if it leases some of the building or some of the lands to someone else? Do yields on the WSO's substantial investments constitute outside contributions? Does registering as a charitable or non-profit corporation, as some OA group and intergroups have done, result in being subsidized by a governmental body through some tax advantage? Does receiving a special rate for renting space from a hospital or religious institution for an OA group, or a subsidy from government during the pandemic, constitute an outside contribution?

These are not easy issues, and there are no pat answers. They are not as obvious as having a non-OA member try to donate money to an OA group. But they do deserve to be discussed on a spiritual basis within our fellowship. Our group conscience, developed through discussion, development of consensus within substantial unanimity (not debate), must always be the guide. And different groups might come to different conclusions on the issues.

## Chapter 9 (Tradition Three):

***Groups should have and convey an understanding of what having a desire to stop eating compulsively means.***

**Tradition Three: The only requirement for OA membership is a desire to stop eating compulsively.**

**AA Long Form:** *Our membership ought to include all who suffer from alcoholism. Hence we may refuse none who wish to recover. Nor ought A.A. membership ever depend on money or conformity. Any two or three alcoholics gathered together for sobriety may call themselves an A.A. group provided that, as a group, they have no other affiliation.*

*The right of membership in OA:*

There is no other right of membership. If you have a desire to stop eating compulsively, then you have a right to join Overeaters Anonymous. You can't be kicked out. You have a right to be there. This flows quite simply from our requirement in Step Twelve to carry the message of recovery through the Twelve Steps to every compulsive eater who still suffers.

Bill Wilson, in both *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age* and *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, explains the history of this tradition. He talks about people with multiple addictions, people whose social standing or background or physical appearance or psychological difficulties made those already in the meetings feel uncomfortable or worried about AA's reputation. Ultimately it was resolved by Dr. Bob's question that invoked his personal deity: "What would He have us do?" The answer was obvious, and Tradition Three was born.

Rozanne's wonderful history of OA, *Beyond Our Wildest Dreams*, describes how the first members of OA, who were all women, did not want to allow a man into their meetings, because it would disrupt the safe space they thought they had created. They realized, however, that they could not exclude anyone, and OA became a fellowship for all compulsive eaters who suffered.

Tradition Three stands for the proposition that we have no right to deny membership to anyone, regardless of anything that makes them different. A wish to avoid discomfort is, of course, quite natural; but it must be overcome in order to act consistently with Tradition Three.

*Disruptive members:*

This has no doubt created problems for meetings. There are meetings in which individual members can be disruptive, in subtle and not-so-subtle ways, by interrupting, by gossiping, by saying inappropriate things, by talking too long, by talking off-topic, by doing inappropriate things.

They cannot be excluded, by virtue of Tradition Three, but there are ways of dealing with their actions. Our pamphlet on the Twelve Traditions, and our *The Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions of Overeaters Anonymous* provide some wonderful suggestions and examples. Here are some others:

- ✓ Providing the chair with the discretion to say to a member during a meeting that they are speaking too long or are speaking off-topic. OA's website has a Suggested Meeting Format which you can find by searching for it at the oa.org website. It contains the following:
  - ✓ "Feedback, cross talk, and advice-giving are discouraged here. Cross talk during an OA meeting is giving advice to others who have already shared, speaking directly to another person rather than to the group, and questioning or interrupting the person speaking or sharing at the time.
  - ✓ "We ask everyone to respect our group conscience. This meeting has decided that the chair for each meeting has the discretion to suggest to anyone sharing that he or she is off-topic or is speaking too long. This meeting asks you to accept this suggestion in order to keep the meeting on track."
- ✓ Creating a meeting format which is structured enough, such as focusing on the Twelve Steps in a progression, or reading the OA 12&12 or the Big Book, that the topic of that meeting is clearly what people should speak about, not what's going on in their life. This makes inappropriate sharing awkward because everyone else is speaking on topic. As well, the meeting itself becomes boring to those who want to use the meeting simply to sound off rather than fulfill its primary purpose.
- ✓ Simply changing the way in which people share can make a large difference in whether and how people share. Many meetings have adopted a round-table kind of sharing, where when it is time to share people go around the room or the virtual room to talk. This encourages everyone to share, even if they have nothing to add to the topic. If a meeting adopts a "come to the front to share" or "if you have something to say about this topic, please line up (literally or virtually) here" that can often encourage sharing that relates to our primary purpose and avoid disruptive and inappropriate discussion.
- ✓ Having individual recovered members focus on how they use the Twelve Steps to deal with their problem, putting responsibility for people who disrupt meetings with their own problems to deal with those problems.
- ✓ Remembering that the purpose of an OA meeting is to carry the message of recovery, and NOT to provide a safe space for people to say whatever they feel like saying.
- ✓ Speaking to the member after the meeting about their issues and how they are disrupting the meeting.
- ✓ And, of course, when an individual acts in a way that intimidates or threatens individuals, gently taking that individual out of the meeting because of those actions. Our 12&12 discusses this extremely well. It's important to remember that a group conscience can always be taken to discuss issues relating to behavior.

*Subtle ways of excluding compulsive eaters who still suffer:*

Although a meeting may think it is acting consistently with Tradition Three by simply acting toward a newcomer in a welcoming way, that meeting may still be excluding compulsive eaters who still suffer, unconsciously and in a subtle way. We have discussed this in both Chapter 4 (Tradition One) and Chapter 7 (Tradition Four). As a reminder, however, here are some examples of potential excluding actions:

- *Speaking of one kind of God in a very specific way (“My God, whom I choose to call X,” “God answered my prayer and gave me Y”);* can exclude believers in other gods or non-believers.
- *Speaking of one kind of compulsive eating (overeating, specific trigger foods) as true for everyone;* can exclude compulsive eaters who don’t identify with this specific kind of compulsive eating (anorexics, volume addicts).
- *Speaking of one way of working the Twelve Steps (Big Book, OA 12&12, HOW, Back to Basics) as the only way of working the Steps successfully;* can exclude people who don’t respond to the language or tone of some of these books.
- *Speaking of one psychological reason for compulsive eating (childhood trauma, dysfunctional family, isolation, abandonment) as being the only kind of reason for compulsive eating;* can exclude people who haven’t experienced this particular kind of reason.

Anytime an individual member speaks in an exclusionary way, the meeting itself becomes liable to be a meeting that is seen as an exclusionary meeting, and this, of course, reflects on OA as a whole. This is even worse if the meeting’s format itself is not inclusive in its approach.

*Tradition Three is all about Tradition Five:*

The importance of Tradition Three is underlined by Tradition Five. Our primary purpose is to carry our message of recovery to everyone who suffers. How can we do that if we exclude anyone?

As we discussed in Chapter 1 (Step Twelve) and Chapter 2 (Tradition Five), the message of each group, which every OA group’s purpose is to carry, is this:

- We used to be addicted compulsive eaters who could not stop returning to behaviors and foods that caused us uncontrollable cravings.
- We abstained from those behaviors and foods and worked the Twelve Steps of Overeaters Anonymous.
- As *the* result of those steps, we have had a spiritual awakening.
- This spiritual awakening has provided us with a power greater than ourselves.
- This power greater than ourselves has given us sanity over our compulsive eating; and
- This sanity is such that we are no longer tempted to return to what we have abstained from.

Boiled down to its essence, that message, as conveyed to the compulsive eater who still suffers, is this: **“If you’re like me, then the Twelve Steps can work for you just as they work for me.”**

This is the fundamental message each one of us who has recovered must carry to those who still suffer, and it is the fundamental message each group has to carry to those compulsive eaters who still suffer. A meeting which does not carry this message is not fulfilling its primary purpose.

Of course anyone who thinks they are a compulsive eater has a right to be a member. But does not the meeting itself have a responsibility to anyone who considers membership in OA to define what being a compulsive eater really means?

*Who is the person who qualifies for membership?:*

We are a Twelve Step fellowship that deals with the addiction of compulsive eating. Twelve Step fellowships range over a huge spectrum.

Some deal with specific addiction behaviors, like Gamblers Anonymous, Co-Dependents Anonymous, Debtors Anonymous, Sex Addicts Anonymous. Some deal with specific addiction substances, like Alcoholics Anonymous, Cocaine Anonymous, Crystal Meth Anonymous. Others might deal with groups of substances, like Narcotics Anonymous.

Overeaters Anonymous, by its group conscience, has elected to be an umbrella fellowship dealing with a spectrum of compulsive eating addiction.

OA encourages each member to analyze what they have to abstain from, and the kinds of things that people abstain from, can range from behaviors, to single substances, to a combination of these. There is no set Plan of Eating or diet which OA requires. Some of us can eat what other people cannot eat. There may be overlap of things to abstain from among many of us, but there may not be.

What binds us together as a fellowship is that we have accepted that we have an addiction to compulsive eating, as it may reveal itself in our own individual circumstances.

Our OA 12&12 makes clear, as does the Big Book, that our problem in its essence is that we cannot stop indulging once we start indulging, and we cannot stop from starting to indulge. What we have to abstain from may differ from person to person, but that vicious circle is our essential problem. And our solution is the Twelve Steps, which gives us the sanity to stop from starting.

*Our responsibility to provide clarity to the person who comes to our fellowship:*

We have to make this clear to the person who comes to our fellowship. They may have been diagnosed by psychiatrists with specific eating disorders, they may have been told by doctors that they are morbidly obese or morbidly undernourished, but if they cannot identify with the idea that they can't stop once they've started and they can't stop from starting, then the Twelve Steps may not be of value to them.

There are many organizations, some of them non-profit, which provide help for people with eating problems. For many people these organizations *can* provide help, because those people are not addicted, in the sense that we experience, to compulsive eating.

The Big Book distinguishes, for instance, between the hard or even moderate drinker, and the real alcoholic, whose drinking may be very heavy or merely moderate.

What distinguishes the addict from the person with another kind of problem is the inability to quit, the powerlessness over food that is Step One.

Some people, therefore, may not need the Twelve Steps to deal with their eating problem because, with some other kind of help, they *can* quit. They may need a good diet, a support group, surgery—there are many ways that people who don't have our addiction have found to deal with their eating problem. We are the last house on the block, not the first.

As well, people who come to us have to understand that we treat our addiction as life-or-death. It is a serious addiction which requires a spiritual awakening. Consider the difference between someone who needs one or two cups of coffee in the morning to wake up, and someone who needs twelve to twenty cups during the day or survive. The former may be addicted, but that may not be a medically serious kind of addiction; whereas the latter clearly has a serious addiction which could cause them physical danger.

*Our duty to the compulsive eater who still suffers:*

So we owe to those who come to us a clear message to the person who suffers from our problem.

Although we may provide love and understanding, group hugs, a safe place to be, a social network, we lose our primary purpose if we do not carry our message to the real compulsive eater who still suffers, rather than to anyone who may come to us.

That means we have an individual responsibility, as well as a group responsibility, to tell our stories in a way that conveys what it is to be addicted to a life-or-death kind of compulsive eating, and how the Twelve Steps have given us recovery from that addiction.

If we don't do that, we are doing a disservice to people who don't need the Twelve Steps, as well as to those who do.

Those who don't need the Twelve Steps may find help in other programs or from other organizations, and attendance at OA may keep them from finding the help they do need.

Those who need the Twelve Steps, on the other hand, will find that help in OA if—and perhaps only if—OA meetings and individuals are clear about their problem (powerlessness over food) and their solution (the Twelve Steps which provide sanity about their addiction).

## Chapter 10 (Tradition Six):

### **Our groups cannot be diverted from their primary purpose by appearing to endorse outside related organizations**

#### *OA's Relationship with the public:*

Up to now we have been discussing the relationship of an OA group to its members. Tradition Five establishes the primary purpose of each group and the basic criterion for actions taken by groups. Traditions One (unity) and Two (group conscience) discuss the basis for our working together in groups. Traditions Nine (unorganized) and Four (group autonomy) establish the inverted pyramid structure of OA and the primacy of the individual group. Traditions Eight (non-professional) and Seven (self-supporting) emphasize that OA's structure depends on each OA member's passion for helping those who still suffer from our addiction. And Tradition Three (membership) establishes the responsibility of each group to make its message clear.

We now make a transition to OA's relationship with the public in our discussion of Traditions Six (non-endorsement), Ten (no outside issues), and Eleven (public anonymity). In this discussion it is important to emphasize that these traditions clearly and specifically deal with an OA group's relationship with the public, and *not* our individual relationships with each other in groups. We will see how clear this is in the Long Form of the Traditions.

Differences in interpretation of these three traditions can and has led to controversy within OA. These controversies occur for a few reasons:

- Some interpret these three traditions as applying to individual members and relationships within a group, rather than groups and relations between groups and the general public. Yet the plain meaning of these traditions is that they apply only to groups, not individuals, and that these three traditions in particular apply to relationships between OA groups and the general public.
- Some interpret these three traditions in broad ways according to their understanding of the grammar of the sentences and specific meanings of words. Yet the plain wording of the sentences and the general usage of the words lead to a narrow and not a broad application of these traditions.
- Some interpret these three traditions in the context of their sense of the state of OA and their fears about the vulnerability of OA groups and members. Yet the interpretation should not vary based on one's assessment on how strong or weak OA or its members are, or one's fears of the outcomes, but should be based rather on the faith in a higher power which is at the heart of the spiritual awakening guaranteed by the Twelve Steps.

What follows in this and the next two chapters is based on an interpretation of these three traditions which is not necessarily shared by others who have studied the Twelve Traditions. This interpretation is, however, based on a reading of the Traditions themselves, the essays about them contained in both the OA and AA Twelve and Twelve, and the history of these traditions contained in OA-approved AA literature.

We begin our study of OA's relationship with the public with Tradition Six.

***Tradition Six:***

**Tradition Six: An OA group ought never endorse, finance, or lend the OA name to any related facility or outside enterprise, lest problems of money, property, and prestige divert us from our primary purpose.**

**AA Long Form:** *Problems of money, property, and authority may easily divert us from our primary spiritual aim. We think, therefore, that any considerable property of genuine use to AA should be separately incorporated and managed, thus dividing the material from the spiritual. An A.A. group, as such, should never go into business. Secondary aids to A.A., such as clubs or hospitals which require much property or administration, ought to be incorporated and so set apart that, if necessary, they can be freely discarded by the groups. Hence such facilities ought not to use the A.A. name. Their management should be the sole responsibility of those people who financially support them. For clubs, A.A. managers are usually preferred. But hospitals, as well as other places of recuperation, ought to be well outside A.A.—and medically supervised. While an A.A. group may cooperate with anyone, such cooperation ought never go so far as affiliation or endorsement, actual or implied. An A.A. group can bind itself to no one.*

*Tradition Six protects our primary purpose:*

This Tradition can be misapplied, especially when it is paired with Tradition Ten, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

Tradition Six is specifically linked to Tradition Five with its concern that endorsement or financial involvement or lending the OA name to any “related facility” or “outside enterprise” will “divert us from our primary purpose.”

Bill discusses the origins of Tradition Six in the AA *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, as well as *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*. He describes the early AA members as being idealists, and thinking that their honesty and dedication would be perfect for changing the world; proposing different businesses that would affect the lives of alcoholics. He describes a job offer made by the liquor industry to a member of AA to use his name and AA affiliation to promote moderate drinking and no drinking at all for the alcoholic. It became clearer and clearer, however, that the AA name could never be used to promote anything other than the Twelve Steps as found in AA.

It bears continued repetition: Tradition Five is at the heart of all the other OA traditions. Once we are clear about our primary purpose, once we passionately fulfill our Step Twelve responsibility of carrying the message of a spiritual awakening through the Twelve Steps to those who still suffer, then external issues must fall to the wayside. We cannot afford to harm OA’s name, or to place it or any one of us in a conflict of interest.

*What are related facilities and outside enterprises?:*

The words “any related” apply to both “facility” and “outside enterprise.” That is the clear grammar of the wording. It’s not only the facility that is related; it’s also the outside enterprise; if that were not the case, “any” would have been repeated in front of “outside.” This interpretation is also made clear by the detailed discussion in the Long Form of Tradition Six, where the concern is clearly with organizations and ideas that have some connection with alcoholism.

A “facility” is a place, a location, a building, designed for a purpose; or something constructed or installed or established to perform a particular function.

An “enterprise” is a business, or a project that requires some effort, or a systematic purposeful activity or type of activity. An “outside enterprise” is therefore a project or business or company that Overeaters Anonymous has not created or embarked on.

Tradition Six therefore means that an OA group does not endorse (give approval to), finance (give or lend money to), or lend our name (allow our name to be used as endorsement), to any place that is designed in some way to deal with our addiction (a related facility), or a project or business that Overeaters Anonymous has not created or embarked on (a related outside enterprise), because to do so would injure our primary purpose.

*Tradition Six, therefore specifically deals with issues arising from an OA group’s affiliating itself in any way with some other organization that deals with compulsive eating in any form.*

The Long Form of Tradition Six makes this even more clear. It provides examples of AA clubs, hospitals, ownership of property. It ends with these simple words: “While an A.A. group may cooperate with anyone, such cooperation ought never go so far as affiliation or endorsement, actual or implied. An A.A. group can bind itself to no one.”

It is clear, therefore, that OA should not endorse or provide its name to obesity or eating disorder clinics or general addiction facilities that also deal with compulsive eating. Our groups may meet in those facilities, but we do not endorse those facilities and must distance ourselves from whatever it is that they do. Having a meeting in an eating disorder clinic might mean that the eating disorder clinic endorses OA, but that shouldn’t and doesn’t mean that OA endorses the eating disorder clinic. Sometimes an individual meeting has to be mindful of where it holds its meeting to make certain no one can infer an endorsement, but this usually does not pose a great problem.

*What does the group conscience of Overeaters Anonymous say about Tradition Six?:*

The group conscience of Overeaters Anonymous as a whole is found in the Policy Manual of the World Service Business Conference.

The Policy Manual does not discuss “facility” or “facilities” at all. Its major mention of “enterprise” is found here:

**1993b Amended 2010.** *It was adopted that:* It is the group conscience of the 1993 World Service Business Conference that the sale or display of literature other than OA-approved literature and AA conference-approved literature (as described in WSBC Policy 2010a) is an implied endorsement of outside enterprises, and therefore in violation with Tradition Six.

(Among other matters, WSBC Policy 2010a defines what AA literature is approved in OA.)

The only other mention of “outside enterprise” is found in Policy 1984e, amended 2014, which deals with sales of merchandise by OA groups. While affirming group autonomy, it suggests that with respect of the sale of merchandise, “Overeaters Anonymous must be ever mindful of our Traditions, which warn against endorsement of outside enterprise.” There could be a difference, for instance, between selling a used bicycle pump and selling a used diet book at an OA fundraiser; the former endorses nothing, the latter might be seen as endorsing a particular diet.

While group autonomy is still paramount in all cases, Policy 1993b does represent the group conscience of OA. It clearly relates to the sale of literature by a group, and only to sale, however, not to quotes or mentions or discussions. Selling literature that is not OA-approved implies, according to the group conscience of OA, endorsement of a related outside enterprise.

*What is the purpose of Tradition Six?:*

And why can't we endorse, finance, or lend our name to these things? Because money, property, or prestige can divert us from our primary purpose of carrying our message of recovery from compulsive eating through the Twelve Steps to those who still suffer.

Naturally getting involved with diet clubs or eating disorder clinics, or using OA's name to promote ideas which do not involve the Twelve Steps, diverts us from our Tradition Five primary purpose, especially in the public's mind. We must remain separate from anything that has its own purpose or method of dealing with compulsive eating.

Anything that does not involve money, property, or prestige—that won't divert us from our primary purpose—is not, however, a problem.

We must keep this balance in mind. The question in interpreting and applying each tradition, including Tradition Six, is whether or not a particular action will help or hinder a group from carrying its message of recovery through the Twelve Steps to the compulsive eater who still suffers. This assessment is best done in specific circumstances by the group being faced with the decision.

And we must also remember that each Tradition, including Tradition Six, relates to OA groups, not to individual OA members. It is the public reputation of Overeaters Anonymous that is the clear subject of Tradition Six.

*Unrelated facilities or outside enterprises:*

Is another addiction fellowship, like AA or NA or GA, a related facility or outside enterprise? Clearly that kind of fellowship is neither. None of them operates a location or place or business, nor do they deal with our compulsive eating addiction. As opposed to the other Twelve Step fellowships that deal with compulsive eating, with whom OA clearly does not affiliate, these other groups deal with the Twelve Steps as applied to other addictions.

Can Tradition Six be used to keep OA members from mentioning their other Twelve-Step groups? Well, if a Twelve Step fellowship is neither a related facility or a related outside enterprise, then Tradition Six is simply irrelevant to the issue. Even if "related outside enterprise" were interpreted as "related to addiction" rather than "related to compulsive eating," our OA 12&12 simply cautions us to avoid focusing on other Twelve Step fellowships rather than recovery from our compulsive eating.

While it may be prudent for a group not to spend much of its time discussing other addiction fellowships, because the primary purpose of that group is to carry the message of recovery from the addiction of compulsive eating, and not other addictions, Tradition Six should not be used as the reason to prohibit that kind of discussion.

Can Tradition Six be used to keep OA members from mentioning their religions, their other hobbies or activities or employment? Again, Tradition Six deals with the actions of a group, not with the actions of individual members. There may be all kinds of good reasons to ask members not to mention these issues, or to keep from dwelling on them—and those reasons would center on whether or not that meeting is focusing on its primary purpose—but Tradition Six does not provide a basis for this.

Are the written comments of OA members a related facility or an outside enterprise? Over the years there has been controversy over the use of writings about OA by OA members in OA meetings.

Some members have published books at a profit and sold them at meetings and conventions. Clearly they were operating an enterprise (selling books for a profit is a business) that was related to Overeaters Anonymous.

But what if a book is not sold for a profit, but given away or sold at cost? In that case, what is the difference between a member sharing about their OA journey through the Twelve Steps at a meeting or a lengthy workshop, and writing about that same journey? Is that kind of writing even “literature” as we use the term in OA?

Some meetings may see a difference, and some may not—it’s all a question of group autonomy. But whatever a meeting may decide, Tradition Six in that latter case is simply not relevant to that decision.

There may be other reasons for a group’s decision not to discuss other Twelve Step fellowships, and we will discuss those issues in our discussion of Tradition Ten in the next chapter.

*The significance of the rescinding of Policy 1979b:*

The following policy was rescinded in 1989 and therefore no longer reflects the group conscience of Overeaters Anonymous:

**1979b** It was adopted that: Any activity (i.e., marathons, conventions, and retreats) not sponsored by a registered group, an intergroup, region, or OA as a whole be considered an outside enterprise not to be endorsed or promoted by OA and as such not appear in a world service publication. Any marathon, convention, or retreat that offers for sale any items that are not Conference-approved, be considered an outside enterprise and also not be publicized in OA publications. (***Rescinded 1989***)

The rescinding of this policy clearly means that the group conscience of OA no longer considers the announcing or publicizing of non-OA marathons, conventions, or retreats to be contrary to the spirit of Tradition Six. This is not a well-known fact. As a matter of fact, throughout OA, there are OA members who still believe that that kind of publicity is contrary to Tradition Six. (We will discuss whether it’s contrary to Tradition Ten in the next chapter.)

We must remember that OA was started when our founder, Rozanne, asked the founder of Gamblers Anonymous, who was also a member of AA, to help her use the Twelve Steps to deal with her eating addiction. In many cases throughout the history of OA, members of other Twelve Step Fellowships have provided and still continue to provide tremendous assistance to OA groups, to help them create OA in their areas, to understand the Twelve

Steps, to provide speakers who could speak about how the Twelve Steps of their fellowship helped them deal with their addictions in order to help compulsive eaters learn how they could use the Twelve Steps of Overeaters Anonymous to deal with their compulsive eating addiction.

To publicize an AA or GA or NA marathon or convention or retreat is clearly not endorsing an outside enterprise. AA is not a business. It does not operate a facility. Its sole purpose, as expressed in its Tradition Five, is to carry its message of recovery from alcoholism through the Twelve Steps to alcoholics who still suffer. That is the same primary purpose as every Twelve Step Fellowship has.

The only difference between any two Twelve Step Fellowships is found in Step One—what the addict is powerless over—and Step Twelve—to whom the recovered addict must carry their message of recovery, through the Twelve Steps, from their addiction.

What is wrong with publicizing the activities of another Twelve Step Fellowship, if attendance at those activities might assist an OA member to learn how better to carry their message or to hear a method of working the Twelve Steps that might be helpful? Clearly the rescinding of Policy 1998b answers that: there is nothing wrong with that!

*The dangers of interpreting Tradition Six more strictly:*

Some OA members read Tradition Six differently. They apply the notion of “outside enterprise” as referring to any organized group or even individual, whether or not that group or individual is “related” to our addiction.

Applying such an idea consistently would, of course, eliminate the ability of any individual from mentioning almost anything going on in their lives—from a movie that affected them, to a school reunion they went to, to a particular holiday they observed, to the kind of work they do, or meditation methods they use. Discussing anything that is not related to Overeaters Anonymous would be somehow lending the OA name to something outside of OA.

Of course this would lead to absurdities. Most people would not feel that there was an endorsement of an outside enterprise if a member said they read something in the newspaper, or if there was a comment about the television show they watched that they learned from.

But applying this idea inconsistently, of course, takes away the idea that “outside enterprise” should be so broadly interpreted.

If we are to fulfill our Step Twelve duties as persons who have experienced a spiritual awakening through the Twelve Steps, then we will have faith that a group of us, working together in unity, with our Tradition Five primary purpose foremost in our consciousness, will create strong meetings that can handle difficult or contentious problems with love and tolerance, with faith and perseverance, without trying to control the outcome, with having a belief that things will work themselves out for the better if we listen carefully to each other and strive for consensus in our group conscience.

## Chapter 11 (Tradition Ten): *What are outside issues?*

**Tradition Ten: Overeaters Anonymous has no opinion on outside issues; hence the OA name ought never be drawn into public controversy.**

**AA Long Form:** *No A.A. group or member should ever, in such a way as to implicate A.A., express any opinion on outside controversial issues—particularly those of politics, alcohol reform, or sectarian religion. The Alcoholics Anonymous groups oppose no one. Concerning such matters they can express no views whatever.*

*Tradition Five, not Ten, deals with group issues, which can include but aren't limited to issues from outside:*

If the primary purpose of every OA group is to carry the message of recovery from compulsive eating through the Twelve Steps of Overeaters Anonymous, our groups must naturally focus on that message, and not on other messages. So we have to make certain, as much as possible, that our groups don't emphasize other messages that are not relevant to our primary purpose.

That means that if a group finds itself spending its time discussing matters other than finding recovery from compulsive eating through working the Twelve Steps of Overeaters Anonymous, it should consider carefully what is going on, and whether it is properly fulfilling its primary purpose. This is true, of course, for any number of matters that a group can discuss, and that some OA groups have concentrated on:

- ∨ Discussing the problem and not the solution.
- ∨ Discussing problems specific to smaller groups within OA.
- ∨ Championing particular versions of a deity.
- ∨ Championing particular versions of a Plan of Eating.
- ∨ Championing particular methods of working the Steps.
- ∨ And discussing matters that have nothing to do with the Twelve Steps of Overeaters Anonymous.

Naturally, in the course of an OA meeting, discussing any number of the above issues might be quite reasonable. There is nothing wrong with talking about one's specific Plan of Eating, nothing wrong with talking about the problems an individual has had or is dealing with, nothing wrong with discussing specific methods of working the Steps, or discussing matters that have nothing to do with the Twelve Steps—*so long as the emphasis of the meeting is on how the Twelve Steps provide us with the solution to our compulsive eating addiction and give us a spiritual awakening that provides us with guidance to live our life.*

It is when groups concentrate on these matters to the exclusion of the Steps that they run two specific risks:

- ∨ First, internally they will encourage living in the problem and not the solution.
- ∨ Second, because they are the first contact many still-suffering compulsive eaters will have with OA, externally they will be affecting the ability of OA as a whole to carry the message of recovery through the Steps.

*Tradition Ten, along with Traditions Six and Eleven, deals with our relationships with the public:*

Tradition Ten, however, goes beyond this concern. It is one of the three Traditions (Six and Eleven are the others) which deal with our relationship with the public, not our internal relationship within our groups. Tradition Five is the backbone of our relationships *within our groups*. Our relationships *with the public* are different.

As was discussed in earlier chapters, especially the one on Tradition Five, Overeaters Anonymous exists solely as a means for individual recovered OAers to be able to fulfill their Step Twelve responsibilities—to carry the message of having had a spiritual awakening as the results of the Steps. So long as OA fulfills that purpose properly, it should continue to exist.

The Step Twelve responsibilities of the individual OA recovered person will always continue to exist, however, whether or not OA exists, because as individuals we will lose our spiritual awakening if we do not carry our individual message. And if we lose our spiritual awakening, we will die the death by a thousand cuts that compulsive eating creates.

The most important way that OA as a whole, as well as specific OA groups, can fulfill their primary purpose is to publicize the message in such a way that suffering compulsive eaters will come to OA to hear the individual message of recovery from recovered OA members.

Traditions Six, Ten, and Eleven, deal with the most significant ways in which OA groups can fall short of their primary purpose.

Tradition Six, discussed in the previous chapter, is about not having OA either explicitly or implicitly being involved with other organizations or movements. OA has its primary purpose, and it ought not to dilute that primary purpose by getting involved with other organizations, no matter how related they may be. Tradition Eleven will be discussed in the next chapter.

*Tradition Ten deals with public controversy, not private controversy:*

Tradition Ten is all about not having OA either explicitly or implicitly being involved with controversial issues. The concept of what an “outside issue” is clearly depends on whether the OA name or reputation will be drawn into *public* controversy. Not only does the Long Form make that clear, but it’s implicit in the form found in our Twelve Traditions. What else could “hence the OA name ought never be drawn into public controversy” mean?

The fact is that OA has no position on any issues other than its Tradition Five message: that compulsive eaters who still suffer can find recovery through the Twelve Steps of Overeaters Anonymous. It has “but one primary purpose” and no other. There would be no need for Tradition Ten if all that it said was that OA has no position on outside issues. Tradition Ten goes beyond that obvious fact, and determines what an “outside issue” is.

If you look at all of AA’s *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* and virtually all of *The Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions of Overeaters Anonymous*, you will see this made clear. The main emphasis in both these discussions of Tradition Ten is that the group (AA or OA) should not take positions on matters of politics or religion or other publicly controversial issues, including issues involving other kinds of treatments for our addiction.

In the case of compulsive eaters, there is a whole industry of medical and nutritional and treatment organizations, businesses, and centers, as well as various other Twelve Step Fellowships dealing with compulsive eating, in ways different from OA. We have no position on them, because our concern is not to be right or to have a monopoly on the solution to our addiction, but merely to be of service to those who still suffer and who seek our help.

*“Non-OA-Approved Literature:*

In keeping with the idea that “traditions” are not “rules,” our OA 12&12’s discussion of Tradition Ten also does make suggestions about the use of what it calls “outside literature.”

This is also found in the following World Service Business Conference Policy, which does not make reference to Tradition Ten specifically:

**2010a Amended 2012.** The following policy statement was adopted:

*Statement on Approved Literature*

In accordance with our Traditions, we suggest that OA groups maintain unity and honor our Traditions by using, selling, and displaying only approved books and pamphlets at their meetings. This includes OA Conference- and board-approved literature; AA Conference-approved books, booklets, and all future editions thereof, with original edition copyright 2010 or earlier; and locally produced OA literature. Locally produced literature must be developed according to the *OA Guidelines for Locally Produced Literature*, and should be used with the greatest discretion. Local literature should be considered temporary and discontinued when OA literature approved for general use is available to cover the topic.

In both our OA 12&12 discussion of Tradition Ten, and this Policy Statement, one should note that the matter is suggested only. This is as it should be, since groups are autonomous and have to make their own decision as to whether their actions affect other OA groups or OA as a whole. In most cases a group will decide to go along with these suggestions.

Certainly books about compulsive eating, or inspirational books about spirituality, that are not specifically related to recovery from compulsive eating through the Twelve Steps are outside the scope of Overeaters Anonymous’s primary purpose. A group that promotes or uses such books could and probably would give the impression to the newcomer that OA as a whole promotes them, and they are clearly related outside enterprises (being sold at a profit or promoting an outside enterprise), as discussed in Tradition Six, and some of them are also just as clearly outside issues (surgery, specific diets, specific therapies, etc.).

But what about an OA member’s story of recovery from compulsive eating through working the Twelve Steps of Overeaters Anonymous? This is *not* an outside issue. It is precisely within the primary purpose of every OA group. Certainly if that story is sold at a profit, it is a “related outside enterprise,” and Tradition Six would suggest that having an OA group sell such a story would be lending the OA name in a way that would create problems for OA.

But if the story is given away or sold at cost, how is that different from any OA member’s giving a workshop on the same subject? Again, this is a matter for group autonomy. Some groups would think it is, and some would think it isn’t.

*Other “outside issues:”*

We must remember that Tradition Ten deals with the idea that OA—OA itself, *not* individual members within OA—should have no position on outside issues. And it is absolutely clear within our membership that that is the case.

Tradition Ten also reminds us that individual members, or individual OA groups, should take care not to give the world outside OA the impression that OA has positions on outside issues. We do that so that the OA name will not be drawn into public controversy. If the OA name were drawn into public controversy, we would lose our ability to help others.

But we should not fall prey to fear in applying this tradition. We can become so fearful that maybe someone just might feel slightly bothered by something some person said that we try to stop people from sharing on anything that could remotely be unrelated to OA. This leads to stifling sharing, hurt feelings, and resentments.

Recently a person who gave years of service in their intergroup and at the region and world service level passed away. They were loved by many. Given that most people knew that person by their first name only, it was probable that many people in their intergroup would not know that the person had passed away.

Should the intergroup announce that they had passed away? There were people in that intergroup who said that the intergroup should not announce their death, because it was an outside issue. It is difficult to understand how their death could possibly be an outside issue or how announcing the death of the OA member could possibly place OA in the midst of a public controversy.

When our founder, Rozanne, passed away, our *Lifeline* magazine devoted space to her memory, as was appropriate. The same was done by AA for Doctor Bob and Bill when they passed on. Where is the difference?

Referring to a book or a magazine article which provides information that could be of interest to someone working the Steps—say, a history of AA, or an article on meditation—is certainly not an outside issue. The fear may be that if one person is allowed to do this, then the meeting might dilute its message.

But aren't all these fears really a matter not of “an outside issue” but rather a matter of making certain that the meeting is strong? That is the key.

*Strong meetings should be the goal:*

A strong meeting that concentrates on recovery from compulsive eating through working the Twelve Steps of Overeaters Anonymous—in other words, a meeting that passionately fulfills its primary purpose—can handle any problem that could easily disrupt a weak meeting. The solution is to strengthen the meeting, not to try to censor an individual member by using “outside issues” as the reason. It's like continuing to use an umbrella in a tornado rather than building a safe shelter.

A strong meeting, by its very nature, concentrates on recovery and not on other issues. In a strong meeting, if a person starts to talk about something *not* related to recovery, the following things could happen:

- Someone might say, “I'll talk to you about this after the meeting.”
- Someone might say, “Maybe it's better to listen than to talk right now.”

- They will begin to realize that what they are saying is out of place, and either avoid going back to that meeting or start listening.
- They will not get the kind of response they want, so they will either avoid that meeting or start talking about things that will get the kind of response they want.
- The meeting chair might be empowered to suggest to anyone speaking that they are off topic—as is found in the Suggested Meeting Format discussed in an earlier chapter.

In other words, a strong meeting can handle any problems an individual member may bring to it, without invoking Traditions Ten, or Six, or Eleven.

Let's not forget that a meeting that concentrates on a specific Plan of Eating or a specific way of working the Steps may do more harm to its purpose of carrying the message of recovery, by giving the impression that this is the *only* OA way of doing things, than a meeting in which someone quotes a non-OA-approved book about AA history.

The issue is always Tradition Five, and the criterion for taking action is always, “Does this help or hinder carrying the message of recovery through the Twelve Steps to the compulsive eater who still suffers?”

Tradition Ten should therefore be a simple tradition: avoid talking about controversial subjects in a way that excludes others and gives the impression that OA has a position on these issues. It really is that simple!

## Chapter 12 (Tradition Eleven):

### *What is a public relations policy and what is not?*

**Tradition Eleven: Our public relations policy is based on attraction rather than promotion; we need always maintain personal anonymity at the level of press, radio, films, television, and other public media of communication.**

**AA Long Form:** *Our relations with the general public should be characterized by personal anonymity. We think A.A. ought to avoid sensational advertising. Our names and pictures as A.A. members ought not be broadcast, filmed, or publicly printed. Our public relations should be guided by the principle of attraction rather than promotion. There is never need to praise ourselves. We feel it better to let our friends recommend us.*

*What Tradition Eleven is not about:*

A wonderful OA speaker once shared what their sponsor told them: “If you are anonymous at any level other than press, radio, films, television, and other public media of communication, then you are breaching Tradition Eleven!”

This should not be a provocative statement. Those who participate in region and World Service assemblies and conferences are familiar with delegates’ using their last names as well as their first. This is not a breach of anonymity. Region and World Service assemblies and conferences are not media.

There are, however, OA members and OA groups which have interpreted Tradition Eleven to mean that the following are breaches of Tradition Eleven:

- mentioning a member’s name in an OA meeting;
- commenting on what a member has said at a meeting;
- taking a private photograph of OA members;
- talking at an OA meeting about what an OA member said elsewhere;
- identifying yourself and talking at a meeting of health-care professionals about OA.

Some of these actions in some circumstances may be quite inappropriate, but none of these actions is included in Tradition Eleven. Both Tradition Eleven, and its predecessor the Long Form, make clear that Tradition Eleven has only relevance in OA’s relationship with the public.

If you want further proof that Tradition Eleven is not about complete anonymity in every situation, you need only look at the chapter *Working with Others* in the Big Book, the original guide to the Twelve Steps. When it comes to carrying the message to those who still suffer (Step Twelve)the Big Book recommends talking to doctors, religious leaders, going to hospitals, going to court to speak on behalf of a member. It recommends talking about yourself as a recovered addict who needs to find someone to tell their story to. These are not actions based on anonymity.

In our next chapter, on Tradition Twelve, we will discuss the difference between anonymity and confidentiality. Anonymity is part of our traditions. Confidentiality is part of our human responsibility to protect privacy.

*Tradition Five is at the heart of Tradition Eleven:*

As recovered OAers who have a Twelfth Step responsibility to carry our individual message of recovery through the Twelve Steps, and who have joined together in groups to carry that message more efficiently by focusing on our Tradition Five primary purpose, Tradition Eleven is very important to us.

Tradition Eleven reminds us that we ourselves have accomplished nothing in our recovery—that our only contribution to our recovery was to give up attempting to control our addiction. Instead of self-control, we admitted our powerlessness. We then relied on the experience of millions of recovered addicts with dozens of addictions, including compulsive eating, who abstained from their addiction, worked the Twelve Steps, and received the miracle of recovery. We did what they did and we were given the same miracle.

At the public level we therefore can take absolutely no credit for what we did. It would diminish our message to the public—the message of recovery through the Twelve Steps. If we put ourselves, our names, our images, in the public spotlight, we run the grave risk of having OA be identified with us as individuals, rather than having us be identified with the Twelve Steps. And we personally run the risk of thinking of ourselves, and hoping that others will think of us, as being special.

And, of course, if we relapse, then all the more discredit to OA if we had been placed in the spotlight!

At the private level, however, we must carry our message to those who still suffer, and that means putting ourselves out there, telling our stories of powerlessness and of gaining power through the Twelve Steps, so that others who still suffer can hear about us and turn to us so we can help them.

*It's public media, not public gatherings or in private:*

It is at the level at which media are involved that Tradition Eleven is significant. It is at the media level that we run the great risks described above. At the media level we are no longer speaking for ourselves. Someone else is taking our story and telling it to others. We lose control of our story. The media tell the story they think will be of interest. Rather than telling our own story, we become part of the media's story.

When this happens—and it has happened in the history of so many Twelve Step groups, including OA—those who give up their anonymity become representatives of OA in the public eye. No matter how much they might say that they are not representatives or are not even representative of OA, they become the face of OA when their names and images are used.

On the other hand, when we are able to tell our story of recovery on a personal level in a forum where the media are not present, then we can control the use of our story to carry the message to those who still suffer. Those who hear our story should hear a simple message: “If you are like me, then the solution I have found might be helpful to you. If you know someone who might be like me, then they would do me a favor if I could meet with them to see if they are like me.”

So identifying ourselves as compulsive eaters in a group of people—whether it’s a formal gathering of health professionals or an informal party—can be of service to those who still suffer.

*WSBC Policies relevant to Tradition Eleven:*

The World Service Business Conference has quite a bit to say about Tradition Eleven:

**1980b Amended 2013.** An anonymity statement was adopted:

Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of our program, always ensuring principles before personalities. This means that OA itself is not anonymous, but its members are. There are no exceptions. While OA may be publicized, we do not break our individual anonymity at the level of press, radio, films, television, and all public media of communication; and the recognizable facial exposure of persons identifying as OA members at the level of press, films, television, and all public media of communication is a violation of our tradition of anonymity, even though the first name only is given or the entire name is withheld.

**2008b** It was adopted to: Create an Overeaters Anonymous media policy.

To raise public awareness, Overeaters Anonymous and associated service bodies may send press releases to or make use of special events/promotions in newspapers, magazines, television, radio, websites, billboards, and other means of public media, providing personal anonymity is maintained for members of Overeaters Anonymous. Contact names on media communication can include any special worker associated with public awareness as well as the first names of individual Overeaters Anonymous members.

**2008c** It was adopted to: Create an Overeaters Anonymous public relations policy.

If Overeaters Anonymous is to continue to exist, it must continue to grow in order to fulfill its primary purpose of carrying its message to the compulsive eater who still suffers and to reach those who are not yet aware of the existence of our Fellowship.

We fulfill this primary purpose most effectively by attraction and cooperation—not promotion or affiliation. For the guidance of our Fellowship, here are definitions of those terms:

To Attract: To draw by other than physical influence; to invite; to draw to; to encourage approach

To Promote: To push forward; to further advance, as in a business venture (implies “hard sell,” advancement for profit)

Cooperation: Joint operation or action (implies coming together of two or more people to work together for a common goal or benefit or on a common problem)

Affiliation: Association or close connection; a uniting (implies lending one’s name, endorsement, legal or financial partnership)

Overeaters Anonymous is attracting when it tells people why we are, what we are, what we do, and how; we let them know that we are available if and when help is needed. We state the facts, which are communicated via the press, radio, TV, internet, and films, always stressing personal anonymity at the public level.

Overeaters Anonymous is cooperating when it works with others\*, rather than alone. Working with others broadens our scope and contacts and we reach more of those in need.

Hiring outside contractors or service companies is not considered an affiliation.

\*Examples could include, but are not limited to, hospitals, doctors, nurses, clergymen, treatment centers, educators, dieticians, nutritionists, employee assistance programs, and health spas.

**2011a Amended 2016 and 2019.** The following policy statement was adopted:

Statement on Public and Social Media

While Overeaters Anonymous has no opinion on outside issues, including social media, the delegates of the 2019 World Service Business Conference recommend that any OA member, group, or service body using social media for OA public information and public awareness maintain the personal anonymity of OA members.

Members of Overeaters Anonymous are anonymous. The Fellowship is not. Members of Overeaters Anonymous are responsible for maintaining their anonymity and respecting the anonymity of other OA members. When attending an OA meeting, whether face-to-face or virtual, members are encouraged to seek appropriate means to protect their own anonymity and that of fellow members.

All registered virtual meetings shall inform members that their anonymity is not fully protected when attending a virtual meeting.

Find options for protecting anonymity at Guidelines for Anonymity in the Digital World. (<https://oa.org/guidelines/anonymity-in-the-digital-world/>).

These statements are all consistent with the approach to Tradition Eleven taken in this Traditions Study.

*Promotion, not simply attraction, at the personal level:*

Those OAers who have maintained a healthy body weight for some time will have friends and acquaintances who did not know them when they were living in their addiction. Those friends or acquaintances cannot possibly notice a change in these OAers, since they have only known them in their recovered state.

Yet these friends, these acquaintances, or these relatives or friends of those friends and acquaintances, who suffer from compulsive eating addiction, deserve to know the miracle of recovery from their addiction through working the Twelve Steps of Overeaters Anonymous.

As Step Twelve says, we owe a responsibility to every compulsive eater who still suffers to carry the message of that miracle. That means we ought not rely solely on who shows up at our meetings to fulfill our responsibility.

Clearly this is what Tradition Eleven says. Its wording is quite clear. Yet there are OAers who will still rely on “attraction, not promotion” as justification for not speaking about their OA recovery when an opportunity presents itself. This is, with respect, an erroneous rationale, based on quite understandable fears or concerns:

**Fear of not having our addiction taken seriously:**

- ✓ This is probably the most difficult one.
- ✓ We have to be convinced that our addiction is a life-or-death one in order for us to work the Twelve Steps. We not only have to know that we are powerless, but we also have to know that our powerlessness is killing us.
- ✓ It is true that many other Twelve Step Fellowships deal with very dramatic addictions—addictions that could have traumatic and immediate consequences. It is easy to imagine a drug addict or alcoholic or gambler or sex addict indulging in an addiction that would result in a sudden and dramatic change in their lives for the worse, including ending their lives.
- ✓ It is harder to imagine, however, a compulsive eater eating a dessert or choosing to restrict their eating, and then suddenly acting in such a way that could have that kind of a dramatic effect.
- ✓ No, our addiction is for the most part a death by a thousand cuts. Compulsive eating generally creates a gradual deterioration of our lives, a gradual diminution of our mobility and our senses, a death coming earlier than it should have and preceded by mental and physical suffering. There is no question that compulsive overeating and compulsive undereating are leading preventable causes of illness and death, but there’s little drama in that.
- ✓ If we cannot convince ourselves of the life-or-death aspect of our addiction, however, then naturally we will not be able to convey the seriousness of our addiction to others. And if they don’t take our addiction seriously, then we have not taken true responsibility for carrying the message.
- ✓ So the solution to the fear that others will not take us seriously is to work on carrying a message of intense seriousness of purpose. To do that we have to work hard on our story, and we have to be able to describe our solution. It’s not effective to talk about how wonderful it is to be spiritual; we have to be able to say that we watch others indulge in our trigger foods or trigger eating behaviors and not be tempted to indulge in them ourselves, *and* that we consider that a miracle.

**Fear of intruding into someone else’s life:**

- ✓ Many, perhaps most, of us are people who grew up with low self-esteem. We don’t feel comfortable intervening in other people’s lives, putting ourselves forward as having a solution to problems they may have, being confident in ourselves and our recovery.
- ✓ We may not feel comfortable, but it is something we must do, because Step Twelve requires us to carry the message to others with vigor and intensity. There are millions of compulsive eaters out there who could use our help. They are suffering. And we have a solution!
- ✓ Again, we have to work on how to carry our message. The brilliance of Step Twelve is that we have a simple way of doing this: “I have to do this because if I don’t I will lose my sanity and return to my addiction. You may not be like me, but I appreciate the opportunity to tell my story because it provides me with the path to continued spiritual sanity. Thank you listening to me.”

## Fear of relapse:

- For many of us, including the writer of these essays, relapse has been a fact of our lives. Once we have relapsed once or twice or three times or continually for a period of time, we lose our confidence in our own recovery. This is a natural feeling. If it happened before, we worry that it can happen again.
- Again, the solution is learning how to tell our story. Relapse can be part of our story. We can use it to good effect—if we can develop a sense of what we are doing now that is different from what we did before. We can describe the mistakes we made and what we learned from those mistakes.
- Relapse can occur from two basic reasons.
  - The *first* is that we were not abstaining from all the foods, ingredients, and/or behaviors, that we should have, so we developed uncontrollable cravings that continued to require us to indulge. In other words, although we thought we were abstinent, we now know we were not.
  - The *second* is that we were not working the Steps with the urgency that we had to, or in a way that worked for us. This can mean that we didn't work the Steps through to Step Nine quickly enough to gain the spiritual sanity we needed, so our mind found a way to persuade us to return; or it can mean that we were neglecting Step Ten, or Eleven, or Twelve, so we lost our sanity and our mind found a way to persuade us to return.
- By the way, if the cause of the relapse was not working Step Twelve, as it can often be, because we are afraid to sponsor, then that is a great opportunity for us to express our gratitude to people for listening to our story, because Step Twelve requires us to do so!

## *Other public media of communication:*

Press, radio, films, and television are obvious forms of public media. But what other forms are there? It can be a subtle issue. Here are some examples:

*Meetings not covered by the public media (funerals, community associations, celebrations, health forums, parties):* Most of these are cases in which we can take advantage of any opportunity to tell our own story. They are not public media issues. We have to be vigilant, however, to make certain that if there are public media issues that we explain to the media our Tradition Eleven. This is standard practice at OA's World Service Business Conference and Conventions where the media are invited.

*Signage in publicly-travelled areas (hotel or hospital lobbies, health fair expositions):* With respect, none of these is a public media issue. Advertising an Overeaters Anonymous (as opposed to the vague "OA") event taking place in a particular location—whether that event is a weekly meeting or a convention or assembly—is an opportunity to carry our message to anyone passing by.

What about privacy? Maybe someone outside of OA will see someone going to a meeting labelled as Overeaters Anonymous. This is, of course, not an issue of anonymity but of privacy.

But why aren't we happy, rather than embarrassed, to be able to say, "I have a life-or-death addiction, and I am taking steps—literally!—to recover from that addiction." Imagine how we would react to someone who said, "I was a horrible drug addict/alcoholic/gambler taking actions that horribly affected me and my family and my friends. And now I am doing something about it by working the Twelve Steps." Our reaction would clearly be one of admiration and respect. We have to learn to treat ourselves that way.

### *The Internet:*

In its early days, the internet seemed to be a private medium, where someone could write on a website and feel that it stayed with that website. With the creation of major search engines, however, the internet became much more public. Anyone who uses their names or images on a public website or a social media platform and talks about being in Overeaters Anonymous can now be identified as being a member of OA through simply searching their name alone.

Does that make the internet a public medium? There can be honest differences of opinion on the issue.

On the one hand, a search can identify a person as an OA member. On the other hand, the only audience on the particular website is basically people who are interested in compulsive eating. Can the fact that one can be identified as an OA member by searching the name of that person qualify as a public medium?

Before the internet existed, one could surreptitiously follow another person to observe what that person did and with whom that person interacted; one could attend an OA meeting by professing interesting in OA and then seeing who is there. In other words, there were ways by which one could find out whether a person was an OA member or not. It is enormously easier these days to find that out on the internet, but that is a matter of degree, not of kind.

This is a difficult issue. It is perhaps better on this issue to be safer than sorrier, and to do one's best not to use their full names or chapter images and identifying as a member of OA on websites that are open to the public and able to be searched.

## ***Chapter 13:***

### ***We come full circle from carrying our message to living the spiritual life:***

**Tradition Twelve: Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all these Traditions, ever reminding us to place principles before personalities.**

**AA Long Form:** *And finally, we of Alcoholics Anonymous believe that the principle of anonymity has an immense spiritual significance. It reminds us that we are to place principles before personalities; that we are actually to practice genuine humility. 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.*

*Tradition Twelve is all about spirituality:*

How do we come to anonymity as the spiritual foundation of all the Traditions? We undertook a personal journey, one that started with Step One, resulted in Step Twelve, which ultimately required the Traditions to help us in our Step Twelve work.

The Big Book was the first book that described the spiritual journey of what became a whole raft of Twelve Step fellowships. The writing of the Big Book required the creation of a set of instructions for recovery from alcoholism that could be used by alcoholics who did not have access to any of the individuals who formed the original group of recovered alcoholics (as they described themselves).

*The journey of the Twelve Steps:*

Essentially, this was the journey that they described, as adapted to our compulsive eating addiction:

- Admitting that we had no power, on our own, to keep ourselves from returning to behaviors and/or foods that caused us uncontrollable cravings. (Step One)
- Having some (maybe a little glimmer, maybe a lot, of) hope that following the path of other recovered compulsive eaters who found the ability to stop from returning to those behaviors and/or foods might give us what they had. Accepting that we all had deep fundamental beliefs that we wanted to live according to, but that in our addiction we had become blocked off from those beliefs. (Step Two)
- Accepting the possibility that our real problem was that we wanted everything to go the way we thought it should go, rather than the way it did go or the way it might go, and that we could no longer try to be in charge, because that simply created more problems than it solved. Committing ourselves to follow a path in which we tried to give up trying to be in control. (Step Three)
- Going through a process during which we discovered that our knowledge that the past didn't go our way and the future would probably not go our way (resentments and fears, respectively) created conflicts with others and an inability to live according to our deepest values. This process involved:
  - Doing our own self-analysis that revealed our defects of character (Step Four);
  - Sharing that analysis with another human being in order to get helpful feedback and a sense of validation (Step Five);

- Accepting that if we continue to live with our defects of character we could not be connected to our deepest beliefs, and therefore being willing to have those defects of character removed (Step Six);
  - Committing ourselves to our deepest beliefs so that those defects of character would be removed (Step Seven); and
  - Cleaning up, as much as practicable and without harming others, the harms we have done to other people as the result of those defects of character so that we could dedicate our lives to our deepest beliefs (Steps Eight and Nine).
- Realizing that the process of Steps Four through Nine have, at least for the moment, taken away the blockage between us and our deepest beliefs, have removed our defects of character, and that miraculously we are no longer tempted, for the moment, to return to the behaviors and/or foods that caused us uncontrollable cravings.
- Keeping our connection with our deepest beliefs, and thus keeping our recovery, by:
  - Continuing our process of self-analysis and cleaning up any problems we continue to create (Step Ten).
  - Dedicating ourselves each day to doing better the next day by reviewing the day that has passed, planning the day that is ahead, giving up control to have things go our way, reminding ourselves whenever we need to that we are not in charge, and realizing that we can trust our intuition to make good decisions (Step Eleven).
  - Helping others who share our compulsive eating addiction to journey on the same path that we embarked on in Step One, with passion, commitment, and gratitude (Step Twelve).

*What we have learned from our journey through the Twelve Steps:*

The theme of the Steps is clear. We cannot be in charge of anything. We have to let go of trying to be in control of anything. We have to live the best life we can live, according to what we deeply believe in, but we cannot control the world and people within that world and must let go.

The whole lesson of the Twelve Steps is that for those of us in this world who are addicts, trying to control anything will send us back to our addiction.

In the process of the journey we have taken through the Twelve Steps, we have learned that our attempts to be in charge have not only harmed us, not only harmed others, but have also at times been quite wrong. We learned that we have made many mistakes. We cannot control others, and we cannot try to be in charge of outcomes.

We have learned that we therefore cannot trust our own judgment, especially when that judgment is made without a sense of connection with our deepest beliefs. We can be committed to our own path in life, and—so long as we work Steps Ten through Twelve—we can be relatively certain that we are doing our best to live according to what we most deeply believe. That is the kind of certainty that comes through giving up control, not by asserting it.

We have learned that we had been spiritually sick, that others we had judged were also spiritually sick, and that we were no better, and no worse, than other people in this world. Some might be more spiritually sick than we are, and some less, but it is all a matter of degree and not of kind.

We have learned to be grateful for the miracle of recovery, because we know that we could not have received that miracle if we had not given up control and trusted in our deepest beliefs.

This is the sum of the spiritual principle that the Long Form of Tradition Twelve addresses specifically, and summarized in our Tradition Twelve: Humility, gratitude, acceptance, love, tolerance, patience, pity—these are the words that must be imprinted on our brains. It is in that context that the word “anonymity” takes its meaning. Personalities are unimportant. The differences between us are insignificant. Spiritual principles are essential. They are the basis of our recovery.

*Tradition Five began this study, and Tradition Twelve ends it:*

Step Twelve requires us to carry our message of recovery through the Twelve Steps to those who still suffer. As we have summarized it in other chapters, that is:

- We used to be addicted compulsive eaters who could not stop returning to behaviors and foods that caused us uncontrollable cravings.
- We abstained from those behaviors and foods and worked the Twelve Steps of Overeaters Anonymous.
- As *the* result of those steps, we have had a spiritual awakening.
- This spiritual awakening has provided us with a power greater than ourselves.
- This power greater than ourselves has given us sanity over our compulsive eating; and
- This sanity is such that we are no longer tempted to return to what we have abstained from.

If we don't carry this message, we will lose our recovery. That is the lesson of Step Twelve. As we have said at length in previous chapters, OA exists specifically—through Tradition Five—as the means by which we as a group of people who have recovered can carry their message to as many compulsive eaters who still suffer as possible.

The Traditions tell us how we can work together to carry that message and how we relate to the world outside of OA to make sure our message is clear and uncompromised.

- *How we can work together:* Traditions One (need for unity), Two (how we reach decisions), Nine (we remain unorganized), Four (autonomy of each group), Seven (self-supporting), Eight (non-professional), and Three (OA membership), describe how our groups are to fulfill their purpose without being organized, without any rules.
- *How we relate to the world outside of OA:* Traditions Six (no endorsement), 10 (no opinion on outside issues), and Eleven (public relations policy), describe how we make sure our message is clear and uncompromised.

In examining all these Traditions, and applying them, we must remember the lessons we have learned from the Steps throughout our entire journey of recovery.

At the heart of the spirituality of our recovery, therefore, is the sense that we cannot afford to try to be in charge of anything, other than our reaction to life, and how we act if based on our intuitive relationship with our deepest beliefs.

So anonymity is no more and no less than the acknowledgement that we have been given a gift through the Twelve Steps and have humbly accepted that gift *and* the responsibilities that come with it.

*The Traditions Police:*

The writer of these essays was for too long a time a member of a secret underground group within OA known to some of us as The Traditions Police; we weren't organized, but we could easily identify ourselves. It was our job, we felt, to enforce the Traditions exactly as we interpreted them, or as we felt OA interpreted them.

We did not hesitate to say exactly what a particular Tradition meant and how it was to be applied and, most importantly, when it was breached or violated or broken. Sometimes we were more gentle than other times; sometimes we just seethed internally; sometimes we spoke up nicely; and sometimes we were downright forceful and even rude in our meetings.

We forgot the real message of the Traditions, the humble spirituality of anonymity, the sense that we are no better and no worse than anyone else, that we could be wrong, that other people could be right, that working together we may come up with ideas that no individual might have come up with. We created more problems than we solved.

This is the beauty of the Twelve Traditions: They represent the combined experience of AA's and OA's history, with suggestions for OA groups to ponder and resolve, always in the context of recovered OA members working together, through consensus, to achieve a group conscience as to how best to carry the message of recovery to those who still suffer.

There is no one correct interpretation or application of any Tradition. The best we can do is to use the model of group conscience to come to a consensus about the application of a particular Tradition to a particular situation with a particular group.

*Other issues relating to anonymity:*

Seen in this context, it is clear that anonymity is not confidentiality or privacy. Anonymity is a spiritual foundation of humility, love, tolerance, acceptance, gratitude.

Confidentiality and privacy, on the other hand, are not spiritual principles: they are courtesies owed to every OA member, who alone has the right to declare themselves a member of OA, and who alone has the right to decide who hears which part of what they share in meetings.

The Big Book says at page 125, "Another principle we observe carefully is that we do not relate intimate experiences of another person unless we are sure he would approve." Of course that's true. That's true for anyone we know, not just for an OA member. This right of privacy and confidentiality is important, but is not part of the Traditions. It is a courteous form of respect for another human being.

Differentiating between anonymity and confidentiality serves a few purposes. First, it emphasizes that anonymity is truly a spiritual principle and not simply a matter of privacy. Second, it restricts the concept of anonymity to the basics of our recovery, and doesn't allow anonymity to be misused as a way of restricting information.

If an OA member is in the hospital and would like visitors, or another OA member seeks to expand their usefulness by getting referred to those who still suffer, and has given permission for their name and contact information to be given to anyone who might be interested in OA, it is not a “violation” of anonymity or of Tradition Twelve to provide this information to another person.

As well, this context of anonymity means that there cannot be any stars, any leaders, any experts, anyone who comes from a position of being above anyone else. One can see how this plays out in many different traditions.

No one has the right to say that they know better than anyone else. At the same time, everyone has a duty to listen to others because, as Bill put it in more religious words, the sole dissenting voice in the room might be the voice of God.

We cannot allow personality issues to conflict with our group purpose. Personalities have to be parked outside the room.

Because we are no better and no worse than anyone else in the room, those of us who are more comfortable being assertive have to learn to hold back, and those of us who are uncomfortable with speaking our mind have to be encouraged to speak our mind.

*The real question to be asked about a potential Traditions “breach”:*

When we are concerned about something that is happening in a meeting, the question is not “Is this a violation of Tradition X?” The real question to be asked is “Will this help or hinder the message that our group has to carry?” *That is the important question.* Everything else is putting form over substance, fear over faith, resentment over acceptance.

We can easily forget that fostering recovery of individuals in a meeting is a far more significant action to be taken than worrying about whether individuals in a meeting do one thing or another. The meeting should constantly ask itself: *Is this meeting fulfilling its primary purpose of carrying the message of recovery through the Twelve Steps to those who still suffer?*

If the answer to that question is a clear, or even a qualified, “no,” then what can be done to change that? This is a question individual members and the group can ask themselves.

Maybe there are things happening in the meeting that distract from its primary purpose; and we should find a way to try to prevent them from happening, of course. As we have discussed a number of times in this Traditions Study, there can be all kinds of ways that an OA meeting can get distracted from its primary purpose.

But maybe, just maybe, the real problem is not something that is distracting the meeting from its primary purpose, but rather the problem is that *the meeting is simply not focusing on its primary purpose.*

And maybe, just maybe, an OA meeting needs to have more recovered people in it. To get more recovered people requires individuals who have recovered to help individuals who have not. It requires that commitment of time and energy, without hope of reward or power or prestige, that Step Twelve is all about.

*Our primary purpose and sponsoring:*

One of the problems that often occurs in OA meetings is that there are not enough people able to help others work the Steps—to sponsor them. Perhaps we need to re-examine how we sponsor. Are we still spending a great deal of time with sponsees who have already recovered? Doesn't that take time away from both the sponsor and the sponsee, so that they don't have time to help those who still suffer? Perhaps we have to rethink how we are carrying our message.

People who have already recovered have the Step Twelve responsibility to help others *who still suffer from our addiction*. Therefore we have no more Step Twelve responsibility to help people who have already recovered. We may enjoy being with those who have recovered, but it is not Step Twelve work to be with them, unless meeting with them—to discuss sponsoring, for instance— will help them to help others recover

*We have a way out for people with our addiction:*

Concentrating on the purpose of our meetings also requires a clear understanding of what the compulsive eating addiction is in order to make certain that the people who come all know whether they really do have a desire to recover from compulsive eating.

They should not be coming because they have a desire to combat loneliness or find a comfortable place to be accepted or become more spiritual or even to find a diet or a support group. They should be coming because they have a compulsive eating addiction and are searching for recovery from that compulsive eating addiction.

And let's not forget Rule 62, discussed in our first chapter: "Don't take yourself too damn seriously!" Let's not forget that the Big Book says at pages 132-3: "But why shouldn't we laugh? We have recovered, and have been given the power to help others. . . . We are sure God wants us to be happy, joyous, and free." Why shouldn't we be happy? Why shouldn't we live in the joy of being able to be useful? Why shouldn't we be light-hearted, and not take ourselves so seriously? We have learned to have faith in letting go!

At the heart of our Traditions, then, is this sense that we are part of a group of people who have a common way out, and who join together in harmony, that we seek or have found recovery from our compulsive eating addiction and want to help each other help others. We are no better and no worse than anyone else.

We are part of a group, perhaps for the first time in our lives not trying to rise to the top or fall to the bottom, but being a friend among friends, a worker among workers, a member of the family (as Bill puts it in the Step Four chapter of the AA 12&12).

We have found a purpose in life. Our dark past, our history of a difficult life, can be transformed into a way of giving others hope: after all, if we can do it, so can someone else.

Our purpose is to be useful in life, and Overeaters Anonymous provides us with the means by which we can be instantly useful.

*Concluding remarks:*

We thus bring to an end our study of the Traditions. The Traditions are brilliant formulations of how to live a life in recovery and usefulness. Let's keep our interpretation and application of them relaxed, humble, and forever focused on our primary purpose!