

An interpretation of the spirit and the letter of the Twelve Steps and the Twelve Traditions

by Daniel Laguitton¹

ABSTRACT

It has been said that the disease of alcoholism is a metaphor for the dis-ease of modernity. It is therefore not surprising to find, in the Twelve Steps and the Twelve Traditions suggested by mutual aid fraternities facing alcohol addiction, a blueprint for recovery that is appealing to an increasing number of groups and treatment programs dealing with the multiple facets of obsessive-compulsive disorders or simply seeking healing from modern alienation. As often the case, inspired writings attaining large scale resonance generate such respect that they become enshrined as famous poems or sacred scriptures. Enshrinement, for all its ritual value, can also lead to mummification, unknown to those permeated enough with the spirit of the initial wording not to notice signs of petrification. Translations into foreign languages is also a common source of corruption of the original meaning. To the newcomer reaching the doors of mutual aid fraternities, and to the professional open to education about the Steps and Traditions, an out of date letter tends to cloud the spirit that inspired it, with the unfortunate result that powerlessness over compulsions is often veiled by semantic difficulties. This article reviews the concepts of self-help through mutual aid found in the Twelve Steps and the Twelve Traditions, with emphasis on the limitations of words to convey the spirit of a fundamentally experiential journey of personal and collective transformation.

Une interprétation de l'esprit et de la lettre des Douze Étapes et des Douze Traditions

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RÉSUMÉ

Au delà de sa dimension physiologique, l'alcoolisme constitue un stéréotype du malaise intérieur ressenti par l'homme moderne. Il est donc tout naturel que les Douze Étapes et les Douze Traditions suggérées par les mouvements d'entraide reliés à l'alcoolisme

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constituent aussi des préceptes de rétablissement adoptés par un nombre croissant de groupes et de programmes se penchant sur les divers aspects des troubles compulsifs ou, tout simplement, à la recherche d'une solution au sens d'aliénation qui prévaut dans la société moderne. Très souvent, les textes avec lesquels un vaste public entre en résonance sont rapidement enchassés dans le patrimoine poétique ou religieux. Cette auréole de succès, malgré sa valeur symbolique, peut aussi produire une certaine momification, à l'insu de ceux qui, imbibés qu'ils sont de l'esprit traduit par les textes originaux, sont beaucoup moins sensibles à une certaine fossilisation sémantique. La traduction en langues étrangères ne fait qu'augmenter les risques de contamination de l'esprit des textes. Pour ceux et celles qui se présentent aux portes de l'entraide et pour les professionnels à l'esprit ouvert qui désirent en savoir plus sur les Étapes et les Traditions, des mots désuets offrent l'excuse d'allergies à la terminologie pour éviter d'admettre une impuissance face aux troubles compulsifs. Cet article passe en revue les Douze Étapes et les Douze Traditions en insistant sur la façon dont elles illustrent la relation entre être aidé et entraider ainsi que l'impuissance des mots à traduire l'esprit de ce qui constitue fondamentalement une aventure vécue de transformation individuelle et collective.

INTRODUCTION

In his thorough historical review of Alcoholics Anonymous (Kurtz, 1991), Ernest Kurtz writes: "... if they did not attend A.A. meetings, professionals would have no way of knowing A.A.'s pluralism, the wide variety of recoveries detailed in the stories told at meetings, or A.A. spirituality, "the spirituality of not having all the answers" (Kurtz, p. 403, note 133). "Its very nature saddled Alcoholics Anonymous with a problem rarely directly confronted. A.A.'s Steps and Traditions combine with the fellowship's practice of anonymity to issue an ironic reality: those who best practice them speak least dogmatically about them. The anonymity tradition attempted to forestall the difficulty, but those most loudly public about their A.A. opinion were by that very fact least qualified to speak for Alcoholics Anonymous. Communicating this truth would remain a prime task as A.A.'s story continued to unfold" (Kurtz, p. 260).

This quotation speaks of the perennial difficulty of providing information to the public about organizations whose Tradition eleven states "our public relations policy is based on attraction rather than promotion" on one hand, and continues by "we need always maintain personal anonymity at the level of press, radio, TV and film." Such anonymity is prescribed not only to protect the individual members of the fellowship, but also to protect the fellowship itself from public controversy. It is, last but not least, suggested as a device of ego deflation or transcendence, one of the key prizes of recovery and self realization. It is therefore important, from the onset, to state that the following discussion of the Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions is neither made by a member of Alcoholics Anonymous or on behalf of any other fellowship bound by the eleventh Tradition. By mid 1987, 83 different associations had asked permission to adopt or to adapt the Twelve Steps of A.A. (Kurtz, p. 287). Consequently, it has become easier to experience the wisdom of the Steps and share aspects of that experience with others without explicitly or implicitly identifying any specific organization. The careful

avoidance of signs of affiliation offers also the opportunity to extract from the Steps and the Traditions what is universal. This may contribute to cross-fertilization between totally separate organizations and be useful to younger fellowships which, unlike A.A. or Al-Anon, do not have the benefit of a regular population of "old-timers" embodying a living example of the spirit behind words that were written half a century ago. The extensive experience available in the two mature fellowships of A.A. and Al-Anon keeps the spirit of Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions alive even if the original wording of these texts has been somewhat rigidly enshrined as love letters and mementos from family elders.

For new members reaching the doors of mutual aid fellowships and for professionals willing to learn about available resources in personal and social health, the Steps and the Traditions may, at first, appear as uninspiring texts containing some controversial words. The reference to a God addressed as a patriarchal "Him", in particular, causes difficulties to survivors of a rigid religious upbringing and to those, particularly women, painfully reminded of patriarchal power.

The objective of this paper is to inform and to clarify in order to prevent the terminology used in the Steps and Traditions from hiding the concepts and the spirit they were meant to convey. The Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions are the blueprint of a journey into wholeness. The Steps are appropriately written in a past tense and in the plural because they embody the cumulative experience and wisdom of a past experience which can be paraphrased by: "This is what *We* did, and it worked for us. Now, do as you wish." Mutual aid is born when one individual respectfully shares with another his experience and, as Ernest Kurtz puts it, when both "share honestly a mutual vulnerability openly acknowledged" (Kurtz, pp. 221, 304). The terminology of the Twelve Steps and Traditions is discussed below, along with the principles they embody, in terms of psychological self realization and in terms of spiritual integration. The essence of mutual aid is then examined, with emphasis on how it constitutes an important medium for achieving self realization and integration through the reciprocal effect of *identification* and *service*. The pros and cons of enshrining the texts of the Steps and the Traditions and the role of language in their large scale acceptance are also reviewed. Underlying this discussion, a clear invitation is also directed to younger fellowships to draw more readily from the impressive source of wisdom embodied in the Steps and Traditions of Alcoholics Anonymous and Al-Anon and in the literature they have inspired.

THE THREE LEGACIES: RECOVERY, UNITY, SERVICE

The Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous were written in December 1938 by William Griffith Wilson, better known as Bill W., recognized as a co-founders of Alcoholics Anonymous (Kurtz, p. 69). They constitute a template of *Recovery*, the first side of the "*three legacies of A.A.: Recovery, Unity and Service*", symbolically represented by a triangle. The Twelve Steps of A.A. guide personal recovery from alcoholism, a compulsion to drink alcohol also defined as the "loss of freedom not to drink alcohol" (Malka et al., p. 35). Recovery, in this context, can be understood as stopping the progression of a chronic debilitating illness, but it also describes the recovery of the scattered parts of a fragmented

personality. In other words, recovering is also reintegrating one's own wholeness. Much has been said about the modern phenomenon of addiction and how it seems to qualify as the dis-ease of modernity (e.g. Kurtz, p. 202, Schaef, 1990). Alcoholism, in that sense is one of a long list of behaviours in which modern man gets trapped in his search for a distraction of, or dissociation from, the pain caused by modern lifestyles conducive to alienation. To put it more simply, compulsions are used to medicate the pain associated with being alive with the result that they lower our sensitivity to life, often to the point of causing spiritual or even physical death. The fragmentation observed in those addicted to a chemical is also found in their family and in those around them like their work colleagues. This has led to the understanding of co-alcoholism, the attachment of those *addicted to the addict* (Capell-Sowder, 1984). Consequently, one should not be surprised that the Twelve Steps and Traditions have been adopted with minor changes by Al-Anon Family Groups, a mutual aid movement for families and friends of alcoholics. Al-Anon and A.A. have a very unique relationship based on close family ties; however, they remain separate, cooperating but not affiliating one with the other. In order to avoid confusion, the following discussion is based on A.A. history and literature, where the Steps and Traditions originated. Most of what is said applies also to Al-Anon and to numerous other mutual aid fellowships of similar purpose. It is not the objective of this paper to discuss the phenomenon of addiction, especially from a biological or pharmacological point of view but to examine a spiritual discipline that allows countless individuals in almost two hundred countries to recover and develop self fulfilling lifestyles.

The Twelve Traditions of Alcoholics Anonymous were written by Bill W. and published in a long form in The AA Grapevine in 1946 and their short form was published in 1949. They constitute a thorough definition of *Unity*, the second legacy of A.A.. They answered the needs of an expanding fellowship seeking to maintain its cohesion at a time of spectacular growth, by answering all basic questions of newly formed groups, such as: Who are we, what are our boundaries, prerogatives and obligations, how do our groups relate to one another and to the outside world. The first Step begins with the word *We* and one can understand the role of the Traditions by imagining that this first word is marked by an asterisk referring to a footnote, under the Steps, that would say: *for a clear understanding of "We" as used in the Steps, please study and practice the Twelve Traditions.*

The third legacy of A.A. is *Service*, meaning a personal commitment to serve the fellowship by undertaking to help its operation at the local, regional, national or international levels. Having, quite fortuitously, found a symbolic and redeeming value in number "twelve", one is hardly surprised to find the guidelines for service described also in Twelve Concepts written and edited several times by Bill W. between 1959 and 1960 and adopted by A.A. in 1962 (Kurtz, p. 257, and Wing, 1993). History has it that Bill W. when he finally counted the Steps he had written, associated twelve with the twelve apostles (Kurtz, p. 70). Iconoclastic humour would suggest that, at least in the jargon of beer drinkers, if the liquid spirit of addiction comes in packs of twelve, why not also the Spirit of recovery. The Concepts deal with matters of administration of the fellowship, definitions of leadership, distinction between legal authority of trustees and traditional authority of group representatives and are beyond the scope of the present discussion. This is not to minimize their significance since they are essential to the practical operation of organizations, especially those composed of several

groups. The Concepts can be seen as explaining the Traditions, especially when they talk about authority (Tradition 2), service centres (Tradition 8), service boards or committees (Tradition 9).

The Twelve Steps

The Twelve Steps offer a guideline for personal liberation from the grip of compulsive disorders. They can be described in psychological terms in order to complement their traditional and somewhat religious terminology. There are some very clear reasons, both historical and pragmatic, for the kind of terminology found in the Twelve Steps. Historically, society in general was quite different, at the time of their writing, from what it is to-day and psychological knowledge was in its infancy. Psychology was in the midst of a transition from an "Old-Testament" or patriarchal phase represented by Freud's ideas, to a "New-Testament" phase represented by Jung's ideas where the feminine is emerging. Contemporary psychology has further evolved by adopting transpersonal ideas and has started reactivating the archetype of androgyny, distancing itself from mechanistic or dualistic terminology and adopting a global, systemic view. Had psychological terminology been chosen by the author of the Steps, they would likely have been coloured with the same patriarchal bias one finds in the religious terminology of the time. On the pragmatic side, Bill W.'s concern was to write Steps that would be appealing to the greatest number, i.e. be offensive to the smallest number. AA inside wit has it that Bill W. borrowed the six-step procedure of the Oxford Group and expanded it to twelve, filling the "cracks" so that alcoholics would not fall through them (Wing, 1993).

From the beginning, A.A.'s story is one of diversity, if not plain apparent contradictions, especially regarding the question of religion. For example attending A.A. meetings was, on one hand banned by some Catholic priests in the Cleveland-Akron area while, on the other hand, every effort was made in New York, by Bill W. and others, to avoid being perceived as associated with the Catholic Church (Kurtz, p. 76). Bill W.'s position towards organized religions seems, however, quite clear when he writes in 1948: "The thing that still irks me about all organized religion is their claim how confoundedly right all of them are" (Kurtz, p. 52). These words echo quite strikingly the quote given above about "the spirituality of not having all the answers" and should suffice, in the present discussion, to draw the line between what is meant as religious and what is meant as spiritual, even if, ideally, the two should be and are related. The Steps are written in terms that borrow from religion without losing their dimension as a spiritual prescription. They are "suggested steps" of enquiry, they do not claim to provide all the answers. The 200 words of the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous are given in Table 1. For the sake of comparison, the Twelve Steps of Al-Anon are listed in Table 3. Both A.A. and Al-Anon provide extensive discussions of the Steps in their literature. Numerous "outside" publications also cover the subject and the reader is referred to leading publishers on the topic such as Hazelden (Hazelden, 1991).

In contemporary psychological terms the Twelve Steps can be interpreted as follows:

- 1- We admitted we were powerless over our compulsive behaviour and that our lives had gone out of control;
- 2- We came to believe that there was a way out of our misery: surrendering to change rather than holding to our will to control;
- 3- We decided to open ourselves to the healing powers of Life;
- 4- We examined thoroughly our personalities in order to recognize the kind of persons we had become;
- 5- We genuinely accepted the results of our findings and fully disclosed our true personalities to another human being;
- 6- We became ready to change;
- 7- We gave ourselves entirely to a process of personal repair and transformation;
- 8- We made a list of all persons we had harmed and became willing to make amends to them all;
- 9- We made amends to all people we had harmed, wherever possible except when to do so would injure them or others;
- 10- We adopted a discipline of self awareness and, when we were wrong, promptly admitted it;
- 11- We adopted a discipline of spiritual growth, seeking harmony in our relations with the visible and the invisible world, within us and outside of us;
- 12- Having had a spiritual awakening, as a result of these Steps, we tried to carry the message to others and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

Many, familiar with the Steps, will have noticed the conspicuous disappearance of the word God from this particular adaptation. Those offended by this may remember that the Steps are less a device for the Spirit to reach us than a path leading us back to the Spirit. The compulsive individual is the one who must travel the distance between his alienation and his reunification, his re-member-ment. The Spirit does not have to wait in the stairway, dressed in a specific three-letter word that happens to be the object of so much power struggle. The expression "God as we understood Him" used in Steps three and eleven was a genuine attempt at freeing the word God from any sectarian meaning. Given the fact that this word has been associated with so many enterprises of money and prestige, many feel that their freedom to understand God is never as real as when the "understanding" of the divine takes place in a silent and intimate encounter with the Spirit they meet as they practice the Steps. Empowering the individual through the acceptance of his own limits, the practice of the Steps leads to the discovery that a word is only a word, a communication device to which one can give a specific and personal meaning, especially when it comes to "the name that cannot be named". Unfortunately, this truth is unknown to most newcomers, especially those weary of religious terminology and unaware that, before being a collection of words, the Twelve Steps are the outline of an experience. They do not describe a cognitive process, but a fundamentally experiential journey to the core of being human, what Ernest Kurtz so vividly calls being "not-God". They are not travelled by reading the right book or having the right collection of rituals. They are ingrained in the living experience of interacting with other not-Gods within and without families and fellowships.

The Twelve Traditions

The Twelve Traditions were the result of over ten years of experience in the growing movement of Alcoholics Anonymous and summarize the hundreds of answers given by Bill Wilson to those, throughout the Americas and overseas, who were asking about starting and maintaining mutual aid groups for alcoholics in the early forties (Kurtz, p. 103). The 1946 first public presentation of the Traditions opened by: "Nobody invented Alcoholics Anonymous. It grew. Trial and error has produced a rich experience" (Kurtz, p. 344, note 56). The principles that permeate the Traditions are those of *experience, limited control, of no absolutes and of flexibility* (Kurtz, p. 104). Such principles are hardly surprising, coming from individuals so vividly acquainted with *experience*, both painful and hopeful and with *limited control* both in terms of addiction to uncontrollable drinking and in terms of recovery through the "one day at a time" surrender of a willpower-based approach to sobriety. The Twelve Traditions of Alcoholics Anonymous are listed in Table 2. For the sake of comparison, the Twelve Traditions of Al-Anon are listed in Table 4.

In succinct terminology, the Twelve Traditions can be interpreted as follows:

- 1- Unity: in case of conflicting needs, the safety of the boat has priority over the individual needs of the passengers;
- 2- Authority: we are all manifestations of Life and its most sacred mystery which many call God, serving Life is the essence of our being alive, we serve Life whether we act as leaders or as regular members in our mutual aid fraternity;
- 3- Group identity: we identify around a single common purpose, freedom from bondage;
- 4- Group autonomy: each group is autonomous as long as unity of the whole fraternity is maintained;
- 5- Our single purpose is mutual aid in order to overcome our specific problem;
- 6- We have a spiritual goal and do not endorse any outside organizations or causes;
- 7- We are financially self supporting;
- 8- Our mutual aid is non-professional, i.e. not remunerated and knows no hierarchy; our service centres may employ special workers.
- 9- We have no structure except to administer our service functions;
- 10- We stay out of public controversy;
- 11- We practice attraction rather than promotion, and anonymity is a needed protection for all;
- 12- Anonymity is also a way to induce transcendence of the ego and to promote spiritual growth.

The Traditions can be thought of as twelve principles of ecology and of reverence for Life. Through the practice of the Steps, individuals outgrow an egocentric attitude towards Life and emerge to a vision of a world which no longer revolves around the unmet demands of a frustrated or neurotic ego, but which the recovered individual is part of. How to care about planet Earth, now that we have realized that its fate is associated with ours, is the basic tenet of ecological consciousness. In a similar way, how to function as an individual in a

mutual aid group and how to interact with other groups, with the fraternity as a whole and with the outside world, are the basic tenets of spiritual ecology embodied in the Traditions. The complementarity of the Steps and Traditions means that a return to individual wholeness depends on adhering to a personal and a "systemal" discipline, two facets of transpersonal consciousness.

The Twelve Concepts

The Twelve Concepts describe the third level of A.A. legacies: Service. They are sometimes referred to as a "best kept secret" because they are much less known and discussed by members of the fellowships of A.A. or Al-Anon. The Concepts are designed to reflect the experience of those who have served the fellowship as local, regional, national or international representatives and other "trusted servants". The Concepts provide a method to address issues, hear opinions and balance the scales between service entities (Al-Anon, 1986). They clarify important notions such as legal versus traditional authority, responsibility and delegation thereof, leadership etc. Without minimizing their importance, it is fair to say that the Concepts are not the first order of priority for those unfamiliar with Twelve Steps recovery and since this discussion is primarily designed to inform the novice, the discussion of the Concepts is limited to this summary presentation.

The Steps, Traditions and Concepts are the principles by which A.A. and its sister fellowship of Al-Anon have been able to establish their healing influence in over 180 countries and to provide recovery guidelines to countless individuals whose disease is still often scorned as a perversion, increasing their load of toxic shame. In the words of Edward Dowling quoted by Kurtz: "A.A. has proven that democracy is therapy." One could even go one step further and suggest that in the Steps, Traditions and Concepts of A.A. lies also a therapy for ailing democracy. One may indeed dream of recovery groups for politicians having admitted powerlessness over their addiction to power. Such groups would likely be very anonymous. Their members could use their proficiency in the art of writing laws and constitutions to review the Traditions, upgrading to number one a second Tradition which states that "our leaders are but trusted servants, they do not govern". In all fairness, they may also promote a much neglected "Concept four" suggesting that "Participation is the key to harmony" and all of us would do well to listen.

THE "REVOLUTION" OF MUTUAL AID

The story of Bill W.'s boomerang

A particular incident in the youth of Bill Wilson can easily be elevated to the statute of ultimate metaphor for mutual aid. The following narration is borrowed directly from historian Ernest Kurtz quoting Wilson's biography (Kurtz, p. 11). "One evening, Fayette [Bill's grandfather] intuitively marked the immense sense of determination beginning to form in the boy in response to *the craving rooted in his felt-rejection*." [italics added; Bill W. was raised by his maternal grandparents as surrogate parents] "Almost casually, the grandfather thought aloud: "I've been reading a good deal about Australia lately and no one seems to know why Australians are the only people in the world who are able to make a boomerang." "There was a pause, then Bill looked up into his eyes. "The only people?" And so young Bill set to work [...]. Some six month later, the boy, in silence, led his grandfather to the church graveyard. Using a boomerang fashioned --the grandfather realized with chagrin-- from a three-foot plank filched from the headboard of his bed, the boy threw, stood waiting, and succeeded. "I did it," Bill first whispered, then shouted. "Our Willie," his grandfather observed, "the very first American to do it. The number-one man."

Some thirty years later, one finds the same Willie as a co-founder of A.A., the pioneer and landmark of Twelve-Step-based mutual aid and the inspiration of over a hundred similar movements in the late twentieth century. How befitting to discover that the boomerang concept of mutual aid, of giving away to get, of serving to receive, was prefigured in Bill W.'s first success in an otherwise difficult childhood. And how ironic that the metaphor for mutual aid, a boomerang carved in the headboard of a bed having witnessed the young boy's most intimate dreams and his *craving rooted in felt-rejection*, had its first revolutions over a graveyard!

The mutual aid/self-help way

To return from the metaphor to a more practical definition of mutual aid, one has only to examine a few of the hundreds of mutual aid groups active in our communities, to recognize, under a diversity of purposes and idiosyncrasies, the common "genius of mutual aid" as described by Jean-Marie Romeder in "The Self-Help Way" (Romeder, 1989). This "genius" consists of the very fact that giving aid is inevitably associated with the reward of mutual aid. Mutuality, in this context is not a trade-off as in "I scratch your back and you scratch mine", it is rather an ambivalence, an inherent reciprocity of the act of helping others in a "giving" way. Such reciprocity is explicit in the hug one inevitably receives while giving one. One is sent right back to the idea so dear to A.A. that "one has to give it away in order to keep it", the "it" being the spirit of recovery sought through mutual aid or, simply, oneself. Bob Smith, the other co-founder of A.A. says it in similar words: "The spiritual approach was as useless as any other if you soaked it up like a sponge and kept it to yourself" (Kurtz, p. 89). One has to give to receive, hardly a new concept! Mutual aid is explicit in most of the great spiritual traditions even if their inspiring scriptures have been appropriated by groups that one

frequently finds associated with righteousness, rigidity and even warship on behalf of a sacred word.

Ralph Waldo Emerson provides a very clear definition of how mutual aid works when he says: "It is one of the most beautiful compensations of life that no man can sincerely try to help another without helping himself in the process." It is also one of the paradoxes of life that one often has to fall victim of a debilitating pain in the form of compulsions, or of overwhelming feelings resulting from traumatic events, to resort to mutual aid and to benefit from its life-giving rewards. It has often been said that one has to learn to die in order to live (e.g. Singer, 1991). The corollary of this affirmation is that many who have known the spiritual death of compulsive disorders count among the most grateful and enthusiastic witnesses of life one can ever meet, going as far as expressing gratitude towards their painful past, a sure sign of personal integration and wholeness. This leads to what Romeder describes as the "extraordinary human warmth" of mutual aid groups (Romeder, chapter 3).

Rallying around a single word

The "singleness of purpose" suggested in the Traditions may appear to somewhat contradict the spirit of the Steps by dividing rather than unifying the recovery movement. Every day, in thousands of locations around the world, individuals meet to read the Steps and Traditions and practice the healing discipline of mutual aid. Often, the single word that distinguishes their Steps from those read in the meeting room of another fellowship, across the hall or thousands of miles away, is the seventh of a list of two hundred: We admitted we were powerless over [. . .]. One word out of two hundred symbolizes the reason why an individual identifies to others in the room or not. In A.A. and Al-Anon, this word is "alcohol". In other fellowships it may be "gambling", "food", "alcoholism", "cocaine", "others", "sex and love addiction", "nicotine addiction", "our addiction", "emotions", etc. The list of acronyms of mutual aid fellowships designed after A.A. and Al-Anon probably covers the entire alphabet: Gamblers Anonymous and Gam-Anon, Overeaters Anonymous, Adult Children of Alcoholics, Cocaine Anonymous and Coc-Anon, Codependents Anonymous, Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous and Nar-Anon, Emotions Anonymous, Nicotine Anonymous, Nic-Anon, Debtors Anonymous, Overspenders Anonymous, Workaholics Anonymous, Neurotics Anonymous etc. One easily understands why the number of associations having adopted the Twelve Steps may be well over a hundred considering that every human behaviour and thought becomes an addiction when used compulsively to escape or alleviate real or perceived suffering.

Broadening the single-purpose of mutual aid

The paramount value of *identification* as a way to recognize oneself in another person has long been recognized in mutual aid and explains that individuals regroup *first* along the lines of their most visible "problem". However, there is a great value in identifying oneself along the lines of a common "solution" once the early recovery from the craving of

compulsive disorders has opened the way to a spiritual awakening. Recovery never means absolute healing of addiction and countless alcoholics know the high cost of ever forgetting that point, but today a shift is taking place towards a broader and more comprehensive conception of addiction and towards the common spiritual solution of acknowledging one's not-Godness.

Examples of such a shift are found in several mutual aid groups for Adult Children of Alcoholics and for codependents. Such groups often require that members identify with a reading called "The Problem" which defines the state of emotional confusion and felt-rejection that characterizes adults raised in compulsive homes or educated in rigid institutions. The adult child of alcoholic and the adult child of a workaholic or of a food addict or of any other obsessive-compulsive personality, share the emotional illiteracy and distortion of personal boundaries they learned from adult models. Various compulsive behaviours develop in such children to cope with emotional abandonment and continue to inhibit their self realization as adults, whence the generic name of *adult children*, both diminutive for *adults, children of ...* and ambivalent name for *former children not yet grown into adults* and *adults repressing the child within*. Such adult children identify with one another not necessarily because of the particular compulsion they wish to gain freedom from, but because of the common emotional crippledness they recognize in their lives (Woititz, 1990; Laguitton, 1992). Alateen is a Twelve-Step fellowship for teenagers of alcoholic families operating within the fellowship of Al-Anon which serves families and friends of alcoholics.

A story of dependence "rooted in a sense of felt rejection"

It is interesting to observe, in Bill W.'s biography, a reference to a "craving rooted in a sense of felt-rejection", which recognizes a strong link between addiction and repressed feelings. The facts leading to this observation are worth mentioning here. "...one night in 1905 [Bill W. was 10] -after a long and largely silent evening buggy-ride with his puzzled but apprehensive son- Gilman Wilson [Bill's father] deserted his family." "Of this childhood trauma, one of his earliest recollections, Bill Wilson later nursed a memory and interpretation perhaps not unusual in such situations. "If only his parents had loved him more, they would not have separated. And this meant if he had been more lovable, it would never have happened. It always came around to that. He was the guilty one." "Soon after, Kurtz continues, his young mother, [Emily,...], launched herself on a brand-new career, [...], leaving Bill and his sister Dorothy in the care of their maternal grandparents (Kurtz, p.10)." One learns further that at the age of 14, young Bill started his secondary education and met Bertha Banford with whom "he fell in love, completely in love". "Then, one November morning, [...], the headmaster stood to make an announcement. Reading from a yellow scrap of paper, he informed the students that "someone very dear to all of us, Bertha Banford, had died the night before, following surgery..." "For days, Bill Wilson was numb, struggling yet somehow also fearing to understand. The evening after Bertha's funeral service, standing in the cemetery next to the crypt that held her body in seeming mockery of his inability to hold it again, the suddenly aged Wilson achieved a revelation of "failure : He knew now... His need, his loving, didn't matter a good goddam. His wanting, his hunger and desire, meant nothing to

the terrible ongoing forces of creation and he would never forget this truth which he saw and accepted that night" (Kurtz, p. 12).

Describing his "dependence", Bill W. writes in 1953: "I know that my underlying difficulty from which all others stem and are merely symptomatic, is that inner insistence which demands that I either be absolutely dependent upon someone, or else dominate them. [...] I am beginning to see that all my troubles have their root in a habitual and absolute dependence upon my personal prestige, security, and romantic attachment. When these things go wrong, there is depression. Now this absolute dependence upon people and situations for emotional security is, I think, the immense and devastating fallacy that makes us miserable" (Kurtz, p. 214).

Without forgetting that Bill W. identified first and foremost with other alcoholics, can one find a better identification under the broader umbrella of what is, today, called codependence, i.e. dependence on others? One may ask, in light of this account, how much commonality would Bill W. have also found in the "shared honesty of mutual vulnerability openly acknowledged" in the fellowships of adult children of alcoholics or codependents as briefly described above and what contribution he could have made in their development.

Rallying around the theme of spiritual awakening

An example of the trend towards identifying along the lines of a solution rather than around a specific problem is found in the September 1991 convening in Atlanta of a conference sponsored by the International Transpersonal Association (ITA) and entitled "Yearning for wholeness: addiction and the spiritual quest". The program stated: "The Twelve Step programs have been using spiritual principles for more than half a century and contain many elements of a transpersonal nature. The main objective of the International Transpersonal Conference in Atlanta is to deepen and further expand the cooperation between these traditions...(ITA, 1991)." At the subsequent ITA Conference in Prague, Barbara Marx Hubbard, co-founder of Global Family, presented the concept of *co-creative networks* in the following words: "It has become the moral imperative of our time to learn social cooperation. One of the keys to planetary survival is for humans to learn how to work harmoniously in small groups, especially in those activities dedicated to caring for each other and the Earth"(ITA, 1992). Other signs of a shift towards a universalization of the spiritual recovery movement are found in the spreading of "spiritual emergence networks" and in the forecast by Lorie Dwinell, closing the first International Conference on Adult Children of Alcoholics held in Toronto in July 1990, that "we will see in our lifetime, somewhere, an international gathering of all Twelve Steps movements", forecast that was followed by an eloquent spontaneous applause by the audience (Dwinell, 1990).

The Twelve Steps movement of mutual aid is a grassroot response to the alienation felt by modern man. Interestingly enough, the religious terminology for alienation is *sin*, whose root signifies also separation, estrangement. Therefore, expressed in modern psychological terms or in traditional religious terms, the Twelve Steps are a suggested path towards the reunification of fragmented lives, i.e. a return to sanity. Reconciliation with

oneself implies reconciliation with the entire body of mankind and a harmonious relationship with all things and beings, in awe and reverence for the power and mystery of Life.

THE ISSUE OF TEXT ENSHRINEMENT

Words as messengers of spirit

Words are messengers, when we use them, we have the responsibility to ensure the integrity of the spirit they are meant to carry. In themselves, they are only fragments of alphabets as suitable for soup making as for writing the most inspired poetry. Messengers, they must conform to the four essential criteria of communication, namely the *What*, the *How*, the *Where* and the *When*. The amount of true signal (i.e. of true spirit) and the level of noise (i.e. of corrupting emptiness) in what is said or written depends on the particular blend of these components.

The *What* criterion of a communication is a matter of motive and content, it is the spirit of what is expressed. Sensory communication is only one narrow and noisy channel we commonly use to communicate and which requires a *How*, a form in which the spirit can become manifest, e.g. a sound, an image, a shape, a word. Words are usually associated with conventional meaning but it takes the context of other words to clarify and reveal their precise spirit, not unlike relationships with others reveal one's own spirit in mutual aid. Quoting words out of context is like breaking Tradition one, the guardian of unity, threatening the integrity of the meaning expressed by the author. What was meant by the author of a word may not always be understood by the most attentive reader or listener. Besides the linguistic or cultural differences in the meaning of a word at a given time for different people, a change of meaning takes also place with time in any given culture. Obsolescence and archaism make the meaning of some words hard to grasp. One rarely reads Shakespeare or Molière in the original texts, and only a few scholars can return to the source to propose a new "interpretation". Communication always requires some *interpretation*. One trustee director of A.A. quoted by Kurtz said, speaking of A.A. key documents: "The authors of this priceless material knew what they were doing. Their word requires study, not interpretation" (Kurtz, p. 405, note 143). At the risk of misinterpreting the words of this well meaning trusted servant, one can assume that he meant "their word requires practice before interpretation." What he meant by "study" has indeed probably very little to do with cognitive knowledge. The profound uneasiness of Bill W. with "absolutes", an underlying theme in Kurtz's history of A.A., comes to mind to support *interpretation* over *dogmatism*.

The *Where* and *When* criteria of quality communication require that one take into consideration the environment at large in order to minimize interference, dilution and corruption and to maximize chances of preserving the meaning. The critical importance of choosing the proper place and time for words of humour is well known. Interestingly enough, words of humour are also called *spirited*, loaded with spirit. What can be found hilarious and most comical in a given context can be tasteless or "out of place" in another. Time plays a critical role in the erosion and in the cultural dampening of inspired words. The chief quality

of an inspiring page of literature or scripture is that it evokes human archetypes and invites frequent reinterpretations that keep it alive as a perennial source of wisdom. Stephen Mitchell, in the introduction of his new English version of Lao-tzu's *Tao Te Ching* says "I also consulted dozens of translations into English, German, and French. But the most essential preparation for my work was a fourteen-years-long course of Zen training which brought me face to face with Lao-tzu and his true disciples and heirs..."(Mitchell, 1991). Interestingly, the cover of the book carries a quote from Huston Smith saying "[this translation] comes as close to being definitive for our time as any I can imagine". Without reinterpretations, the spirit of this text, like any other, would undergo a process of decay and sclerosis.

Bill W. was very aware of this, as noted by Kurtz: "One motive impelling Wilson to write *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* [an explanatory manual on the Steps and the Traditions published in 1953] had been the realization that the original text of the "Big Book," *Alcoholics Anonymous* had become "frozen"- too "sacred" for even its principal author's taste." Another reason was that someone else had started writing an interpretation of the Twelve Steps and that Bill W. was urged to do it himself since he had been the driving force behind them in the first place (Wing, 1993). In 1952 Wilson wrote to Charles W.: "As to changing the Steps themselves, or even the text of the A.A. book, I am assured by many that I could certainly be excommunicated if a word were touched. It is a strange fact of human nature that when a spiritually centred movement starts and finally adopts certain principles, these finally freeze absolutely solid. But what can't be done respecting the Steps themselves- or any part of the A.A. book, I can make a shift by writing these pieces which I hope folks will like"(Kurtz, p. 132). Almost ten years later, in 1961, commenting on the aging of the same *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* book he writes: "As time passes, our book literature has a tendency to get more and more frozen- a tendency for conversion into something like dogma. This is a trait of nature which I'm afraid we can do little about. We may as well face the fact that A.A. will always have its fundamentalists, its absolutists, and its relativists" (Kurtz, p. 356, note 67).

The impact of translations on the spirit of the Twelve Steps

Something must be said about the difficult problem of translating original texts in A.A. or Al-Anon literature from the original American version into others languages. Knowing how many "authentic versions" of the Bible are claiming faithfulness to the "original texts" and how many wars have been fought over differences in translations, one has a glimpse of the phenomenal task of translating the literature of a spiritual program of recovery into dozens of foreign languages. As a simple example, A.A. and Al-Anon being two independent fellowships, they have separate services for translation and approval of literature. The Twelve Steps, as already mentioned, have exactly two hundred words in English and the A.A. and Al-Anon versions differ only by one word, the tenth from the end. In A.A. one is invited, in the twelfth Step, to carry the message to "alcoholics", in Al-Anon one carries the message to "others", meaning families and friends of alcoholics. If one examines the French translations adopted independently by A.A. and by Al-Anon, the number of different words in the latest translations is 22, admittedly without any significant

shift in meaning. This amounts to a eighteen-fold increase of the original difference between the two version of the Steps (from 0.5% to 9%) and illustrates the potential impact of translations. This is not to say that one version is "better" than the other, since there are, fortunately, many ways to express the same meaning. However, this speaks to the vital importance for all participants in the mutual aid journey of self discovery to be the living messengers and interpreters of the Spirit of recovery, (i.e. to be as perfectly "not-Gods" as humanly possible), carefully fine-tuning their listening capabilities and questioning the accuracy of their interpretations of old texts and of Life itself.

The policy of using only Conference-approved literature in large fellowships like A.A. and Al-Anon, requires that documents be approved by the World Service Office or Conference (WSO or WSC), or by national committees responsible to them. It has the paramount objective of maintaining a worldwide spirit of unity and a focus on undiluted and non-distorted themes of recovery. The anguish of those committed to maintaining the integrity of such valuable texts as the Twelve Steps and the Twelve Traditions transpires in the comments of a General Service Director in 1986: "How might we prevent distortion or even simple erosion of our message without copyright protection?" (Kurtz, p. 299). One could add to this legitimate concern a similar one that laments the impact of time and space on any text, protected by copyright or not. English being the mother language of A.A. and an international language, the drawback of the policy of Conference-approved literature is that members of a different mother tongue must forever be content with translations. They must especially overcome nationalistic and cultural colorations and prejudices that often inhibit or delay literature penetration. The examples that come to mind are French from Canada, France, Belgium or Switzerland, Russian from various republics, Spanish from Spain, Mexico, Chile, etc.

One may ask whether unity really demands that millions always "watch their movies in a dubbed version or with subtitles". It seems natural that, if it is not already so, original documents written in various languages will some day be approved and will reach members in the intimate nuances of their mother tongues and cultures. One can easily understand the legitimate concerns of those opposing such evolution, considering the horror stories and distortion that will likely follow such liberalization. However, the point can also be made that trying to avoid these "growing pains" resembles the resistance of parents overprotecting their children from being hurt in the process of living. The spirit on which fraternities like A.A. have been founded will surely find a solution in accordance with the archetype of a Spirit speaking in many tongues. Some lesson may be drawn, in that respect, from the model of the nursing-log. In the rain forest of Washington state, nature interpretation trails feature impressive examples of the phenomenon of the nursing-log. When one of the giants of the forest falls, its huge carcass slowly decays on the forest floor and provides nutrients to the seeds that fall on it. Hundreds of years later, the forest has been renewed, the carcass of the nursing log has disappeared, its mission totally fulfilled, but one can still see it, in spirit, in the thriving life of the impeccably aligned siblings whose roots still rise like arches over the elder they once straddled.

The story of the Serenity Prayer

The Steps and the Traditions, viewed as enshrined texts, amount to quotations out of context. One should never judge the wisdom of a spiritual tradition by merely looking at its shrines. The true temple where the wisdom of mutual aid is to be found is in the lives of those who practice it. The story of the Serenity Prayer as it is known today, also called the "A.A. prayer" in the beginning, illustrates vividly how the letter and the spirit of a text can travel through time and undergo various changes, in an apparent defiance to any enshrinement. The English form used in A.A. and other fellowships is "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference". It is generally credited to theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. As Richard Fox, the biographer of Reinhold Niebuhr, tells it, the words written by Niebuhr were: "God, give us the serenity to accept what cannot be changed; Give us the courage to change what should be changed; Give us the wisdom to distinguish one from the other" (Fox, R., 1985). Another biographer of Niebuhr, June Bingham has it that Niebuhr's words were: "O God, give us serenity to accept what cannot be changed, courage to change what should be changed, and wisdom to distinguish the one from the other (Bingham, 1961)". Close enough indeed, but obviously one of the two biographers, at least, does not quote accurately the original! The central message in A.A., Al-Anon, Codependents Anonymous, Adult Children of Alcoholics and other Twelve Step programs is to focus on changing oneself. It is therefore not surprising that the wording of Niebuhr has been altered from "what *should be* changed" to "the things *I can* [change]". Another consequence of this alteration has been the replacement of the collective dimension of the request "grant *us*" by an individual "grant *me*", a far cry from the collective "We" of the Steps and Traditions. One may ask, in the context of this discussion about faithfulness to the spirit of a text, whether A.A. has captured the *words* of Niebuhr, the *spirit* of his words or neither one entirely. The words of Niebuhr's version, if they speak of finding serenity in acceptance, could also speak of social engagement in changing what *should be* changed. The spirit of social engagement in A.A. is found in the networking of mutual aid and in the "*practice these principles in all our affairs*" of the Twelfth Step... same spirit, different shrines.

The story becomes even more fascinating when, reading Richard Fox, one finds that a Theodor Wilhelm, after seeing Niebuhr's prayer, claimed to be the author of a word-for-word German version that was popular at the time and which he had written under the pseudonym of Oetinger, a 18th century German theologian to whom it had been credited. Others have written Niebuhr asking whether his prayer had come from Marcus Aurelius or others. Fox goes on describing how a pained Niebuhr "must have wondered if he had subconsciously recorded a prayer used by his father [a German] or one that he had read somewhere years before."

The August-September 1992 issue of a newsletter from the General Service Office of A.A. carries an article entitled: *The elusive origins of the Serenity Prayer* (Anonymous, 1992) which, a week before the present article was to be delivered, adds significant material to this story and names yet more suggested sources for these words, including a 14th century "General's Prayer". The author of the article indicates how, according to a researcher, the "first form of the prayer originated with Boethius, a Roman philosopher (480-524 A.D.) in a

book called *Consolations of Philosophy*", and concludes a series of interesting anecdotes about the "elusive" prayer as follows: "...the prayer has become so deeply imbedded into the heart and soul of A.A. thinking, living, as well as its philosophy, that one could almost believe that the prayer originated in the A.A. experience itself."

The theme of the current discussion is precisely the magic property of some words to reflect the heart of the human condition when they are rooted in flesh and blood *and allowed to evolve* to better capture the spirit of that experience. The story of the Serenity Prayer, as far as reflecting A.A.'s heart and soul is concerned, is one of reinterpretation and of *non-enshrinement*. Strict enshrinement, if it ensures some short term continuity, is a step towards the "absolute" which, sooner or later, is deserted by the Spirit of Life. One will find solace by turning once more to the words of historian Kurtz as he himself reflects on the future of Alcoholics Anonymous. "It is conceivable, I suppose, because all institutions degenerate, that individuals who call themselves "Alcoholics Anonymous" might some day ignore service, violate tradition, and scorn the Steps- or worse, accord them only lip service. But should that happen, I am sure that somewhere, perhaps under a battered bridge, or in a dingy alcove, perhaps even in an atmosphere free of cigarette smoke and lacking coffee, some alcoholic who is trying to stay sober will sidle up to some other alcoholic who may even be drinking and say: "Psst, buddy. You must be awfully thirsty, but let me tell you how it was with me when I used to need a drink..." And in that moment an A.A. meeting will begin, and the story of Alcoholics Anonymous will continue. [...]. For A.A.'s story is one of those stories that will never end so long as there are human beings who discover, however painfully, having tried to play God, that they are not-God --that they can *both* be "sober" and "alcoholic", both whole and flawed" (Kurtz, p. 306).

CONCLUSION

It has been the objective of this paper to present a reflection on the Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions of Alcoholics Anonymous because they constitute a precious heritage of wisdom currently spreading into a grass-root movement of spiritual ecology. Everywhere men and women are reaching the shores of the next millennium with an increasing awareness of having been lured into the pernicious and destructive belief that the quality of their lives arises from focusing on collecting, hoarding, controlling, adding, in short, resorting to *greed*, a misdirection of life's energies which Matthew Fox identifies as the root of all addictions (Fox, M., 1991). Craving for the Spirit, they have succumbed to the seduction of smaller spirits, have become addicted to them. From the midst of those most aware of the dead-end of addiction, alcoholics and their relatives, the twinkling light of mutual aid has received a massive injection of fresh air, it is now burning high in thousands of groups all over the world. Informing prospective members by explaining texts that may puzzle or intimidate rather than attract is part and parcel of carrying the message, a twelfth Step suggestion. Such was the intent of this paper which suffers from the obvious limited proficiency of the author in the English language added to the constraints of his classical scientific training. No matter how intricate or byzantine its reasoning may have seemed at times, this discussion will close by two more quotes from the founders of A.A., colliding like two flints, to light another spark of spirit.

Dr Bob: "Keep it simple"(Kurtz, p. 42).

"Many of us exclaimed: "What an order! I can't go through with it!" (A.A. Big Book, chapter 5, p. 60)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS: I am indebted to Dr Ernest Kurtz, whose book *Not-God* I have massively quoted, for his comments on the manuscript and to Nell Wing for her comments on some historical aspects as well as for making suggestions on the form. I thank Carl Frizell for correcting the manuscript. I am also grateful to the multitude of anonymous friends in mutual aid who have inspired me to write this paper.

DISCLAIMER

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Table 1. THE TWELVE STEPS OF ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS

- 1- We admitted we were powerless over alcohol- that our lives had become unmanageable.
- 2- Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
- 3- Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God *as we understood Him*.
- 4- Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
- 5- Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
- 6- Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
- 7- Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.
- 8- Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.
- 9- Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
- 10- Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
- 11- Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God *as we understood Him*, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.
- 12- Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

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Table 2. THE TWELVE TRADITIONS OF ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS

- 1- Our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends upon A.A. unity.
- 2- For our group purpose there is but one authority- a loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience. Our leaders are but trusted servants; they do not govern.
- 3- The only requirement for A.A. membership is a desire to stop drinking.
- 4- Each group should be autonomous except in matters affecting other groups or A.A. as a whole.
- 5- Each group has but one primary purpose - to carry its message to the alcoholic who still suffers.
- 6- An A.A. group ought never endorse, finance, or lend the A.A. name to any related facility or outside enterprise, lest problems of money, property, and prestige divert us from our primary purpose.
- 7- Every A.A. group ought to be self-supporting, declining outside contributions.
- 8- Alcoholics Anonymous should remain forever non-professional, but our service centres may employ special workers.
- 9- A.A., as such, ought never be organized; but we may create service boards or committees directly responsible to those they serve.
- 10- Alcoholics Anonymous has no opinion on outside issues; hence the A.A. name ought never be drawn into public controversy.
- 11- Our public relation policy is based on attraction rather than promotion; we need always maintain personal anonymity at the level of press, radio and films.
- 12- Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our Traditions, ever reminding us to place principles before personalities.

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Table 3. THE TWELVE STEPS OF AL-ANON

- 1- We admitted we were powerless over alcohol- that our lives had become unmanageable.
- 2- Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
- 3- Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God *as we understood Him*.
- 4- Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
- 5- Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
- 6- Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
- 7- Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.
- 8- Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.
- 9- Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
- 10- Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
- 11- Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God *as we understood Him*, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.
- 12- Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to others, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

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Table 4. THE TWELVE TRADITIONS OF AL-ANON

1- Our common welfare should come first; personal progress for the greatest number depends upon unity.

2- For our group purpose there is but one authority- a loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience. Our leaders are but trusted servants; they do not govern.

3- The relatives of alcoholics, when gathered together for mutual aid, may call themselves an Al-Anon Family Group, provided that, as a group, they have no other affiliation. The only requirement for membership is that there be a problem of alcoholism in a relative or friend.

4- Each group should be autonomous except in matters affecting another group or Al-Anon or A.A. as a whole.

5- Each Al-Anon Family Group has but one purpose: to help families of alcoholics. We do this by practicing the Twelve Steps of AA *ourselves*, by encouraging and understanding our alcoholic relatives, and by welcoming and giving comfort to families of alcoholics.

6- Our Al-Anon Family Groups ought never endorse, finance, or lend our name to any outside enterprise, lest problems of money, property, and prestige divert us from our primary spiritual aim. Although a separate entity, we should always cooperate with Alcoholics Anonymous.

7- Every group ought to be self-supporting, declining outside contributions.

8- Al-Anon Twelfth-Step work should remain forever non-professional, but our service centers may employ special workers.

9- Our groups, as such, ought never be organized; but we may create service boards or committees directly responsible to those they serve.

10- The Al-Anon Family Groups have no opinion on outside issues; hence our name ought never be drawn into public controversy.

11- Our public relation policy is based on attraction rather than promotion; we need always maintain personal anonymity at the level of press, radio, TV and films. We need guard with special care the anonymity of all AA members.

12- Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our Traditions, ever reminding us to place principles above personalities.

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