

## Safety in AA – Is it a Topic at all?

First, a thank you for being asked to do this. It is a privilege. I appreciate any and all requests that make me think. And this one did just that. I had to consider it carefully in order to share some few thoughts with you today.

It's not that it isn't a real topic – exactly – In AA, apparently someone thinks it is, because it is being discussed everywhere. But it has been hard to get my AA arms around it. I am not so sure that by our discussions on this topic we aren't helping to create a bigger problem. So walk with me through this topic for a little bit. We realize that I know only a little, so I have lots of questions.

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For several weeks – I am a slow learner – I cogitated about – what does “Safety in AA mean?” Since I wasn't clear, I asked others about what they thought safety in AA was, what is the substance of it. What sorts of issues are “AA safety” involved with? Whose safety – whose guarantee – whose liability, whose responsibility?

I asked around. These problems have probably never come up in your groups. These are actual members, feet-on-the-ground worries, unretouched.

- Safety to be an Atheist, one who doesn't feel safe in our Christian meetings?
- Safety to discuss my intimate issues in public, at open meetings.(You know this one)
- Safety to be gay, or transgendered, in groups that might be aggressive, or offensive against them. (Yes, this has happened, recently.)
- Safety to be comfortable in a group, ideally one which looks like me. When people look dangerous, unkempt or smell bad, it is frightening. I feel safe when others look like me. (racism – a hidden/invisible issue)
- Safety from Predators. Sexual and Financial, including Child Sexual offenders.
- Safety from the inappropriate. The drunks, the mentally ill and potentially violent members.
- Safety from Court-Ordered people who don't want to be here. (this is accompanied with the theory that Court ordering has made meetings unsafe in general)
- Safety to discuss my addiction issues without bias or criticism.
- Safety for famous persons to come here and be anonymous. Should the Betty Fords or 'you-know-who' celebrities need to wear a disguise if they come to a meeting, or be unable to work a program for fear of some member publicizing it?

- Safety from gossip and 5<sup>th</sup> step careless public sharing.
- Safety from breaks in anonymity and exposure in social media.
- You can add your own favorites here at the end of the list... I am sure that this is a partial one.
- ***I am guessing that the Elephant in the room that has prompted this topic are sexual and violent types of security.***

It is obvious that there are safety concerns and questions out there. I have to ask though – are we confusing safety with security – my need to be comfortable, my demand that the group make me comfortable and secure? Is this something that we have been taught by treatment centers. Our members have been coming to us fully cleaned up, sobered up and informed up – and we have gotten unfamiliar with drunks - or is it our own desire to fluff up the edges of AA, and be more like a treatment center? I wonder how much we have forgotten who we are.

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**Safety in the Public View...** But – on to another aspect of safety – the public face. People are asking, if you look at media coverage, if it is safe to go to AA or to send loved one there. I might think that it is a foolish question, but then I thought about what an effect this public issue has on all of us, especially our newcomers. Our co-founder Bill Wilson says that we could not have made the progress with which we have been blessed without the good opinion of our friends. I wondered if the recent media attention is bad enough to damage the past 60 or so years of work. Let's be friendly with our friends, indeed. Adverse publicity is one aspect – perhaps a big threat to the enjoyment of a good name we've had in the past. That is perhaps why this topic is important now anyhow. We liked it a lot when we were listed, proudly, as winners of this and that, but when we break the moral codes, we also take a very public black eye. Members behaving badly is broadcast widely across the media, and we are ourselves not shy about our presence in the media, any media. *I am further wondering if we are trying to find a way to look good, even more than the desire to do good. If that is so, shame on us.*  
(personal opinion alert, the first of several)

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## TRADITIONS

So then I begin to ask about traditions, and to think about our traditions, and how we came to all of this discussion today. Can the traditions help our groups? Do the traditions damage our expectation of

safety, as well as also help to guide us toward solutions?

Since when did AA guarantee safety, or even promise safety to all? How is it that we allowed ourselves to get into this particular pickle, even enough to be having this as a topic? Has the membership changed? Are we doing something differently? Its too easy to think that the world changed. The answers I got were in two basic areas – organizational and personal.

### **Organizational – Problems first... and Groups**

Everyone in this room understands the organizational aspect of AA, or you wouldn't be here – I presume. I am talking with the choir here, in this room. I ask an unpopular question

**Are we organizationally flawed?** Bill thought so, but he built our flaws into our traditions, as part of our higher spiritual principal, with some business principles to attend to so that the bills got paid.

It seems obvious to me that the traditions are part of the answer, and that they might even be a part of the problem, from a strictly practical point of view

- We accept all people, regardless of their background, providing that they have a problem with alcohol, or say that they have a desire to stop drinking, two different statements perhaps. This is our strength – it is also our vulnerability. You are a member if you say so.
- We are a group, or many groups, whose membership is composed, at our best, of people who suffer from alcoholism – it is our strength – it is also our vulnerability. The doorway is wide.
- We alcoholics suffer from a spiritual malady – it is our deepest strength – it is also our deepest weakness. We are a selfish and self centered people – our highest spiritual value is to care for another human being. Our base values are to 'get mine,' first.

You already know this. You can add to my partial list of human-being-problems from your own experiences, I am sure. Our membership is open to all who wish to recover from alcoholism. Tradition three – you either believe in that – or you do not. It's a principle, and it doesn't change with circumstances. Is our unity stronger because of our diversity. I do believe so.

From 12 x 12, page 141, tradition three

*'We were resolved to admit nobody to AA but that hypothetical class of people we termed "Pure alcoholics." Except for their guzzling, and the unfortunate results thereof, they could have no other*

*complications. So beggars, tramps, asylum inmates, prisoners, queers, plain crackpots, and fallen women were definitely out.'*

Which of us would be here if this was the case, I bet the room would be cleared.

More traditions: Unity requires sacrifice. We are practicing sacrifice, or we are not. We are taught that early – but it's not a virtue much admired – sacrifice. Society is telling us to take care of me first.

Our groups are autonomous, and we celebrate that. They are unmanagable by any AA police.

Our name also suggests that we practice the humility of anonymity.

There is a dark side to that anonymity coin

- We discourage gossip about the person who has a run in with the law, whether criminal or business or personal, a good thing, indeed, but then the price for that is that people can gain both a public persona that is squeaky clean, and a private persona that is quite different. Others do not know about or talk about these folks, so vulnerable members cannot make informed decisions. Our outsides can look far more recovered than our insides.
- We abjure public controversy. Do we break our own commitments against public controversy and go on Facebook or Twitter to explain ourselves, and tell people our principles? Do we defend ourselves? We have decided not to do that. So what do we do about that? Should we do anything about them? Should we do nothing about them?

Regarding Branding. The larger picture from our organization is perhaps about the legal aspects of protecting the 'brand' of AA when sponces and sponsors run amuck. In the public perception, it is AA that is on trial whenever someone breaks the law, or does damage. Who is responsible for that? You and me? No-one? Does our bottom level of servants at the office reflect our spiritual values or does it reflect a new age business model, where business acumen or connection trumps all other qualification for service. We are in need of alcoholics with principles as our lowest levels of service, We definitely need leaders who are not afraid to pay attention, and to lead, without secrets. Fearlessly.

Actions: Should we write a targeted pamphlet?" Yet another targeted pamphlet to a minority group? **A word to the criminals and the violent among us...** We would probably all have to read it, as mandatory reading before attending AA. It's a bit of the story of my pre-AA life.

Is it the responsibility of CPC and PI committees to put themselves in a place of protecting us from the lousy public opinion that others get whenever we hit the news with yet another member acting out?

Should we have, instead of yet another insipid book to promote sales, a PR clean up team? – call it the **damage control committee on membership practices**. It surely is being practiced, whether we

acknowledge it or not.

Is it right to have the responsibility lie with the leaders at all? Is it up to us to do this when our leaders fail us.

## **Ground Zero**

**Where do our safety 'issues' present itself?** I would propose, in two places.

First, In groups, that is where. They exhibit in groups – our own homegroups. That is the face that most members connect with, and often the only experience that they will ever have of AA.

Who makes up the groups – individual alcoholics.

What is our responsibility as a group, and within ourselves?

I hear a lot of people saying that they are going to trust God, but then do nothing. I know that my garden grows in God's own light and air and rain, but someone had to plant the seeds and dig the ground to make it workable. Someone has to pull the weeds or nothing can grow. How do we work with the trusted power of God - not just organizationally, but individually, within our groups.

As AA members, As AA groups, we have chosen the highest form of freedom by not limiting our message to one class of person. We have chosen the highest amount of individual liberty within our groups by making the groups autonomous, responsible to their own authority, even the right to be wrong. We have no AA police, although I have myself often wished for them to come and incinerate one intolerable person or another with a great flame thrower.

Who is going to deal with the chronic 13<sup>th</sup> stepper or other predator, if not the members themselves?

We are taught and told to practice love and tolerance and respect. We have chosen to live among the sick and the mentally ill. We have chosen this because they are us, and because it is what has been asked of us. I was taught that when I am to surrender, I hand in my weapons, and go over and sit down, awaiting instructions. My instructions have been clear. I am to work with others, and to be a home group member to the best of my ability.

So – how do I do that? - the second thing, the second place where we confront our safety issues is me. Sponsorship and Commitment.

- We teach our newcomers about what AA is or might be, at it's best.

- Regular attendance at my home group – the only place where I really have a vote and a voice.
- Regular meditation to keep myself spiritually fit so that I can sponsor others conscientiously.
- Being the best and most effective channel that I can be, given my own flawed nature.
- Business meeting attendance to help the group to build its community of recovered and recovering drunks so that we are strong enough to carry a message, to support our sick in finding recovery. Together in unity.
- Personal demonstration of change.
- Care for our newer members until they too can carry a message.

Seek to share the substance of AA, not the side distractions. It is substance that will save my life.

Don't you think that it is our fear, and our dependance on the opinion of others that allows us to put our own spiritual principles second? The Doctors opinions says that “they believe in themselves, and still more in the power that brings men like them back from the gates of death... There's a challenge! I am afraid that we usually want to save our face more than saving our fannies.

I do not believe we are supposed to save everyone, regardless of the great pressure to do so. I think that we are afraid to have principles that are unpopular. I think (lots of opinion alert here ) we fear talking face to face with others, more so since the advent of technological masks like cell phones and social media. We aren't looking at each other eyeball to eyeball and telling the truth.

I am aware that it is possible to know both too much about someone, and yet to know nothing about them at the same time. Our own social media proves this to be true.

Chapter 2 says that respect for others opinions, tolerance of their shortcomings makes us more useful. I want my loved ones to find something that is pure and good here in AA – maybe that is too much to expect- but this program offers everyone the opportunity to change, nothing less. It is personal change that lets me become a safer person.

### **Personal:**

Who do I know well?

How is it that I can know another person well enough to be useful? Do I ask them about themselves – our book says to find out all that you can about someone so that you can put yourself in their shoes. We meet them where they are, not where we would like them to be.

So- a true story. A couple in town had some violence issues between them. She talked with her women friends, they had two little kids, he had a good attorney general job, like his father. When he and she got into it, and he killed her with the kitchen knife, the community was charged up, and we did our usual grief, quite in public. Big demonstration against domestic violence, and how the program failed. I did have some sense of righteous failure, because he had been sitting at meetings for 4 years, and never said a word. No one, myself included, talked to that rigid stone-faced man. We allowed him to fence us out with his attitude. When he blew, I was sick with guilt that I had never crossed the room, nor spoke our language of the heart with him. Not that I am God, or even that I could have made a difference, but, I will never know- I didn't try.

The 'work' of AA is our twelve step, and there is plenty of guidance in our big book. I am usually not afraid, and feel protected, but want to listen to the guidance of a Higher Power. My sponsor used to say that he sat in his home with the hardest people – the psychopaths and hardened people, seriously mentally ill, real bad guys. He brought them to his home that they might see how a family lived, how they treated each other, and how they interacted on an ordinary level. He said that he spoke to the god that lived within.

What is my responsibility, and what is my authority regarding general safety in my AA life?

We once worried about some stuff going on with the young women at my home group and so a couple of us took it upon ourselves to host a meeting to talk about sex, and recovery at my house- it became known as “Sex with Judy”. We told them about predators, and how to practice safe sex. Two of the young women became pregnant within a couple of months. One of those babies became my grandson. I haven't had the nerve to try that solution again!

What is my spiritual responsibility in my sponsorship, my groups or meetings?

What do I know about the nature of recovering addictions after alcohol is removed?

I do rely upon the intuitive thought to save my own butt, and I do have that as my spiritual guide often when working with someone. Sometimes I am not useful, or they aren't one of us, and I have to pray carefully to know where is the best other place to take someone ( not send them – they don't get there, usually)

There has always been someone in AA trying to get another person to take care of them, to support them, to hire them, to sleep with them, to make them feel better. That has been around since our beginning. Safety has never been promised, especially not when I am sick, and make lousy choices. When I accept your guidance, I make fewer mistakes.

Am I encouraging safety when I rely upon the police to make me safe with legal actions and restraining orders? This solution is very popular in my town. There is nothing quite like coming to a church, and mixing at the front door with the police, the choir and thhe AA group, all coming gether with their ID cards.

Is there some time when I need to ask for help? Yes, I don't think that I can be birdman and fly without wings. But when and how to help, that is the question.

### **Solutions – Are there any?**

Better groups of drunks.- better basic material – *that's a joke*

More rules to keep people out. - *that too is a joke*

*We have the very best solution possible for drunks.*

Sponsorship – it is what is available, practical and it works.

Active Home Group – what can I do to help right where I live?

Traditions? They set us spiritually in principles of openness and acceptance.

Personal Spiritual growth.

Be responsible for *our program*, not for all of the sub-interest-groups that are springing up.

Should we continue our pamphlets that showcase every individual separate issue? Does this do damage to the whole?

Is AA so focused on growth that we haven't cared to grow our own recovery depth. Is our focus misguided when growing our numbers and contributions is more important than saving lives of drunks?

Should we focus on being more about slogans and less about meaningful change?

**Leadership** - Is it time – I am speaking to the choir here, for us to begin talking to each other about AA issues, so that we can be more cohesive and less separate in developing our conscience. If we don't talk together about issues, as we work within AA, encouraging secrecy, we are part of an ongoing problem. We don't know who we are electing, because we don't know what they think, or what they stand for, or what they do after they are given our trust. Leadership functions at our lowest level, but the vibrations of either good or bad leadership are felt at our highest group level.



## **We are a program of redemption. The stories abound.**

The most ferocious killer in the hells angels, or in the mafia turn into chaplains, fathers, husbands.

The most selfish and ego centered among us work in detox, prisons and missions.

The energy of drug runners becomes the energy to fuel 12 stepping, when it comes from an alcoholic who is armed with the facts about himself.

The young among us want to find a place for their more noble desires. They yearn for meaning and challenge. Does the program change them, or do they change the program?

The faithless become faithful. We get new teeth. We go to school. People make amends and become whole. People do their step-work and find freedom from the bondage of self by freely helping others.

We take people where they are, as they are, when they get here, and it is our job to help them find what their God would have them be.

The darkness that lives in the unrecovered alcoholic is about selfishness, self centeredness and fear.

Your serotonin level will only carry you so far. The power of love transforms lives, yes, but we all have example of people we have loved who do not change, and do not live – love is a partial answer only.

If it were simple, we would have a book that had one page, with printing on each side. One side would say – Stop Drinking. The other side would say Love. But it isn't so simple as that.

## **Conclusion**

**You cannot create safety in AA without taking the alcoholic out of the group.**

**And yet: Is it possible for AA to be safer from the behavior of AA members, it's own lifes blood?**

**The only solutions I have come to are Responsible Groups that do their work well, and Sponsorship, all acting under the guidance of a loving God.**

We keep working with others, and do it well, because the lives of others, my own life, the lives of our grandchildren and those to come, whose future problems I cannot imagine, depend upon it.

Show up for duty as assigned.- it is the principle I was given. It, demands the very best that I can give to another. How is it that that can happen, when I am a flawed person, a damaged vessel. Let me bring to the table my own broken bowl that it can be made beautiful by the loving hand of God expressed through you and the cracked and chipped and scratched and dented others just like me. If it be your will, God, then, I can do what is asked of me.

My prayer, I will share it with you. It got simpler this year.

Heal me that I might help others.

Thank you for letting me share.

God Bless.

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