

## Chapter Twenty

### I Was Stunned

The Board of Trustees had been in their closed meeting for over four hours when they sent for me. Upon entering the room, I noticed that the smiling faces and jovial attitude normally present at breaks in their meetings were totally absent, and concluded this was indeed not going to be a pleasant discussion. This was the first time the trustees had excluded me from any discussion in the entire time I served with NA, so my heart was pounding quite fast.

Jack was at the head of the table, and the only empty seat was at the opposite end. As I sat down, the door was closed, and after a moment Jack began.

"There is no way to make this easy or pleasant, Bob, but the board has been discussing your tenure as Executive Director. No one has ignored the invaluable contribution you have made to Narcotics Anonymous and all the things you have done for the fellowship. No one can take those things away from your service to NA.

"But the board is of the opinion that NA is going in new directions, and that you would probably not be able to adjust to the kinds of changes that are necessary. It is not that you have done something wrong. The board just feels that you will be unable to cope with the changes that will come about. Because of this, we feel that a change in management of the office is in the best interests of the fellowship. The trustees are therefore recommending to the Board of Directors that your contract not be renewed.

"Is there anything you would like to say about this?"

I was stunned! Waves of heat flushed through me as I tried to comprehend and organize my thoughts. Dozens of ideas whizzed by, but I was too numb to catch them or even make sense of the images they carried. I was fighting against this electrical storm in my mind as I tried to fathom why they had decided this — what should I say, what words could I use? In just a few seconds my world had been turned upside down. Without hint or warning, the Board of Trustees had decided to boot me out. Through the shock, I began to feel like I was inside a roaring fire, racing in circles. I needed to say something, but what, and will the words come out?

What could I say? Having had no warning that day or any day previously that the trustees felt a change was necessary, or that I could not adapt to the changes taking place, my mind could not come up with a rational defense.

The World Service Conference had ended only thirty days before, during which I had been lauded by the trustees and the conference for another year of excellent performance. In the weeks leading up to this meeting, not one member of the board had suggested to me or to the office directors that I should not be retained another year.

Yes, there were three trustees who considered me their enemy because I frequently opposed their power grabs, needless junkets at NA expense, and self-promotion, but I never suspected they would convince the others that I should be disposed of. Nor would I have suspected that those among the trustees who had been my close friends for many years would have, in four hours, turned against me in such a callous manner. Frankly I was unable to comprehend what Jack meant, or really why they had reached the conclusion that a new Executive Director was essential immediately.

Throwing out an Executive Director with no notice is simply a stupid idea unless the individual is guilty of some negligence or misconduct. And if those were the issues, every such charge requires an open and fair hearing. But I was not being charged with negligence, incompetence, dereliction, or commission of some crime, or even of some mistake! I was not being given an opportunity to rebut their contention. They had already made up their minds. I was guilty of some supposed vague inability to adjust, and the trial was over. End of discussion.

Suggesting I was unable to adjust to changes in the fellowship seemed then, and seems now, simply ludicrous. No one had been closer than I, or involved so directly with the tumultuous changes in NA for the previous fifteen years. Not only was I at the center of those changes, but many of them rested on my ability to foresee their need, convince others of their value, and then later implement them. Many important changes were simply put in my hands by the conference, the trustees or the directors, and I was charged with the duty of getting them done. If there was any quality or characteristic I possessed, it was ability to adjust.

Despite my disagreement with the trustees' assessment, and my demonstrated ability to adjust to changes, I didn't have many options for a response. From the very beginning of my tenure as an employee of NA, I had warned against allowing the Executive Director to become entrenched. I had even forced the issue by writing in my contract in 1983, that to remove the Office Manager (later changed to Executive Director) required only a phone call or letter of notice from

the Board of Directors. I had even set up that my contract was for a year only and renewal was at the pleasure of the board.

In some ways I was guilty of having prepared the hemlock the trustees were now serving me. The black humor of having built my foundation as Executive Director on such thin ice escaped me then, but later I would shake my head in disbelief. Equally unfortunate for me at that moment was the fact that I had trained nearly all the trustees over the years and made sure they knew how easy it was to remove me.

Perhaps I had done it all wrong, and should have taken the more traditional approach. The more traditional approach used by Executive Directors was to write multi-year contracts that are hard or expensive for boards to break.

Most of the trustees knew about that tactic. Jack, for example, had become Executive Director of his treatment center twelve years earlier, in part, because of my efforts to remove his predecessor. He and Chuck L. were subordinate staff members when their Executive Director grossly violated good management and even misappropriated resources of the treatment center for his own benefit. But the guy was smart, and had a lifetime contract as Executive Director. I had helped their Board of Directors remove him, despite that contract. Jack became his replacement, and Chuck had later become his assistant. Greg P. had been a trustee at that time and was a friend of the Executive Director who was removed.

More recently, all but a few of the trustees had been active in the fellowship when Jimmy K. had fought to the very last to remain as office manager, and they knew how that conflict had rocked the fellowship to its foundation. Having gone through that had surely imbued the trustees with determination to act swiftly to remove me.

All of the trustees knew the language in my contract that allowed for nonrenewal. That factor had been openly announced at the conference several years running, and I had discussed it with each trustee personally over the years. Two were even more directly familiar with my contract as they had served as chairperson of the Board of Directors while I was Executive Director. Additionally, Stu, then the then chairperson of the directors, had participated in the four hours of their discussion. I certainly had the deck stacked against me.

But all was not lost. The trustee recommendation, even if strongly argued, might not be sufficient to sway the Board of Directors when they had to decide the issue. I had worked with most of the office directors for years, and most professed strong friendship and support for continuing my management. Most also felt the trustees were more than a little out in the ozone when it came to practical de-

cisions about fellowship matters. It was still possible, I knew, that the directors might reject the Trustee recommendation and renew my contract for another year or more. And I knew that many Executive Directors would have argued for a delay, and then used the time to marshal member support in opposition to such a removal.

Unfortunately, these were not options for me.

In the education I had given to this room full of trustees about organizational management, I had stressed that internal fights over the Executive Director had to be avoided at all costs. I had lectured them at business meetings that a board that engaged in a bloody fight with its Executive Director over tenure is dumb, and that such battles are dangerous to the interests of the organization. And the way to do that was to have the Executive Director on one-year contracts. Furthermore I had educated them on the notion that such easily-ended agreements served to protect the interests of the organization, and the interests of the organization were paramount. Employees could come and go, but the volunteer management had to always have the upper hand and be in control. Yes, I had indeed planted and cultivated the seeds of my own removal.

Several trustees who had participated in the discussion guessed correctly that I would not fight against their decision. I had shared openly over the years with all of them that I loved Narcotics Anonymous too much to cause a fight over my tenure. I was never told what was discussed at the meeting, so I don't know how much of my vulnerability was disclosed, but if some were as smart as they pretended to be, they should have made sure everyone knew.

But this complex analysis really came later. At the moment I sat there with Jack's words still ringing in my ears, I was trying to formulate some kind of response. I had a decision to make and no time in which to make it. They were waiting for me to respond, and my response would set the stage for a destructive fight or my capitulation.

Still in the trustee meeting, my head felt like it would explode and my heart was now racing so fast I could feel the blood rushing through my body. I was still trying to come up with some response. I had a faint sensation that I could see myself from outside my body and I was looking at me from the right side of the room and everything seemed to be moving in slow motion. The few seconds of Jack's statement and the moments before I responded seemed like a long, long time. I knew I had to say something, and I wanted the words to be right and clear. I was afraid, however, that my voice would be so quiet and low that no one would hear me. My vision had so constricted that I could not see anyone except Jack. I don't even remember who was sitting where.

Finally I was able to muster a response. I don't remember precisely what I said, but this was my message:

"I don't agree with your recommendation. I think it is wrong. But I will not fight your recommendation. I believe NA should not have a fight between the Executive Director and other service boards. To do so would be harmful to the fellowship. As you know my contract is at the pleasure of the directors so there should not be a bloody fight over my removal.

"It is a matter of confidence. If the service boards cannot have the confidence of working well with the Executive Director, the Executive Director must go. As it is obvious that your confidence in me has gone, then I must go."

I may have said more, but I don't remember. The trustees did not record their meeting, nor did they have minutes or a written report made of their discussion or my few minutes with them.

Jack must have said something, because the meeting then broke up and I rose to leave. My head was spinning so much that I don't recall if anyone said anything to me in any way. My first recollection was that outside the meeting room Stu T., office chairperson, suggested we have dinner together and figure out what to say to the Board of Directors when their meeting started in slightly less than an hour. So off he and I went to discuss a quick termination from what had been the center of my life for seven years.

Some trustees, whom I had considered friends, even close friends, had evidently not stood in the way or fought to retain my services. Heavens! They didn't even fight to have the removal handled with grace or loving care. As I walked away from that meeting, and later that weekend from the joint meeting of the two boards, these "old friends" avoided me, wanting, I believe, to hide their guilt and shame at having been so callous and insensitive. In the years since that night, only two of the trustees have made any effort to communicate. With those trustees I had felt were my friends, I was disappointed that I have never initiated further contact either. The rest still avoid me, although I have been easy for them to call or visit. It is almost like I had died, and they did not have any further need to recognize their insensitivity or that I had ever existed. Yes, I was hurt by this experience, and it took a long time for me to recover from such a heartless removal. But time has washed away most of the sting of that hurt.

For those who truly considered me their enemy, I am sure there was jubilation. Their victory was easy for me to reconcile. They knew that I believed their motives and actions were based on their own

pride, ambition and quest for power, and that their actions were harmful to the fellowship.

For the few with whom I had a more neutral relationship, I was quite disappointed that they failed to consider the damage such a sudden and ill-conceived change would have upon the office and the fellowship at large. Their willingness to approve the removal of an Executive Director so suddenly and without cause is testament to their lack of qualification for service on such an important board.

The disappointment of that day and the sadness of the last month at the office were not representative of my experience with Narcotics Anonymous. There was a time, even when controversy swirled around me or the office, that the support and affection from the boards, committees, and the fellowship at large, was strong and sustaining.

Even in departing, I knew the vast majority of the members who were aware of world service matters would be stunned and saddened by my leaving. They would not understand my removal any more than I did. Unfortunately it was my task to permit the last month to proceed with as little notice as possible and allow no further controversy. A wave of opposition to my removal now would not have served the interests of the office or NA, and had to be avoided. My career at the World Service Office had to be sort of like the adage about the month of March: "In like a lion and out like a lamb."

And truly I had come into the position of office executive with the force of a lion. But it was not I that was the lion; it was the conference and the group conscience driving it. On that day in 1983 when the conference voted to suggest I become the office manager, there were whoops, hollers and a standing ovation. Practically everyone in the room was showing their favor and support for the decision. By that vote, the conference had, for the first time, demonstrated its authority and control over its service boards.

At each conference since then, I had received standing ovations for the year's work and overwhelming support for continuing as the Executive Director. At the conference just a month before, the participants had again loudly demonstrated their support.

But now the conference was over, and there was no one to effectively combat the closed-door kangaroo court session that had engineered my removal. Only if I fought against their decision and remained as Executive Director until the next conference was there a possibility I could win against such odds. That would likely paralyze the office and the relationships among the world service boards. The only choice was to pack my bags and leave. I went without a fight. "Out like a lamb." As the full time paid Executive Director that tens

of thousands of members knew about, I had an obligation to set a proper pattern for my successors.

As I left with Stu, I pulled Anthony and George aside to tell them the trustees had voted to recommend that my contract not be renewed. They were stunned, and in total disbelief. I asked that they not tell the others, as I felt I should do that when I returned from dinner with Stu.

At dinner I didn't ask Stu what had been said in the meeting or how he had argued against the idea. Deep inside I felt he had probably been mostly silent or provided encouragement for my removal. We talked about practical matters.

I proposed a separation payment equal to seven months salary. As I mentioned in previous chapters, in the previous three contract renewals, at my suggestion, the board had not given me a raise. Instead the board had agreed to provide an additional month to my severance payment. In this way I had earned three months' severance, which was in fact earned compensation, but the payment was deferred until I ceased being an employee. The contract renewal Stu and I had discussed only days before, was to extend my earned severance to four months. I had five weeks unused vacation time and was due more than twenty working days in compensatory time for working extra days and overtime without pay.

By suggesting seven months, I was including the already-earned compensation, including vacation, and comp-time and that the board pay me two months salary, unearned, for the sudden and unwarranted termination. I also suggested I was not willing to leave immediately, but would expect and require to remain on my job for an additional thirty days. Stu agreed to these, and promised to get the directors to agree when their meeting convened.

I don't know what was going through his mind about how the office was going to be run or get through a period without an Executive Director, but we did talk about it. He was aware of my opinion, but I restated it during dinner.

We had on staff two capable and skilled assistant administrators in George and Anthony. Both were fully able to run their departments without supervision. This had been proven over and over again because of the long trips I was often forced to take. If the Board of Directors could provide the buffer between them and the power grab that would take place in my absence, the office would continue to run efficiently. The most critical matters would be to keep the trustees from taking direct control of office staff or their work assignments, and from getting control of office spending decisions that I customarily made in conjunction with the WSO board chairperson and the conference chairperson.

We finished dinner quickly and returned to the office. The trustees had ended their business for the night and departed while the directors were just getting there. I had George assemble all office staff members who were still at work. I told them what the trustees had decided, and that I was not going to fight to stay on. Everyone was shocked; several were soon in tears.

Stu called the board meeting to order shortly after six, and although we were still missing a few members, we proceeded with the agenda. There were about three hours of work to be done before we got to the item marked as Personnel. Stu and I moved forward on all of these matters without having first informed the board of what the trustees had decided.

About nine o'clock we finally got to personnel matters. At that time Stu explained what had taken place, and about our dinner conversation. The board was totally shocked. Martin C. quickly said that he didn't care what they wanted. "We need Bob," he argued. "He is an excellent Executive Director and there would be chaos without him. Their idea is just nuts!" He was in truth voicing the feelings of nearly all the directors. Martin and several others were willing to go against the trustee recommendation, even though it would cause considerable controversy. Randy J., at his first meeting since becoming a director was incensed. Always quick to raise his temper, this afforded him a new opportunity. Others were just as heated, and had some of the directors from the early eighties been on the board — such as Kevin F. or Mac M. — they would have simply told the trustees to shove their idea where the sun don't shine.

After the shock had set in for a few minutes, I quietly explained, that I was hurt by the trustee action, but that NA could not afford to have a fight over the Executive Director. We had been through that once, and by having a one-year contract for me, we had set it up to avoid fights like that again. "Essentially," I told the board, "the Executive Director is an expendable person. The volunteer leadership needs to have someone they can work with, and Trustee confidence in my ability to work with them has vanished. I believe it is best for the fellowship that the directors follow the trustee recommendation." After a little more discussion, I left the room so the board could discuss the matter in private and make decisions on the conditions of my termination. After about forty minutes, I was called back to the meeting, told of the board concurrence to the trustee recommendation, and we proceeded to finish the evening's agenda.

I don't remember sleeping that night, but periodically took aspirin to relieve the pain and swirling in my head. The following morning the board continued with its agenda matters until just before lunch when we finished. The directors each spent some time with me

sharing their dismay and disbelief. They also expressed their appreciation and that of a grateful fellowship for my years of service. Each expressed their continuing affection and concern for my well-being. On Sunday afternoon I returned to the office and, as usual, took two separate carloads of departing directors to the airport. I didn't cry until the last had left.

There were four visiting members to the weekend's events that had a ring-side seat. Present this weekend were representatives from Hawaii and Ohio. They were also shocked when told of what had happened. I remember telling them that I was stunned by the decision but the system in place protected the fellowship against a fight over tenure of the Executive Director. I have often wondered what they thought and what they told the folks back home.

On Monday morning Stu and Jack came to the office to preside over a staff meeting at which they explained what had taken place. It was an undignified way to treat a delicate situation. The impression given was that I was being removed for some unspeakable and unannounced cause and that Stu was going to take immediate control of the office. "Yes, Bob was going to remain on the payroll, the staff were told, but without any authority. Supervisory staff members were to meet with Stu at the end of each day and he would make all necessary decisions." From the way Stu and Jack presented the matter, they conveyed to the staff that all trust in my decision-making ability had been withdrawn.

The staff were in complete shock. For most it was hard to comprehend. I had hired most of them, trained them, organized them and made the whole team work. Many felt a loyalty to me that was stronger than their loyalty to the impersonal office that was to emerge from the weekend meeting. There was disbelief, and this time, lots of tears.

It was a tough day. One after another the staff visited my office for moments of personal grief and expressions of affection. Several cried nearly all day. Around five o'clock that afternoon, Stu arrived and commandeered George's office. He proceeded to take full and direct control of the office. I wasn't even invited into the meetings he had with the staff.

I spent the next few days comforting the staff and taking phone calls from people who were just beginning to get calls about what had happened. I tried to work as much as I could, as there were a lot of projects on my desk that had to be finished or ready to turn over to someone else.

Stu came each evening after working at his own job to meet with George, Anthony and other staff members. This caused a lot of friction within the staff and some lasting resentments. I took Friday off

and drove to southern Utah, where I owned some property, and escaped thinking about anything but the beauty of the red hills and blue sky.

I was sad that my service to NA was having a sudden and unhappy end. But I was also confident that the office was being left in good hands, if they would let George and Anthony do their jobs. George, Anthony and the staff were well-organized, knowledgeable and capable of doing their jobs regardless of who was Executive Director (or even without one). We had assembled a talented team of members and local non-members who worked hard for NA. There was very little employee friction at the time, and the level of commitment to the fellowship was extremely high. The office had been organized into a fellowship services department and a support services department, responsible for internal operations. George ran fellowship services and Anthony managed support services.

George had been the RSR from Florida in the 1981 conference. He served as vice-chairperson for two years under Bob R., and then served two years as chairperson. Shortly after his second term expired, we hired him as my assistant in the overall management of the office. We needed his vast fellowship knowledge and experience. NA had invested thousands of dollars in him when he was an officer of the conference, by sending him to many places around the fellowship to gather information and serve the fellowship. No one at that time was as well prepared to do the job he was given. George is a quiet person with tremendous restraint and tact. Yes, he does have opinions — strong ones at times — but he is a professional, dedicated to the service of NA.

Anthony had been a member of the host committee of the 1986 World Convention in Washington DC. Later, when the Convention Corporation was formed, he became a member of that board and served with considerable distinction. His knowledge of conventions was unparalleled and he was organized, assertive and straightforward. He was just the man you would want as the captain of your team, for any venture. In 1988 the position of H&I coordinator became vacant, and I called Anthony about the job. I wanted Anthony because I knew he would be an excellent choice for the H&I job, but more because he had the skills, temperament, background and recovery that we needed in management employees. He was surprised at the call, and more surprised at the job offer. It took some time and persuasion, but he accepted, and brought his family to Los Angeles.

Later, when the support services division was to be created along with the administrator position to manage it, Anthony was chosen for the job from among eleven qualified candidates. He organized the department, trained and supervised the staff, and managed it with ex-

cellence. Anthony demonstrated that same ability when he managed the World Conventions from 1988 to 1990. Without his knowledge, experience and hard work they would not have been nearly as successful.

George and Anthony made a good team for NA, and since I left the office they proved that confidence in them was well placed. The rest of the staff were also steady and dependable. Several, like Bob S., Lois G. and Vida M., had been with the office for many years, and remained the rock upon which the office rested.

These and others were very close friends, and the sudden decision was as tough on them as it was on me. But their dedication to the office was strong enough that they continued to work just as hard during that last month and after I left as they had when I was there. Throughout the staff there existed a spirited sense of purpose that was not dependent upon who the Executive Director was. Even so, there were strong bonds of affection, and over the last weeks, I spent time privately with each member to talk about their beginning with the office, our special relationships and our hopes for the future.

The fellowship at large didn't learn of the removal for a week or more. A joint letter from Stu, Jack and Ed D., conference chairperson, was sent to the fellowship announcing the decision. I felt sorry for Ed at having to apply his name to such a muddled and ambiguous communication on such an important decision. The closest they came to announcing a reason for the change was "it became clear to those present that there needed to be a change in the way the office functioned within world services." The unwillingness of the trustees to tell bluntly that I stood in the way of their power grab was a measure of their duplicity.

After fifteen years of adjusting to the changing factors and forces within the fellowship, it was strange to be told I was unable to adjust to the changes that loomed on the indefinite horizon. Looking back after these years, the only functional or organizational change that followed my termination was the attempt by the trustees to take complete control of world services. And yes, I would have continued to oppose that centralization of power.

Reaction from the fellowship was mostly shock and disbelief. Members, groups and committees discussed what little they were told. Many wrote letters to the board, and many wrote directly to me. I received letters and messages of affection and support from places as distant as Australia, Canada and Germany along with many from within the US.

In the final weeks I wrote a closing report for the board, about a hundred and fifty pages including attachments, in which I outlined many of the concerns I felt they could not afford to neglect. I gave

considerable emphasis to international fellowship needs, resisting the power grab taking place, and expressing my appreciation to the fellowship at large for their affection and support.

I also wrote a farewell letter to the fellowship at large, hoping the board would permit it to be published in the *Newsline*. I was pleased that it was. I reminded the fellowship of the disastrous fight over my predecessor, and implied my unwillingness to engage in that kind of battle. I expressed my regret at leaving, and my appreciation for the support and affection that had been shown me during my service with NA. I was not terribly vague in offering several warnings about personality cults and power grabs.

During my last days with the office, we had two going-away parties. The first was the official departure party, but the second was the personal farewell to friends. Both were filled with tears and sadness. But I was leaving a strong World Service Office. It was far different from the one I started working for in June of 1983. I was proud of the changes and the success we had achieved.

The gross income of the office for the year that ended a few months before I became an employee had been \$87,000. There was one full-time employee, a part-time employee and a typewriter that didn't work. In seven years, NA and I had built a service office with forty-three employees, a five-million dollar budget, and branch offices in Canada and England.

When I began my first day on the job, there were probably two thousand meetings worldwide and perhaps six thousand members of NA. On the day I left, there were over fifteen thousand meetings and more than a quarter million active members. It was both pleasure and privilege to have been part of that growth and to have had a significant role in its success. There had been some problems along the way, but the fellowship got from me the ultimate in hard work, dedication and fidelity to the interests of the fellowship.

Narcotics Anonymous had become a strong, viable solution in the worldwide war against addiction. Although our Public Information philosophy kept NA out of the headlines, NA is the only entity that is truly solving the problem. Others may fight the war on drugs, but only NA is fighting the war on addiction — and winning.

It was impossible in 1976, when I first served NA, to have guessed that it would grow to the magnitude it had. But looking back, there was a steady course of expansion. Looking back even further to the very beginning, it seemed even less probable that NA would have become the dynamic, worldwide lifesaver it is.

There is no doubt that I was terribly angry and resentful over my removal. For seven years I had given the fellowship my unreserved effort and determination. I had been faithful to my responsibilities

and had been summarily removed without an adequate explanation. My leaving was poorly explained to the fellowship, and they were left with the impression that I had been removed for some hidden and nefarious reason.

Frankly I'm over that now, and writing this chapter was the start of getting over it. I spent nearly a month writing the previous pages of this chapter. As I wrote, I got through some of the anger and I rewrote it and felt better. And I rewrote it again, and again until it finally reads the way it does. The rest of this book was written two years later.