

When I first received this loving invitation from Blair to share on Young People in AA I was not too enthusiastic and could not seem to get started. I mean, it is obvious that I am not a young person in AA. I was 34 years old and today I am 64. But I guess some things never change. When I arrived at the doors and I looked around the rooms and saw a sea of grey hair I thought to myself. These people are really old. God! The average age must be deceased. When I think back, even at those meetings, we of a common age banded together in fellowship and I realize today that without those younger friends in AA I may not have stayed sober. We did a lot together outside the meetings. In fact I spoke with a young friend recently. He sobered up when he was 22 and now 24 and he told me his biggest challenge today is finding people his own age to do things with outside the meetings because most of the young people are coming and going. Mostly going. At one point I gave him a local young peoples' web site and number but when he phoned, the number was disconnected and the web site was down. He tells me that he feels accepted and has learned to mix with the older people but he would still like to find some people his own age.

Before AA began alcoholics were not considered as such unless they were in state mental hospitals. They had years of wreckage behind them, broken families, lost careers and health problems, both physical and unrecognized

mental disorders. If an alcoholic was in a sanitarium or psychiatric ward they were considered a heavy drinker. If one was rich they were called a dipsomaniac, if one was poor they were called a rubby. The bottom was low. There was nowhere to go. Remember there was no book; there was no programme of action. Low bottom drunks were locked up and so many died. In the first couple of years there was no one over age forty except Dr. Bob. Everyone was 35 – 40 yrs old. So AA began with middle aged men and extremely low bottoms. Even when considering the name of the book, one of the titles suggested was One Hundred Men. Then a woman sobered up named Florence in 1937. And she said, hold it! It has to be called 100 men and one woman. So they threw that idea away because it was too long. Along came a man named Joe Warden who had recently been released from a psychiatric ward. He was wet brain due to alcoholism but it was his idea to name the book Alcoholics Anonymous. He was then readmitted to the psychiatric ward and died there of alcoholism. He was only out for two weeks, just long enough to name our Big Book. Just long enough to give us a name which only goes to prove a good idea can come from anywhere. There is no mention of groups in the first red book edition. We did not have a name as a society and we eventually took our name Alcoholics Anonymous from our book. There were only two groups, one in New

York, one in Akron and a third formed in Cleveland. There were perhaps 40 members in all staying sober six months. When the BB was published in 1939 there were only six members with over six months of sobriety. After the Big Book was published in 1939, there were 110 groups .There was now a programme; some unity of thinking. Even our first AA pamphlet was written by a man who was three weeks sober. Six out of twenty of those original story writers in that first book committed suicide. So that is a little history documented by the fourth member of AA who sobered up in 1937 and helped write the Big Book. Jimmy Burwell is credited with the phrase “God as we understood Him.

One of the great strengths of Alcoholics Anonymous has always been that everyone is equal and everyone is welcome. Nobody is important but everyone is important. AAs tradition of anonymity, self support, and singleness of purpose all contribute to this true equality of fellowship found in AA meetings. Special groups have sometimes been viewed with suspicion, alarm and sometimes outright hostility within AA. Nevertheless, special groups based on a commonality of interest beyond their common alcoholism – gender, age, race, occupation, sexual preference etc. have existed within AA since the earliest days. In the mid 1970s feelings against “special purpose” groups were at their

height. Many members felt that no AA group is special and, therefore, that no group should be labeled as such or even the impression that it is special.

However, the fact is that such groups do exist. These groups felt and still feel that “labels” serve the purpose of attraction and are not intended to imply exclusion of alcoholics.

Women’s groups were probably the first special groups to form. That was in 1941. It was difficult for a woman to approach AA in the late 30s and 40s. The men were suspicious about their motives.

Such a far cry from that kind of thinking, where we have many special composition groups in AA. Doctors, lawyers, gay, lesbian women, men, blacks, seniors to name a few. This is to include remote groups like Native American because of their cultural ties and groups who speak a language other than English. Up until the early 2000 we as an Area seemed only to be able to relate to remoteness as tied to geography but that was only our experience. We were to find out that the true definition of remote really did represent geographical, cultural or language. Not all three had to be present to feel cut off. These specialty groups arose for different reasons and yet the same in a way.

Homosexuals believed that the specifics of their relationships would not be

understood or accepted in regular AA meeting. Our first black trustee served 1983 to 1987 where he reported that he was not welcome at white meetings in Washington DC. It was brought out then that in keeping with its Traditions, AA has not taken an aggressive or advocate role with regards to racial causes, but has "let it happen." The result was that in many parts of the country, integration came earlier and easier than segregation. In other words the forming of Black groups in order to stay sober.

Young people are convinced that their life styles are not understandable to older members. And professionals feel they get more understanding from those they consider their peers, particularly in matters relative to their conduct in their professions when they were active alcoholics. Furthermore, there seems to be more of a genuine concern about anonymity one person reported, among people whose professional status calls for licensing, homosexuals who are in groups made up mostly of heterosexuals, and young people who were once involved illegally with drugs. Members of special groups are certain that many of their kind would be unable to get themselves to AA if they had to enter through a regular group. Whether or not you agree with this thinking, the point is that many alcoholics do believe in it. And they believe in seriously enough to form these special groups and make them work.

When AA was young, most of its members were not. There has always been a sprinkling of young alcoholics, in fact many of AAs old-timers today came in at a relatively youthful age or they would not be around today. The first International Convention in 1950 included a session for Young People in AA because there were enough young people. And in the late 50s and 60s more young people started showing up in their twenties and teens. There were several reasons for this trend. Awareness of alcoholism was much higher, so those with a problem sought help earlier. The stigma was steadily reduced. Many, likely drugs hastened their progression into alcoholism and their inevitable depression. Later on treatment centers turned out large numbers of young people. So in my view, there was somewhere to go unlike the early years. And when a kid-rejecting his family or they rejecting him, and who ran with a street crowd found acceptance in AA, he attracted some of his peers. It is still the same today. So AA is upholding its primary purpose to carry the message to the alcoholic who still suffers.

Young people started banding together in their own groups. The first known group for young men and women under 35 was formed in Philadelphia in 1946. Then in San Diego. A 1961 Grapevine Article on the so called "Youth Groups" states. A young people's gathering was held in Vancouver by 1962. Vancouver

held its first YP Convention at the Hyatt in 1979. In some places they were started with high hopes and energy but little stable or wise leadership. Groups turned into social clubs, or Traditions were broken and the groups died.

In 1958 ICYPAA was formed. The international Conference of Young People in Alcoholics Anonymous held their first convention in Niagara Falls. Under the ninth Tradition which says “we may create service committees directly responsible to those they serve”, the primary purpose is to carry the message to younger alcoholics. There was no intention, nor is there today to be separate from Alcoholics Anonymous and Young People in AA uphold the twelve steps and the twelve traditions.

With the advent of a publicly accessible internet in the mid 1980s it was inevitable that AAs would find a way to band together. One of the first on line groups reported 200 members by 1986. Lamplighter is an email group with hundreds of subscribers and they report a 23 year anniversary. By 1994 the Living Cyber Committee was formed to coordinate the hosting of a hospitality suite at the International Convention in San Diego. They reformed shortly afterwards to become an Online Intergroup. The heart of the online intergroup remains the same as any other intergroup to carry the message to the alcoholic

who still suffers. The online community devotes a great deal of energy to making the online experience as close any face to face group. They maintain that online is not a different king of AA but simply a different means of carrying the message. They established a relationship with the New York General Service Office and through that office with AA service worldwide. About the time I served you as your delegate in 2005 the online groups are now listed AA world service directories as well as service material.

As younger people find a new way to communicate, we face the challenge of anonymity in the digital age. Questions arise as to anonymity and how Traditions 11 & 12 applies in today's digital age. The pamphlets Understanding Anonymity and AA Guidelines on the Internet provide good resource material. Some feel that social media sites are inherently private and not public so it is not at the same level of press, radio and film. The best thing about all this is young people are aware of this issue and are discussing it. Yes, anonymity breaks have been going on for forever and Bill and Bob and a handful of old timers were the biggest anonymity breakers of all. That is how and why our Traditions were written. The Traditions were not written out of success but of colossal human failure. AA has considered a presence on FB. Before we move forward on FB we must be very clear on how we can respect AA anonymity in

social media and we have not achieved any such clarity so far today. I am not a Twitter user but I understand that a post on that social media site can be re posted again and again. We must remember that we do not know who is seeing our photos, reading our words or finding our links to other Web sites. What we put on the Internet in social network sites is public knowledge and we must not assume otherwise. That is why Anonymity is the spiritual foundation.

"Nothing matters more to AAs future welfare than the manner in which we use the colossus of modern communication. Used unselfishly and well, it can produce results surpassing our present imagination." That was in 1960 so Bill was truly a visionary despite his self confessed tendency toward a power driven personality. Never before have we had so many new ways to communicate with each other and stay connected and to reach out to fellow alcoholics. Bill and Bob had no idea. The fundamental idea still exists. We must always ask ourselves how better we can reach the alcoholic with our principles employed as guides that help us navigate unfamiliar seas and never keep us weighed down from moving forward. However, it is our spiritual responsibility to keep our 36 principles in true perspective and to pass that on not only to the newcomer but to those who may not fully understand what Anonymity: our spiritual responsibility in the digital age is all about.

I will touch on one more subject briefly before I close. And that is the dually addicted alcoholic. We have a few pamphlets on this and Tradition Three explains it well. For reasons I cannot explain, some young people coming into AA today seem to carry the banner of a drug is a drug and that if they are dually addicted they must pronounce that at AA meetings. Drugs are not new phenomena. I stand before you as a grandma of dual addictions as with many AA members my age. The old-timers simply told me “Don’t smoke, shoot, snort or swallow. Let alone the old timers and sedatives which they often took on twelve step calls in the early days, or a member such as I who grew up in the sixties.

When I am at a meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous I am an alcoholic and an alcoholic only. Anything apart from that sets me apart from you and I may become terminally unique. When I hear I am an alcoholic/addict I hear, I am just a little bit more than you, a little bit different from you. It is not to make anybody wrong; it is so we can keep our focus. AA offered up its 12 steps for free to any movement that wants to use them to make their respective lives useful and happily whole.

Unity is our most precious possession, our best guarantee of AA's future. May we all value and preserve it today and all the tomorrows to come. It is that special quality that makes our fellowship unique. It is the cement that holds our society together, the platform that makes AA service possible. It is more than an agreement on basic principles. It is a bond fashioned of shared experience such as this one we share here tonight. We must find a way to transition the young people in AA sitting on committees into general service because the newcomer is the heartbeat of AA. The focus of the AA General Service Structure does not have as its focus to change AA but rather to adapt and confront to a changing world. Above all, our spiritual responsibility is to maintain and encourage unity.

Connie M. Panel 55 Delegate

(20 minutes)