

Self-Support Today

"When we meet and defeat the temptation to take large gifts, we are only being prudent. But when we are generous with the hat we give a token that we are grateful for our blessings and evidence that we are eager to share what we have found with all those who still suffer."--The Language of the Heart

When the hat or basket is passed at an AA meeting, and AA members throw in a buck or two, they're observing the Seventh Tradition by contributing to AA's self-support. Simply put, the Seventh Tradition means that the Fellowship pays its own way: it doesn't solicit or accept contributions from government, corporations, or charitable institutions, and it caps donations from individuals at \$1,000 per year. It neither lavishly spends nor raises money; it doesn't try to amass capital. In a world where money talks, AA has chosen to remain quiet.

This isn't how it was in AA's early days, however. In the beginning, money looked like a very good thing to some of our members, including co-founder Bill W. Bill had tremendous energy, drive, and ambition on behalf of the budding Fellowship but he was also susceptible to visions of grandeur. When he wrote about the dangers of "self-will run riot," he was speaking from the heart.

Bill's schemes, in the first few years of AA, included having paid AA missionaries and setting up AA hospitals, and he managed to persuade a reluctant Dr. Bob and a group of Akronites and New Yorkers that these things were desirable. He wanted to spread the message of AA and perhaps naturally, he thought in terms of establishing power bases. Bill was a former stockbroker, and everything he knew about business and life told him that money made the world go round. It seemed like simple logic: if AA had more money, it could carry the message better.

To that end, in the fall of 1937, Bill's brother-in-law Leonard Strong set up a meeting with Willard Richardson, an associate of John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Richardson was impressed by Bill and his story, though a few weeks later he wrote to Strong that "anything that tended to professionalize or institutionalize [AA] would be a serious matter and quite undesirable." However, Richardson set up a meeting with the Rockefeller associates and with Bill, Dr. Bob, and members of AA. Bill had hopes of a large outpouring of Rockefeller money, but in the end, the Fellowship had to make do with \$5,000.

Two years later, Rockefeller set up an exchange between AA and the New York business community, this time a dinner at the exclusive Union Club, to which 400 were invited and 75 came. (Because John D. was ill, his son Nelson presided.) Contemplating a roomful of wealthy, influential men reignited Bill's hopes. He described it later, with gentle self-mockery:

"As we watched the faces of the guests, it was evident that we had captured their sympathetic interest. Great influence and great wealth were soon to be at our disposal. Weariness and worry were to be things of the past. . . .

"Breathlessly, we waited for the climax--the matter of money. Nelson Rockefeller obliged us. . . . 'Gentlemen, you can all see that this is work of goodwill. Its power lies in the fact that one member carries the good message to the next, without any thought of financial income or

reward. Therefore, it is our belief that Alcoholics Anonymous should be self-supporting so far as money is concerned. It needs only our goodwill.' Whereupon the guests clapped lustily, and after cordial handshakes and goodbyes all around, the whole billion dollars' worth of them walked out the door."

As a matter of fact, some money did come in because of the Rockefeller dinner: Rockefeller himself bought 400 copies of the newly published Big Book (at a discount) and sent it to the 400 invitees; he also contributed another \$1,000; and AA was allowed to solicit the invitees--the "dinner list." It did this for four years, reaping a total of \$3,000 a year in donations. These monies helped support the new AA headquarters on Vesey Street in Manhattan and gave Bill and Dr. Bob a weekly stipend of \$30.

But Nelson Rockefeller, like William Richardson, had put his finger on the thing that made AA work: members carrying the message with no thought "of financial income or reward." He could see--more clearly than could Bill at the time--that money and professionalism would corrupt the real spirit of the Fellowship. So, in a way, AA was saved from itself. But the remarkable thing is that Bill and the other early members were so quick to grasp the value of self-support. The financial necessity to be self-supporting gradually merged with the desire for autonomy and the recognition that AA was not a business proposition.

In an August 1947 Grapevine article, Bill explained how self-support became a practical reality. In 1941, *The Saturday Evening Post* asked Jack Alexander to write an article on AA. Bill anticipated that the article would bring hundreds of queries into the little New York City office, which was staffed only by himself, Ruth Hock, and a typist. They were going to need help. But how would they finance a larger office staff? Bill described how two alcoholic trustees went out to AA groups to ask for help:

"They presented their listeners with these ideas: that support of our Central Office was a definite responsibility of the AA groups; that answering written inquiries was a necessary assistance to our Twelfth Step work; that we AAs ought to pay these office expenses ourselves and rely no further upon outside charity or insufficient book sales. The two trustees also suggested that . . . all group contributions ought to be entirely voluntary; that every AA group would receive equal service from the New York office, whether it contributed or not. It was estimated that if each group sent the Foundation a sum equal to \$1 per member per year, this might eventually carry our office, without other assistance. Under this arrangement the office would ask the groups twice yearly for funds and render, at the same time, a statement of its expenses for the previous period. . . Now clearly understanding the situation, most groups began contributing to the Alcoholic Foundation for Central Office expenses, and have continued to do so ever since. In this practice the AA Tradition of self-support had a firm beginning."

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The Alcoholic Foundation is now the General Service Board, and through group contributions the Fellowship continues to support it and its related activities: group services, the convening of the General Service Conference and the World Service Meeting, and the maintenance of the Archives. However, while the number of registered groups has risen over the past six years, the percentage of registered groups that contribute to GSO has steadily fallen. So for several years there's been a widening gap between the cost of providing services to AA groups and the dollars

contributed by the groups--a shortfall which for many years has been met through literature sales.

This doesn't mean there's a financial emergency at GSO; in fact, the Reserve Fund recently exceeded its Conference-approved limit (equal to twelve months of operating expenses) and operating plans were deliberately put into effect in order to reduce it. So, the question might be, what is wrong with supporting GSO's services with profits from the sale of the Big Book or "The Twelve and Twelve" or *Living Sober*? Why is there a concern, as Gary Glynn (Class A [nonalcoholic] trustee) explains, with "the long-term implications of what appears to be a trend of too much self-support coming from literature income and too little coming from group contributions"? Why did Bill write in 1946 that "the voluntary contributions or pledges of AA members should be our principal and eventually our sole support."

A primary reason is that while contributions come *only* from AAs, a consumer of AA literature can be anyone, in or out of the Fellowship (a bookstore, a treatment center, a library system). There's certainly nothing wrong with that per se; the literature is an important Twelfth Step tool. But if AA is to be self-supporting, then increased literature sales could eventually violate the Seventh Tradition. And if GSO becomes too dependent on literature, then less and less income will come from the direct source, and conceivably the AA member and the AA group could become less important. Group contributions maintain the direct one-on-one connection between GSO and the Fellowship--a connection so vital to both parties.

Different AA groups define "self-support" in different ways. A group may collect money only for the support of itself--i.e., rent, coffee, literature for newcomers. Some groups are simply too small, too new, or too unstable to make contributions. But most groups who see the role of self-support as part of the larger picture will be more likely to support local, area, intergroup, and GSO service activities with a donation, even if it has to be small, understanding that at all levels AA must be self-supporting. As Bill W. once put it, "Our support of services actually amounts to a recognition on our part that AA must everywhere function in full strength--and that, under our Tradition of self-support, we are all going to foot the bill."

So self-support isn't just a matter of dollars and cents; it's also about a willingness to participate. Making a contribution is an act that affirms the importance of unity, responsibility, and commitment to "our common welfare."

George D., general manager of GSO, points out that "the whole process of the member putting money in the basket, the group taking care of its expenses and then, through a group conscience, determining how it can pay for needed AA services that can't be extended by individual groups acting alone--this is a wonderful spiritual process basic to our personal recovery and to our Traditions." George made these remarks at a sharing session of the General Service Board last fall, when Gary Glynn and other attendees were asked to address the question of declining group participation.

George emphasized the importance of participation: "Appeals for money based on other than basic AA spiritual principles could result in temporary increases in contributions, but they might not continue. We hope for orderly and sustainable growth in contributions rather than quick fixes."

Trustee Julian R. suggests some reasons why a smaller percentage of groups is participating these days: for example, downswings in the economy and an overall drop in membership in all organizations. He also wonders if newcomers are learning from their sponsors how important it is to have a sense of commitment to a home group: "Do sponsors still point out the importance of the home group in instilling a sense of responsibility and commitment to newcomers? When I was newly sober, self-support was explained to me as being important to both my personal recovery and to the home group I attended."

Perhaps the biggest problem, however, is lack of communication. Julian reports that he was told by AA members around the country that "the lack of participation could be attributed to a lack of information rather than a lack of interest. Many groups simply do not know and do not understand just what the General Service Office does for them." George comments: "We need to do a better job of getting across an understanding of the critical importance of contribution support. With new people coming in and new groups that may be less connected to AA as a whole, the message has to be repeated and repeated in simple and straightforward AA language."

In an effort to communicate the importance of self-support more clearly to the Fellowship, the 1995 General Service Conference approved a newly revised self-support pamphlet, "Self-Support: Where Money and Spirituality Mix." As the Conference looked at the new pamphlet, it debated whether or not to include the pie charts, which suggest ways a group can divvy up their contributions. Some felt that the pie charts were too directive; but others pointed out that many AA groups have found the charts to be helpful. The new pamphlet offers five pie charts (labelled "Suggested Plans for Group Contributions Toward All AA Services"), but great efforts were made to present a number of different options, making it clear that there isn't one right way to contribute. It's always up to the group how it can support AA services.

The new pamphlet deemphasizes dollars and cents, makes clear that the Fellowship is GSO's base of support, stresses the importance of an informed group conscience, and renews the focus on the spirit of the Seventh Tradition. Different people might sum up that spirit with different words: *responsibility*, *commitment*, *participation*. But it is generally agreed that as members of Alcoholics Anonymous, we are all responsible for carrying the message--and that is where spirituality and money mix. As GSO's auditor of many years has often put it: "Contributions are the mortar that holds AA together."



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