

Some thoughts regarding our relationship to Alcoholics Anonymous

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The question of just how Narcotics Anonymous relates to all other fellowships and organizations is one which generates a good deal of controversy within our fellowship. In spite of the fact that we have a stated policy of "cooperation, not affiliation" with outside organizations, much confusion remains. The most sensitive issue of this nature involves our relationship to the Fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous. A constant stream of letters is received by the World Service Board of Trustees asking a variety of questions about this relationship. The time has come for another *Newsline* article to shed some light on this important subject.

Narcotics Anonymous is modeled after, though not identical to, Alcoholics Anonymous. Nearly every NA community in existence has leaned to some degree on AA in the NA group's formative stages. Our relationship with that fellowship over the years has been very real and dynamic. Our fellowship itself sprang from the turmoil within AA over what to do with the addicts knocking on their door. So we will look at those roots for some perspective on our current relationship to AA.

Bill W., one of AA's co-founders, often said that one of AA's greatest strengths is its single-minded focus on one thing and one thing only. By limiting its primary purpose to carrying the message to alcoholics and avoiding all other activities, AA is able to do that one thing supremely well. The atmosphere of identification is preserved by that purity of focus, and alcoholics get help.

From very early on, AA was confronted by a perplexing problem: "What do we do with drug addicts? We want to keep our focus on alcohol so the alcoholic hears the message, but these addicts come in here talking about drugs, inadvertently weakening our atmosphere of identification." The steps were written, the Big Book was written--what were they supposed to do, rewrite it all? Allow the atmosphere of identification to get blurry so that no one got a clear sense of belonging? Kick these dying people back out into the streets? The problem must have been a tremendous one for them.

When they finally studied the problem carefully and took a stand in their literature, the solution they outlined possessed their characteristic common sense and wisdom. They said that while they cannot accept addicts who are not alcoholics as members, they freely offer their steps and traditions for adaptation by any groups who wish to use them. They pledged their support in a spirit of "cooperation, not affiliation." This farsighted solution to a difficult problem paved the way for the development of the Narcotics Anonymous Fellowship.

But still the problem that they wished to avoid would have to be addressed by any group who tried to adapt those principles to drug addicts. How do you achieve the atmosphere of identification so necessary for surrender and recovery if you let all different kinds of addicts in? Can someone with a heroin problem relate to someone with an alcohol or marijuana or Valium problem? How will you ever achieve the unity that the First Tradition says is necessary for recovery? Our fellowship inherited a tough dilemma.

For some perspective on how we have handled that dilemma, one more look at AA history will be helpful. Another thing Bill W. used to frequently write and speak about was what he called the "tenstrike" of AA--the wording of the Third and Eleventh Steps. The whole area of spirituality vs. religion was every bit as perplexing for them in those days as this unity issue has been for us. Bill liked to recount that the simple addition of the words "as we understood Him" after the word "God" laid to rest that controversy in one chop. An issue that had the potential to divide

and destroy AA was converted into the cornerstone of the program by that simple turn of phrase.

As the founders of Narcotics Anonymous adapted our steps, they came up with a "tenstrike" of perhaps equal importance. Rather than converting the First Step in the most natural, logical way ("we admitted that we were powerless over drugs..."), they made a radical change in that step. They wrote, "We admitted that we were powerless over our addiction..." Drugs are a varied group of substances, the use of any of which is but a symptom of our disease. When addicts gather and focus on drugs, they are usually focusing on their differences, because each of us used a different drug or combination of drugs. The one thing that we all share is the disease of addiction. It was a masterful stroke. With that single turn of phrase the foundation of the Narcotics Anonymous Fellowship was laid.

Our First Step gives us one thing to focus on, so we can do that one thing supremely well. We carry the message to the addict who still suffers. As a bonus, this wording of Step One also takes the focus of our powerlessness off the symptom and places it on the disease itself. The phrase "powerless over a drug" does not go far enough for most of us in ongoing recovery--the desire to use has been removed--but "powerless over our addiction" is as relevant to the oldtimer as it is to the newcomer. Our addiction begins to resurface and cause problems in our thoughts and feelings whenever we become complacent in our program of recovery. This process has nothing to do with "drug of choice." We guard against the recurrence of our drug use by reapplying our spiritual principles before our disease takes us that far. So our First Step applies regardless of drug of choice, and regardless of length of clean time. With this "tenstrike" as its foundation, NA has begun to flourish as a major worldwide movement, clearly appropriate to contemporary addiction problems. And we've only just begun.

As any given NA community matures in its understanding of its own principles (particularly Step One), an interesting fact emerges. The AA perspective, with its alcohol oriented language,

and the NA approach, with its clear need to shift the focus off the specific drug, don't mix very well. When we try to mix them, we find that we have the same problem as AA had with us all along! When our members identify as "addicts and alcoholics" or talk about "sobriety" and living "clean and sober" the clarity of the NA message is blurred. The implication in this language is that there are two diseases; that one drug is separate from the pack, so that a separate set of terms is needed when discussing it. At first glance this seems minor, but our experience clearly shows that the full impact of the NA message is crippled by this subtle semantic confusion.

It has become clear that our common identification, our unity, and our full surrender as addicts depends on a clear understanding of our most basic fundamentals: We are powerless over a disease that gets progressively worse when we use any drug. It does not matter what drug was at the center for us when we got here. Any drug we use will release our disease all over again. We recover from this disease by applying our Twelve Steps. Our steps are uniquely worded to carry this message clearly, so the rest of our language of recovery must be consistent with those steps. Ironically, we cannot mix these fundamental principles with those of our parent fellowship without crippling our own message.

Does this mean that AA's approach is inferior to ours, and based on denial or half measures? Of course not! A casual, cursory glance at their success in delivering recovery to alcoholics over the years makes it abundantly clear: Theirs is a top notch program. Their literature, their service structure, the quality of their members' recovery, their sheer numbers, the respect they enjoy from society, these things speak for themselves. Our members ought not embarrass us by adopting a "we're better than them" posture. That can only be counterproductive.

The simple fact is that both fellowships have a Sixth Tradition for a reason: to keep them from being diverted from their primary purpose. Because of the inherent need of a Twelve Step fellowship to focus on "one thing and one thing only so that it can do that one thing supremely

well," each Twelve Step fellowship must stand alone, unaffiliated with everything else. It is in our nature to be separate, to feel separate, and use a separate set of recovery terms, because we each have a separate, unique primary purpose. The focus of AA is on the alcoholic, and we ought to respect their perfect right to adhere to their own traditions and protect their focus. If we cannot use language consistent with that, we ought not go to their meetings and undermine that atmosphere. In the same way, NA members ought to respect our own primary purpose and identify ourselves at NA meetings simply as addicts, and share in a way that keeps our fundamentals clear.

As a fellowship, we must continue to strive to move forward by not stubbornly clinging to one radical extreme or the other. Our members who have been unintentionally blurring the NA message by using drug-specific language such as "sobriety," "alcoholic," "clean and sober," "dope fiend," etc., could help by identifying simply and clearly as addicts, and using the words "clean," "clean time," and "recovery" which imply no particular substance. And we all could help by referring to only our own literature at meetings, thereby avoiding any implied endorsement or affiliation. Our principles stand on their own. For the sake of our development as a fellowship and the personal recovery of our members, "our approach to

the problem of addiction" must shine through clearly in what we say and do at meetings.

Our members who have used these sound arguments to rationalize an anti-AA stand, thereby alienating many badly needed stable members, would do well to re-evaluate and reconsider the effects of that kind of behavior. Narcotics Anonymous is a spiritual fellowship. Love, tolerance, patience and cooperation are essential if we are to live up to that.

Let's pull together our energies into our personal spiritual development through our own Twelve Steps. Let's carry our own message clearly. There's a lot of work to be done, and we need each other if we are to do it effectively. Let's get on with it in a spirit of NA unity.

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