

A Design for Living: Traditions and Concepts

2002 | Part 1 | Reading edition

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Transcript

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Better. I have always had difficulty with things getting between us and tables always do. My voice is diminishing as I get older. And I'm from Colorado and I'm so dry right now we can't even breathe. So can you hear me back there now? I don't want to push it because I still have to talk tomorrow night too. My name is Don. I'm an alcoholic. I'm a member of Alcoholics Anonymous. My home group is simply known as an AA group. We looked at the long form of the third tradition and it says that any two or more alcoholics gathered for sobriety may call themselves an AA group. So that's what we call ourselves.

We had an interesting time. Our central office told us we could not register under that name until we reminded them that they work for us, not the other way around. We can register any damn way we please. Sometimes you have to do that with your central office and your general service coffers. Welcome. You missed all the good stuff. My little group's a small group on a good day, 20 people on an average day, eight to 12.

We meet at six o'clock every Friday morning in St. Joseph's Hospital in Denver. Very little deadweighted our meeting. You really want to be there. You don't get up that early. Our format is very simple. We do a step, a tradition and a concept back to back. It may be in one meeting. It may take six weeks. We really don't care. That's the format. The second Friday of every month belongs to our GSR and our central office rep. They've been to a district meeting or to an assembly and we want to hear about it.

And if they take 10 minutes, that's fine. If they use the whole meeting, that's fine. I'm not here. Our legacy is that there are three legacies. There's personal recovery. There's unity. And then there's the service to today's AA and tomorrow's AA. It takes all three to really be part of this thing for me and the people I hang out with. See, I know clearly what my responsibility is today. It's to find an alcoholic who doesn't know that if you're an alcoholic you don't ever have to drink again and show them precisely how I recovered. That's my responsibility today.

But I have an obligation to the past and a duty to the future because my real job is to make sure that when somebody comes through the door 50 years from now, when I'm dead and gone, they get the same shot I did. The same opportunity. So what I've had to learn over the years is not so much what I do in AA. It's what I don't do. I don't change things. And I've got to tell you the truth. In the big book, in the service manual, in the traditions, there's all kinds of things that would read better if they just said it this way.

I have some ideas on how to improve us. I promise you you will never hear them. This is a Godfather favor. This gathering, I'm amazed that you would come out. I'm here for another function and someone called in a Godfather favor so we have tonight and tomorrow. And I'm really kind of glad to do this. I also, every Wednesday night at my house people show up and we study the traditions and the concepts. And have a great meeting. We have about 5.30. We have a potluck because people learn better when their stomachs are full.

Learn that from the Salvation Army. And then we talk about things. Sometimes it's studying the manual. Sometimes it's the application. And the task I've been given tonight and tomorrow, according to what I saw on

some paper somewhere, was the concepts as they apply to our life. And we will get to that because they are living, breathing principles. They not only help me in my relationship with our service body, but on my job and in my home.

They're very real. They're very alive. They teach me how to do things. So, I don't know where we're going to start. I do know, oh, here's some more. Come on in. They have to sit down front. Do you have chairs? Oh, yeah. latecomers have to sit in front. Shucky darn pillows, yeah. Hi. So, I don't know where to start because I don't plan these things. I do know this. The whole journey starts with my personal recovery. One of the reasons for our traditions and our concepts is somebody has to have a place where I as a newcomer could show up and AA would be there.

I got brought into AA in the Colorado State Penitentiary. My sobriety date is December 26th, 1967. I always mention that because I think we need to start telling people today that relapse is not a necessary part of recovery. What it does happen, continuous sobriety is what we really offer here. You don't ever have to drink again. We don't promise you a pain-free life or joy and happiness every minute, but you don't ever have to drink again.

I did not know I was alcoholic when I got here. I was certified by one government agency as a sociopath type two. I don't know what it is. It's just really not good when it isn't. I've studied it. It's worse than I thought it was. You too. Hear that laughter? That's a dangerous woman. Be careful. Federal parole officer said I was a psychopath. The psychiatrist said I was a manic depressive drug addict because I had hidden my alcoholism behind high drama.

I don't, none of you have ever done that. Christmas night in 1967, I had surrendered totally and completely and forever. After having done a thorough inventory of my life, I took a two-month supply of amphetamines and shot them up my arm and drank everything in the house and laid down and died. I couldn't take it anymore. I couldn't stand being me one more second. That seems to have activated a certain kind of spiritual power because I woke up the next morning and I shouldn't have.

I didn't feel good. I had no idea what was wrong. I just know that I'm a failure at living and a failure at dying. I'm in a body that won't quit and the mind won't work and I'm breathing, which put me in a good position. I'm willing to go anywhere anyone says and do anything anyone says if it means I don't have to be that anymore. So my experience of God says that He will not interfere in your life in order to give me something.

But God uses whatever is at hand. At the time I was on federal parole and in a state jail. So I went to the penitentiary instead of the hospital because that's where you were. I bring you to that place because I did not know what was wrong with me and I would not have picked A or any other place. In fact, I made a deal with the state and the feds to go to the federal hospital. That's what I signed up for. So I get to live with the fact that I can't even get locked up in the right place. That's how much power I've got.

At a level below thought, things I can describe today, what went into operation was I began to just do whatever you said because this is where I was brought. This whole business, recovery, service, unity is all based on one thing. I am willing to comply. Now that's a word that alcoholics can't stand. I will not only comply, I will do things that are contrary to what I would rather be doing. I will say yes to any reasonable AA requests, which means almost every AA request.

I mean, what the hell do I know is reasonable and what isn't? Along the way you learn some of those things. They had a place for us to go and they did outreach. When we were in the fish tank, three guys came over, inmates, ugly people. Except for my sponsor, Bruce, he was pretty kind of cute, but really was. And I like girls and he was cute. They came over in our third week to talk to us. They were reaching out. They were following one of the basic principles. The primary purpose of any group is to carry its message to the alcoholic who still suffers. And that's what they were doing.

They were taking it from their meeting room and carrying it to us. And what they carried was a very simple basic message. Ugly number one got up and he said, my name is Doc, and I'm an alcoholic. And that means that I'm powerless over alcohol and guards and drugs and all of the other circumstances in my life. And my life has become unmanageable. And if any of you smart bastards think you can still manage your lives, look at the reward the state just gave you for the nifty job you've been doing.

Your very best thinking got you the penitentiary you're not doing too good, are you? That's love. Now that kind of truth without love is cruelty. And that kind of confrontation without a real answer is brutality. So we don't do that. But they loved me in a way I couldn't have described to you. They cared about me because they took their time out and came to see me. And believe me, on the first day we all got to, hey, this is all about me.

There were 30 of us in the room, but they came to see me. They were talking directly to me. They had set up some things based on recovery that they knew would work. They understood clearly that the basis of recovery from alcoholism is in the steps of alcoholics and animals. The process by which alcoholics identify and get rid of self enough that they can begin to become servants instead of takers. That clears the mind enough so that I don't have a busy mind anymore because it's not thinking so much of me and my needs.

When I do think, at least once in a while, I think of you and your needs. And these changes take place, and that's what I needed, was the kind of a place where change was apparent. Recovery's about change. Just not drinking is a terrible thing to offer any alcoholic. Subrides are worse than an oral for an alcoholic. It's the main reason we drink. Can't stand sobriety. Yeah. Sobriety with purpose that I can live with.

The purpose is what's called for here. See, I killed myself because I've become useless. Once I've become useless, I must either surrender or die. And I had nothing to surrender to, so I died. Which is the same thing. The first message of alcoholics anonymous is that you can become useful. You and I, with the message we carry, walk into the lives of people who are dying and going insane, and their families are dying and going insane, and the neighbors are going insane.

And just because we're there and willing to pass on a little something, they don't have to die, and the children get to grow up a different way. That's pretty important stuff. I'm not the kind of person that ever was able to get out of bed and go to an eight to five job. I have a passionate need to have passionate needs. I need a cause. I'll give you 15 hours a day for a cause. I won't give you two hours of decent work for a paycheck.

Okay. That's what that is. What I'm trying to do is bring these principles to life. What they had set up, we had a regular A meeting on Friday night where they let real people in from the outside. Very important. But the more important is that they understood that recovery came from doing certain things that are laid out in a book of alcoholics anonymous. So we weren't allowed to go to that regular meeting for five weeks.

On Saturday and Sunday, we gave up our yard privileges in our movies, and they had established what they called a 12 step study school. And we had to go through that whole school first. We did not know what that was. I'm talking about me and my partner, Jim. Jim was an interesting case for me. I knew why I was in the penitentiary. I had done what they said I had done. I belonged there. I knew I belonged there. Jim didn't know why he was there.

He had done, whatever he wanted in this room, has been terrified we might have done one day. In an automobile drunk in a blackout, he killed some people. So he was doing a three to five for vehicular homicide with no memory of the event. He wasn't a criminal in the same way I was. And I was interested in him. See, I believe if you showed up here tonight, you're already spiritually awake. You just may not know it. But you're already awake.

I came here awake. I wouldn't have spotted what I needed to spot. I wouldn't have heard what I needed to hear. So Jim and I decided to go to this goofy 12 step study school. Thank God they had it set up. I had no idea what it was. My fear was not the penitentiary. I've been in three of them. I went to the first one when I was 19. And nothing to it. You learn who the players are, and you be careful where you play, and you get through it.

Okay? And if you don't, you die. That's all. Just kind of like out here in Spokane. Only more concentrated. These guys were slick. They made their presentation in a fish tank. A peeling enough that we would want to come join with them. And the first thing they did, which is one of our basic principles, is they invited us to this school. It had been so long since I didn't invite it anywhere. I'd have gone anywhere. I needed to learn how to live on the outside.

My fear was not being locked up. It was a certain insurance knowledge that sometime in the next year and a half to seven years, I'm going back to the streets of Denver. And I can't stand the thought of living the way I was anymore, and I don't know how else to live. And one of the promises they made was that your very best thinking got you the penitentiary you're not doing too good. But we can show you how to learn a new way of thinking.

We can show you how to learn to live a way of life that'll make sense to you. Man, that was good news. See, I've been trying to live my life so it made sense to you. It never made sense to anybody. They have taught me how, and I now live a life that makes sense to me. And it doesn't make sense to a lot of people I know. And I really don't care. I was telling Charlotte on the way over. When I got here, I lived in an eight by ten toilet.

Actually seven by nine, I got to see it the other day. They had my old cell on display and it's smaller than I thought it was. My bathroom is bigger than where I used to live. I live in a resort if you want the truth. It's shameful. I have a different room for every mood. Isn't that nice? A lot of rooms. A lot of rooms. Well, we just got rid of all our kids. It really freed up a lot of rooms. I don't have that many moods anymore either.

That helps. Who am I going to learn this? Remember, I'm surrounded by people who have proven beyond a shadow of a doubt. They don't know how to live free either. That's why we're all where we are. We don't know how to live. But we decided to go because it made some promises. And because of the example that I was seeing in these three men, that's why I stayed here. Didn't always alcoholics or alcoholics anonymous to get me sober was not my reason.

My reason for staying here and paying attention at the beginning was change. I needed to be changed. This is about demonstrating, not about learning. Bruce demonstrated change. This was a man who, when he told me his story, when he was 17 one day, he woke up feeling that nobody cared whether he lived or died. So he started to drink in order to kill the pain, and that day it didn't kill the pain. It intensified. And the only emotional response to feeling like you're an outcast is outrage.

There's no other honest response. Deep within us, we all know we're supposed to be here. And anything, me or you, that indicates I'm not pisses me off. And in that rage, he decided to hell with it, went down and robbed a jewelry store, and then killed two people on the street and shoot out with the police on his way out. The man telling me that story was not capable of committing that act. And I watched him. One of the examples, I learned a new kind of courage by watching him.

He was demonstrating the welfare of the group comes first, the first tradition one day. We had 23 self-help groups in that prison. We ran the prison. Well, we did. That's the way it is. There's a constant tension between the two opposing forces. And one of the others decided they wanted our meeting room for our 12-step study school. What that was was for five weeks, they read the big book to us, shared their experience with it and of it, and then gave us assignments out of the book.

We actually worked the steps in five weeks. And then in the sixth week, I was given the new group coming out of the fish tank, the help of my sponsor. I was to do what I was really all about, pass on what I had been given. It's the reason I'm still here, you know, because I don't know any other way to do it. And that seems to be okay. But then we're going to tamper with our room and our time for the weekend. And the word came up to the school and I watched Bruce who up till that time known in maybe six months was my ideal of spiritual.

He was calm, he was self-possessed, he was cute. He was just, when I was locked up at night, he'd come by and visit with me. And I realized he's getting out of his cell whenever he wants to. I want what he has. The spiritual life is very practical. Always handled everything well, and all of a sudden he gets pissed. Face gets ready, stiffened up. He said, I'll take care of this. In a tone that told me he is heading for trouble.

Stomped out of the school and down the stairs, he said, I'm going to go see Wilson. Mr. Wilson was the associate warden of treatment. And Bruce is going to go see him and take care of this with attitude. And I know where Bruce is really going, he's going the whole. You don't stomp into Wilson's office with that kind of attitude. We didn't see him for 15 or 20 minutes or so. Then he came back all relaxed and cute again.

I don't know what he said. I know today what he did between the time he hit the bottom of the stairs and he got to Wilson's office. Somewhere along the way he paused and asked for the right thought or action. I know that because I've talked with him. He demonstrated a kind of courage that I didn't know existed. He exemplified the first tradition. He risked his freedom, his position, his status, his way of living in that penitentiary for us.

He could have stood still and just let it happen and he'd had the weekends off for a while. It would have been a whole lot easier, but he risked the whole thing for us. And that's what that, when I finally got to it and realized that's what he's talking about. The welfare of the group comes before any individual including himself and he knew he was the only one that could go see Mr. Wilson. Because he had demonstrated something else over the 17, well it was about 14 years that he'd been there.

You could count on him. Continuity and regularity are part of recovery. There are certain ways we do things and we do them every time. And that's why we have credibility. The wall really believes that if they call A for one of the people they love, A will show up. It's very important that we do that, you know. If the doctor calls, if the police call, if the family calls, it's very important that we keep our commitment.

And our commitment is we will show up. We don't have any magic answers, but we will show up. We, uh, we aren't a girl arrested out of our meeting one time because of the first tradition. The old Henry Young people's group. Call the cops on her. She came to the meeting drunk which didn't bother us. A lot of people do. Do you still get drugs in your meetings? We do. There are places in this country where they won't let them in.

Isn't that awful? Yeah. As long as they're not disrupting, I don't care. She came to kill her husband. Yeah. He was twice as big as her and he was a sissy. Little big old thing. She wasn't as big as you are. It took five of us to hold her down. When she was drunk, she was mean as a snake. She was a danger. Is that you? I could tell. Two dangerous women in the same place, boy. The welfare of the group had to come first. This was a grave disruption.

Her safety and ours. And it was more than we could handle or should. So we called the police because we knew they would take her to detox. She was made welcome the next week. That's not a problem. But the welfare of the group had to come first. Bill learned that after we had been around for a while. I've got to get through some of the traditions or we don't get to the concepts. Okay. As the groups begin to grow, somehow or another it seems to be in the nature of alcoholics to be a little bit fractious.

We're doing fine. You and I in this group. And then he comes along and we have to shift a little bit. If she comes along, damn this is getting uncomfortable. And about eight or ten of those and all of a sudden I got to start a new group. Because he said something I didn't like. She backed you to hell with both of them. He'll come with me. And we started a new group. And three weeks later we were all friends again. But when we came back from the Soviet Union, I had the privilege of going to the Soviet Union in 1988.

And at the Moscow Beginners Group, which was the only group of Moscow, I got home and about three months later got a letter from Eugene from that group. And he says we now have three groups. Because it was a disagreement with the leadership. So they had gone off and started two more groups and all I could say was wonderful. That's the way it works, whatever it takes. And that was occurring at the beginning. Dr. Bob had one style, Bill had another.

They balanced each other nicely, but when Bill went back to New York, he got two different styles. And Clarence Snyder came along and he had a different style. And the styles is all that's different among us by the way. Unity is easy to preserve as long as we understand. It's all about style. There's people that all kill. If they get ten feet with it near me. There's other people that I can work with and they will live and you'll kill.

So we need to stay together so we can pass folks around. Because I don't want anybody to die. Thank you. Thanks, Mom. Bill had an awful time selling the traditions. Because they do one thing and it's apparent what they're going to do if you read them. They take the individual power away from individuals. None of us really like that. Particularly since we've been power is so long and all of a sudden now we have some. This takes the individual power away from the individual.

The whole idea of the trusted servant is an interesting idea to me. I've got fourteen different things I want to tell you all at the same time. I get excited about this, by the way. It became apparent and the big book was written because of the awakening of the fact that the integrity of our message is critically important. Throughout history with just one or two exceptions alcoholics don't survive. The Washingtonians had nearly 200,000 members but they got lost in some other things and within three years were gone.

Most of the time it's only every now and then. Dr. Young said her own hazard. Now and then an alcoholic survives us through a vital spiritual experience. Most of us die. That's still true today, you know. Most of us die. One of the best events that I have been involved in this year was in Iowa. We were doing a traditions weekend. On Sunday morning a lady who had been in and out for about eleven years and was back for about a week had a convulsion right there in the middle of the meeting.

Kind of stopped everything. She went down and her sponsor went down with her. The EMT who was a member of the group froze. He doesn't know to this day why he froze but he froze. New EMTs came in an ambulance the whole thing. The crowd got to see alcoholism. See we get to meetings where everybody seems to be sober. We don't see alcoholism much anymore. They got to see it so we spent our last hour talking about what are you going to do when she comes back?

Because she will come back. She's proven that. After eleven years she just keeps coming back and the group conscience was that while we'll open her with open arms somebody needs to tell us lady. If you keep this up you're probably going to die. And we don't want to see you die. It's one thing they hadn't done yet. We talked about it. We preserve unity by talking with each other. And unity becomes important. Let me take that into my home.

How do we preserve unity in a home? Most homes get pretty divided particularly when the teenagers become teenagers. I'm with Mark Twain. They should be thrown out about thirteen and allowed to come back about nineteen. He's got some. So the first tradition states a problem for us. The welfare of the group must come first individual welfare is a close second. I prefer to read the long form. I can see it. I use the long form of traditions by the way because they can't be interpreted.

They're clear. Each member of Alcoholics Anonymous is but a small part of a great whole. A must continue to live where most of us will surely die. Hence our common welfare comes first but individual welfare follows close after. A did not get me sober. God got me sober. It brought me to a five and a half months later where I learned to do with sobriety to live with it. So my loyalty to AA is based on the fact that you taught me how to live and you give me a place to be useful.

And I like you. I mean real people bore me in about fifteen minutes. I'm sorry. I don't mean to be arrogant but crab grass is not my top priority. And real people talk about stuff like that. My neighbor wants to teach me how to aerate my trees. I'm really glad he knows how to do that. I'd pay him to come do mine. I don't want to learn. I have this mission in life that has to be taken care of. He's passionate about putting a stick full of water in the ground.

I like him. But I need to be around people who really believe that what we do here tonight may affect somebody's very life. See I can get out of bed with that one. Oh yeah. Don't ever discount your ego. It's one of

the best tools God has. It gets me out of bed. You've got to consider this. I'm truly a reasonably humble man today. I know my limitations and I know I'm just one of the guys within reason. So 1988 they come to me and say we would like you to be on the team that goes to the Soviet Union to tell them about it.

Did I say aw shucks. Put me in the game coach. I can handle that one. Let's go save Russia. Now that only lasts for a couple minutes but that's part of it. If the welfare of the group is going to come first I've got to be passionately involved on a personal level with the group. My group. There's a fine line between my group and my group is the best. Please don't ever see that. That means that if you say that mine isn't.

They're all equal. But it's my group. I'm proud of the fact that there's 12 people wanting to get up at 5 o'clock in the morning to make an AA meeting on Friday. Because they have a passion. Last October I was in that hospital. For an operation and the next day some problems came up and I was rushed back into the ER. This was a bad day and a bad night. And I woke up in some kind of hospital bed and my wife was sleeping in the chair in the middle of the night.

And it occurred to me later that day that there must be people who have people like me who are in that hospital who are members of AA. And they've sat up in a chair all night. It wouldn't be nice to have a place where they could go at 6 o'clock. That's part of our passion. Beats the hell out of putting a stick in the ground. Keep her around. So by group conscience we have a passionate group. We were meeting in a correctional facility.

They made it very clear they really didn't want us there. They made it clear because they weren't sending anybody to us. And they were making it difficult for us to get to our own meeting. Just the whole series of things. And we talked this over about the hospital and went negotiated with the hospital. And we're going to get into some of that. We picked a little committee of people to go negotiate with the hospital to see if they'd give us room.

They couldn't wait to have us there. Love to have us there. They won't let us pay rent. One of our spiritual principles is that we must be self-supporting. So our rent is a case of big bucks every six months. And we give it to them because they know which ward has the alcoholic on it that needs that book right now. And if they run out of books we'll give them another case. That's our deal. Very shortly they're going to have us do an in service for the entire hospital staff.

That ain't a bad deal. Because you know who doesn't know anything about alcohol is the most? Doctors. They get two hours in medical school. And one out of every twelve of them belongs right here. I want to make sure he's sober when he works on me like the last one he did. Then following our meeting we go to breakfast. And if you're new and you came and we're in the middle of a concept meeting just sit still. We'll twelfth up at breakfast.

Besides what we're talking about in the concepts relates to your daily life anyway. And I know from being new the first couple meetings I don't care what they were talking about. I didn't understand a word. But I like the feeling in the room. I like the whole idea that they understood. So the unity becomes a living breathing thing. The welfare of the group. How are we going to bring that about? We're the most independent, self-centered, me me me people on the planet.

Even spiritually awake. We're still doing this for ourselves. It just never goes away. How are we going to even form a group? Well that second tradition covers that. It covers almost everything. How am I going to bring about the first one? For our group purpose there is but one ultimate authority. A loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscious. I love group conscious. I've been to hundreds of them. At the group level, at the area level, at the conference level.

It's a wondrous process. We have business to do. What will our format be? I know what I think it should be. And I'm right. And so I say that. And then you have a variation on it that's a little different. And you're right. And we have six or eight people have talked and I don't know what the hell to think because they all sounded good. There's a reason behind every one of them. And so we go around again and I speak the changes.

It takes time in this group conscious process. One of the worst things that can occur is a vote that comes too early. In all the group conscious that I've been to, it's clearer. If you've talked long enough, you know what the vote's going to be before you ever vote. And if you don't, you haven't talked long enough. It may take three or four meetings before this goes on. I mean confusion is just the name of the game when we're trying to do things to follow the welfare of the group.

What is, what's going to be best for this group? Well, we did it this way in Colorado. Well, you're an outsider. We don't want to be told how to do it here. I know it sounds good, but you ain't one of us yet, kid. That's part of the human condition. So we talk and we talk and we talk. And if you're a good GSR, you know what it's going to be before it's over anyway because you've been listening to the group outside of the meeting.

Most group conscious takes place outside of the meeting. While I'm in a meeting, whether it's a step meeting or a group conscious or whatever, I cannot to this day, almost 35 years over, I still, in any formal meeting, I'm only partly listening to you and part of me is formulating what I'm going to say when it's my turn. And I can't get away from it. Gotcha. But at breakfast, it's freewheeling. There's dialogue. So group conscious takes place over a period of time.

We have a gathering on my back porch every Wednesday night. We do a little potluck at 5.30. And then when we're through just yacking with each other, we have a tradition and concept study. It started because two of our young GSRs wanted to know more about the concepts and the traditions. And then other people heard about it and we got about 10-12 people show up for that every Wednesday. And it's not a formal group. And I wonder why do they drive from where they drive to my house out on the plains?

And I've suggested a couple of times we might find a more central place to meet. They don't want to do that. The group conscious to me is clear. As long as they keep showing up, that's where they want to meet. When they stop showing up, then we won't meet there anymore. And somewhere along the way we'll talk about that. So the application of these principles in my life means I'll become a listener and a watcher. What did he really say?

Unless you've practiced speaking in not really a little off kilter from your peers, unless you've practiced at that when you first say what you're going to say, it isn't completely straight. I always say something just to see what kind of reaction I'm going to get first. It's just the way it is. After you've practiced it, then you can cut through the crap and just go right for it. I have to understand that there are people who cannot just walk up to that microphone.

They have to be called on. Then they can speak. There are people who even in a group setting can't just come out. They need to be called on. So I need to watch. Watch the eyes. Watch the body language. Get to know them over a period of time and you know where they're going to be. And you may have to just urge them a little bit. Make them welcome. That's the application of the principle. Let's take that home. You better have group conscience in a family where there's kids.

Do not let the children run the home. What shall we eat? Cookies. Breakfast? Cookies and ice cream. For lunch, ice cream and cookies. For dinner? More ice cream, more cookies and cake too. Do you have kids? We've had some fun with group conscience. There was a time I had seven children, eight counting my wife, eight and a half counting me. And it was a noisy house. We also had a dog and a couple cats. God, this was a noisy house.

One of the kids was a twin, which is more than two that makes four. Everybody was making noise. The hollering. It was just awful. And I was back when I did things formally. And we called a formal group conscience. And the topic was what are we going to do about the screaming and the yelling? Because it was bothering everybody. Even the screamers and yellers it was bothering. Everybody had to say so. And the best suggestion came from the seven year old.

He said that it seemed to him that the screamers should be made to get up on top of the ice box and jump off on her head. And I got to tell you, that was the best suggestion that we came up with. Which led us into the truth. Because we had talked enough and listened enough. The truth is, if you live in a house with seven kids and two adolescents, a dog and a couple cats, it's going to be a noisy house. That's just the way that is.

But because the screaming and the yelling was bothering everybody, perhaps you could do that on the side, bother the neighbors, not us. We would modify our behavior. That's true group conscience as it plays itself out. It means everybody got to talk and everybody got to listen. And sometimes you have to draw it out of people what they really think. We did a group inventory one time. And the groups I'm in tend to draw new people because we go trolling for them.

We kind of drag them out. Not that your group's bad, but we like fresh meat. And there's kids in there about six months. Good member, just going along pretty good. And when we do a group inventory, we use the traditions as a checklist among some other things. We've gotten to the fifth tradition. What's the purpose of this group? Well, the primary purpose is to carry the message to the alcoholic that still suffers. And he spoke up and he said, I'm a little confused.

I've been coming here for six months and we've never left this room yet. I thought we were supposed to carry this message. Walk us up. So we started taking our meeting then to the Skid Row thing on Sunday and to the youth center and to the jail, our meeting. The way we did things. It was quite a revelation. Skid Row meeting particularly. That's Sunday morning. So you bring in two speakers and you guys have a great time while the client sleeps.

Our meeting was a step meeting. We get in a circle and we're going to use the big book as the key and start a step meeting. And that's what we carried into the detox and into the Skid Row places. We still had a good time, but they didn't get to sleep. And who knows? We may have planted a seed or two. The application of this came from our youngest member, not our oldest. He had a clearer view than we did. One of the things that successful

sobriety breeds is arrogance.

Oh yeah. I can't help it. That's what it brings. We're doing it right. The minute you think you're doing it right, be careful. Because all of a sudden it won't work anymore. Meaning I don't feel good today. If you ever think about that, that's what it isn't working means. I don't feel good today. Don't call me. All of the concepts in essence are the second tradition taken to a business level, an international level, an interaction with other agencies.

It's the second tradition. How do we get group conscience? What is the best thing for this group, whether it's this group of two, this group of twenty, this area, this group we call a general service conference that's still in a group and should operate by the same principles? What's going to be the best? Because we're being watched, you know. We sometimes forget, I know I do, simply because of my activities. I hear a lot of speakers and I get to thinking it's the spoken word that's important here.

People watch us. I paid attention to Bruce because I watched him. I came here a real cynic. Now I'm a healthy spiritual skeptic. I'm wanting to believe that whatever you believe is absolute gospel truth in whatever universe you're living in. But I'm just passing through. What's going to be the best for all of us? What we do in Colorado in terms of style is different than what you do up here in terms of style. I know it is, just because it's different.

I've also listened. What happens in Kansas is a little different from what we do. There's little changes in style but the principles are still the same. One of the things group conscience had to figure out is who gets to belong to A. That's a very basic problem to solve in it. Who gets to come here? What are the qualifications? Tough one. Bill, I don't know whether it was eight or fifteen groups. We were beginning to have, no it was forty groups, if I remember right.

Don't quote me on that. Somewhere around forty groups it got clear. Everyone of them had their own rules. The Wilson group in St. Louis for instance. First of all, Bill had said, please don't name any groups after me so they did right away. They had fifty-some odd rules. In order to come to an A meeting in that group you had to have a note from your doctor saying you were alcoholic. You had to have a sponsor in the old-fashioned terms, somebody who said, I'll watch him so he don't screw things up until he learns how we do business.

I'll teach him the rituals and all that. That's what sponsorship originally was. I'll be responsible for him. If you missed one meeting you and your sponsor had to go to what they called a crash committee and you had to have a written note that had to have an excuse and it better be a good one. If you got drunk, you're out. That kind of thing was going on all over the country. Bill sent out a request to all the groups.

We'd like to have some continuity here. Send us your membership requirements so we can kind of put them all together and have a basic idea. By the time they put them all together nobody could blow a day. Somewhere somebody had excluded even Bill and Dr. Bob, which led us to this one. Our membership ought to include all who suffer from alcoholism. Okay. And of course we have to have a description of what that is and it's in the big book.

It's clearly described. By the way, I'm not going to get into definitions this weekend. I don't like definitions.

They formalize and end discussions. We'll go into descriptions. So our membership ought to include all who suffer from alcoholism. Once we may refuse none who wish to recover. No ought a membership ever depend upon money or conformity. You don't have to dress like I do. You don't even have to take a bath, although in Denver, if you don't for about a week, somebody may suggest to you that you might want to do that.

Any two or three alcoholics gathered for sobriety may call themselves an A group, provided that as a group they have no other affiliation. So there is a requirement. Part of this came from an experience Bill had in New York. You know, he and Ruth Hock had that little office. They were beginning to get a little bit organized so we could feel the mail. Some articles had come out in Liberty and we were getting known when people were running in.

Last time the night my mind doesn't work too good. Okay. Appreciate that. They had a little clubhouse there in New York and the boys called one day and said, Bill, you got to get down here quick. We got trouble. And when Bill got there, trouble was sitting on the front porch. Black transvestite in a purple dress. Oh yeah. Bill got inside and the boy says, it wants to come in. What are the neighbors going to think? It's going to destroy us all.

And Bill's response was to the stuff with alcoholism. He had a drinking problem. He wants to do something. And he says, well he says he does. He says, and then you let him in. Turned out later he was also a heroin addict. But he dealt with his alcoholism and became one of the best AA members and 12 stepers in New York. And that's part of where this developed. You are a member if you say you are. You cannot recover from alcoholism if you ain't got it.

But you can hang out in AA if you want. We don't care. In fact, we got a lot of non-alcoholics in AA today. I'm kind of glad because they're not as cheap as we are. They tend to pay the rent and keep, well they do. I caught myself at that the other day. I was talking with Clancy and they're building a new mission. And he's fundraising so I gave him a dime. It's just automatic. He took it too. So they had created a place where I could come not knowing I was alcoholic.

They created a time and a place and that's group business. What time shall we be there and what are we going to do? Our basic purpose was to get us through the recovery process so we could then join the fellowship and begin to learn how to live and to be given some useful work to do. Something happened to me in that process. There were serious and spiritual awakenings. But there was a time when the administration wanted to kick us out and they couldn't pull it off.

But the inmates made it. A little power play went on and all of a sudden there's a new group of inmates that have complete control of the 12 step study school. See, inmates are always looking for power and AA is an observable place of power. So there's always an attempt to get it. And that meant all of us who were part of the 12 step study school are now out. And I learned a very vital thing about what was going on with me.

I had to do some service and I had a couple guys I was working with. But what I did during the interim was learn to transcribe books into Braille. They had a machine and I learned how to do all that because I had to do something beyond who I am. That's part of what goes on here. That's part of what the traditions will do. This will carry this time and place to get sober beyond who I am and beyond my time on this planet.

How many of you think in terms sometimes of when I'm gone? Would you like to leave a real legacy? Good. So would I. I really would. If it's only one person, somebody is alive because I was alive today and straight on the path. That ain't a bad thing. If your ego gets a hold of it, you'll need 100,000 or it won't be enough. I don't see anybody here. I'm going to worry about doing that. You'll be a member of my family.

Good. Come on over. In fact, if I sponsor you, that's kind of how we start out. You come to my house at six in the morning. And we sit on the couch while you watch how recovered alcoholic and his family prepare for the day. That's why you come at six. I want you to see it in operation. I want you to see the kids and the chaos. And got some wonderful messages came out of that. I have raised an advocate. My youngest daughter is an advocate.

Which is a nice way of saying she's mouthy. She speaks her piece when you like it or not. Anyway, I've got a psychopath there. My family understands because we discuss it. That's probably a psychopath. That's a very dangerous person you're looking at. Because that's who God sends me because I know who they are. And I don't let them out in the house. They're really, they're just scared children. That's all. Anyway, Nutso and I are sitting there reading the big book, Engaged in Life and Death. Oh, he was. This is the one who tried to kill me.

Or threatened to. He didn't try hard. He just threatened him. She comes running down the stairs and stopped at the bottom of the stairs and said, Excuse me. Well, that's attitude. Excuse me. And it shocked me. Because they know what I'm doing. And I know if I don't pay close attention, this nut may get up off the couch. She's going to risk it. I said, what do you want, what do you want, Kelly? She says, I live here too, you know. And you haven't introduced me to this person.

Jesus, what a lesson we got on how to live. Okay. Because that kind of trust is part of what goes on in AA and why the unity of the group and the welfare of the group has come first. I must create an arena whereby new people can sense the trust. There's no bickering amongst. We're here for common purpose. And there's no bickering. They're safe. They can say stupid stuff. I got to two weeks ago. I had a wonderful experience with that in Virginia.

At a convention, I noticed this young black kid and he was nervous. And I liked the nervous ones because I know they're new. I mean, you old guys are all calm, cool, and collected. Just one was nervous. So I cut him out of the pack and sure enough, he's five weeks over. He's a captain for one of the DC Gangs. And he's an alcoholic. He's a genuinely dangerous guy. But I've lived with dangerous people my whole life, including me. Nothing to that. We sat and talked and he tested me. When I let him test me, because he needed to find out whether he can trust me or not, because he's got a very important piece of information he had to pass on to somebody, he wants to stop drinking in the worst way and change his life, but he didn't like A.A. people.

He told me that. It took an hour to create the environment where he could tell me that. I don't like A.A. people. And he told me why. Some jerks had gotten to him, but he just mainly didn't like anybody. But he really didn't like A.A. people. How am I going to stay sober? Okay. That's kind of what we created. We created an environment at home where a 13-year-old can say, you haven't even introduced me to this person. She warned you.

Or a 7-year-old can feel it's safe to say jump off on your head. So you feel safe in your group? One of the first things I felt I was safe here. I didn't have to be smart. I didn't have to be hips looking cool. Somehow or

another I was safe here. They knew who I was and what I was and what I was and they liked me anyway. Despite all of that. I think that y'all want to break. The smokers I know are going. It is 7.15. How about 7.30 we come back and keep moving?