

IN AL-ANON we have learned that as individuals we are very important, and that if we don't take care of ourselves, "Who will?" Tradition One speaks to our need for "common welfare." It speaks to us as individuals, as members of a group and to our group. It suggests that, by caring for the well-being of all participants, we will be able to discern what will best serve the individual growth of most members and foster our own well-being. Within a loving, spiritual community, each of us has the best chance for personal progress and Tradition One sets the foundation for creating and maintaining that community.

Remembering our common welfare helps us learn how to use our meeting effectively. What is common welfare? For Al-Anon members it means familiarity with our primary purpose—to help families and friends of alcoholics. It means recovery, sharing at meetings, personal growth, group growth, participating in the worldwide fellowship, and understanding a common problem—alcoholism. Although spoken and written in many languages, by reading the suggested opening, reciting the Serenity Prayer, Steps, Traditions and Concepts, using Conference Approved Literature (CAL), and reading our suggested closing, we are assured that the message of Al-Anon is spoken worldwide.

This does not mean that all groups are exactly alike. Groups follow different formats: some hold literature study meetings, have monthly or quarterly chairpersons, begin meetings by reading all Steps and Traditions, or by reading the Steps and one Tradition. Some groups are non-smoking, some meet in hospitals, some focus on children or parents of alcoholics, and some are primarily for men, women, gays or lesbians, or newcomers, but all groups have a framework of Al-Anon principles. All groups seek to relieve the pain of living or having lived with an alcoholic.

As new members of a group, many of us withhold our thoughts and experiences, either out of consider-

Tradition One

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ation for others or from fear that we might be embarrassed, thus depriving our group of our wisdom. Through the unity and leadership of the group members, we learn that by speaking we share the responsibility for keeping our meetings healthy. Longtime members often withhold sharing in larger meetings, believing it is essential for the newer members to talk first. They forget that, by sharing, they may be providing wisdom and encouragement to a newcomer or another longtime member with a new problem in his or her life. It is essential that we nod in understanding to the pain of the newcomer, to the parent living with a child who slips in and out of recovery, or to the longtime member discovering that yet another relative is suffering from the insidious disease of alcoholism. Sharing our common experiences and the Al-Anon solutions at meetings is what makes a meeting alive and unified in purpose.

Practicing the Traditions helps us maintain unity and a sense of familiarity. As individuals each of us is free to find a group where we feel most at home. At the same time, because of our unity of purpose, we are assured that we will find some familiar ground in any Al-Anon group we attend.

Sometimes, however, members consciously or unconsciously disregard the Traditions. In such instances each of us has a responsibility to remind them of the Traditions in a caring, loving way. When making such a suggestion, it helps if we remember that guidelines are for group harmony. Our Traditions are suggestions that we each adhere to voluntarily, using the best understanding we have of them at the time. We have learned that as our recovery expands, our ability to benefit from the Traditions also expands.

Over the years, many groups have faced common problems. As new members, we find it far easier to talk about the alcoholics in our lives than to focus on ourselves. Later we learn that taking excessive time dumping a great many details on the group is not ben-

eficial for the group or for us. It is often at this point in our recovery that we learn about the role of a Sponsor and the many purposes of sponsorship. A Sponsor is a person with whom a member can share and discuss personal problems or questions in detail, who will willingly share their Al-Anon experience, strength, and hope one-on-one. A Sponsor serves us better than the group for lengthy discussions. Sometimes desperate newcomers may need to unburden. Allowing them some meeting time to share and making an offer of personal contact after the meeting are ways to offer loving understanding in this situation.

A good source of unifying material is our own Conference Approved Literature (CAL). “Conference approved” means that what is contained in our published literature was written by Al-Anon members and has passed through a rigorous World Service Conference (WSC) approval process. It is an accurate reflection of the ideas and experience of our fellowship as a whole. It is appropriate for use at all Al-Anon meetings and events. What we read outside meetings is our own business and becomes a part of our personal experience. In meetings we share from our personal experiences and from CAL. With all the research, popular writing, and media attention to alcoholism, we in Al-Anon cannot review and discuss everything that is published. We keep it simple when we use the literature that we know reflects our Al-Anon approach to alcoholism. Using CAL also has the advantage of allowing us to access the experience, strength, and hope of members in our large, diverse, worldwide fellowship. Through CAL, we share the suggestions we know have helped us.

Some people may wonder how an entirely volunteer fellowship can survive without enforcing rules. Ours is a spiritual program. Again and again we must place our trust in a God of our understanding to lead us to decisions for our common good and we must practice the principles we know have worked for oth-

ers in our fellowship. We are not perfect; we often have strong conflicts, but we work our way through them with the Traditions and our trust in a Higher Power. So far we have found that if each of us seeks our best personal understanding of the principle of unity, accepts our diverse backgrounds, and keeps faith with ground rules established by the group conscience, the program works. It may not be amazing that it works, but that is further evidence for trust in our Higher Power.

Many Al-Anon groups close their meetings by reciting the Al-Anon Declaration, *Let It Begin with Me*. “When anyone, anywhere, reaches out for help, let the hand of Al-Anon and Alateen always be there, and—*Let It Begin with Me*.” This is a common message and it speaks to the welfare of those who have not yet found meetings as well as to the unity of members of our worldwide fellowship.

Members Share Experience, Strength, and Hope

I SAW A
GLIMMER
OF HOPE

HOW DID I-Anon come alive for me? It wasn't through the Steps as it might have been for most members. For me it was on a special night in a meeting on Tradition One. That night I was receptive. I heard how Al-Anon worked in other people's lives, and I understood some of my part in this disease. I felt the pain. I realized how deeply alcoholism had affected our family. As I sat in the Tradition study meeting, I really listened to each person share. It became clear to me that these Traditions could apply to my home. After all, I saw Tradition One working in our group. I even saw it applied very successfully in our business meetings. I saw a glimmer of hope, a new direction, a real tool I could use in my recovery.

Tradition One spoke of unity—something that I longed for in my home. This Tradition made me look at my part in our dis-unity. Somewhere in the family

disease of alcoholism, I had taken control. I took it upon myself to make most of the decisions. After all, I was not the alcoholic, so I was okay. The decisions I made and my motives for making them were to keep the family together and the alcoholic in line. I know today that most of my decisions were made in times of anger, resentment, deep despair, and insanity. I had no balance, no serenity, and no Higher Power. I had retired God many years before this and I had been fueled by self-will ever since.

Today I know that for unity to exist in my family or in my group, all of us must have a voice. No one voice is more or less important than anyone else's. I have a responsibility to listen, to share, and to accept. Tradition One lifted the burden of control off my shoulders. I no longer had the right to make decisions for everyone. The people in my home deserved to make their own decisions and to be given the same respect that I desired for myself, whether they were in recovery or not. This new freedom for me and the other members of my family was a miracle from Al-Anon. When I see Tradition One applied at the group level, it reminds me again how important unity is in my life. The reminder always brings me back into balance.

WHEN I first came into the Al-Anon program, I didn't understand the Steps, let alone the Traditions. After a while I began to look at the Traditions, but I interpreted them according to my own behavior at that time. I always put my needs after those of the alcoholic and my friends. If they told me what they wanted, I did it. I kept thinking someday my turn would come, but it never did. As a result, I interpreted the Traditions to mean that everyone in the group had to be happy or we would lose our unity. If someone wanted to ban smoking, I thought we had to ban smoking. If an A.A. member wanted to discuss the Big Book in a meeting, I thought we should all be

MY UNDER-
STANDING
GREW AS I
GREW IN
AL-ANON

courteous to listen. If a member shared the same story week after week without taking any action to improve the situation, I felt my job was to be there for him or her, even if he or she kept taking valuable meeting time to rehash the same old problem.

One week we studied the First Tradition. The leader said that in Al-Anon each person's opinion counts and that no one person should force the group to do anything. I was floored. How could we possibly have unity and still let everyone speak? A fight always started when I expressed my opinion at home. I always gave in to keep the peace. In Al-Anon I learned a different way. Tradition One meant the group could set aside time to discuss the issues and then we could vote. That way no one forced the rest of us to do anything. During our group conscience meetings, I actually saw people disagree without getting angry. After we voted and made a decision, we held hands and said the Serenity Prayer. Even the people in the minority were pleasant because they had had their say. In the end, everyone accepted the group's decision.

Learning about the Traditions also helped me in my private life. I began to understand that even at home I didn't need to take it personally when we had different opinions. I could state my opinion and let go of the results. As I began to detach and not force solutions, even the alcoholic began to change. Sometimes we agreed to disagree. Other times we talked about our problem and came to a mutually acceptable decision. Al-Anon taught me that I don't always have to win or lose. Sometimes I can just participate.

I began to understand that common welfare meant I needed to object to things that would divide and confuse us in our meeting. If someone dominated the discussion or tried to bring outside issues into the meeting, I needed to stand up and say something. Eventually I had the courage to speak up when members discussed their religious convictions or political beliefs. I gently reminded them that we come to

Al-Anon to share our experience, strength, and hope about living with alcoholism. I found they responded positively when I gave them my reason instead of shouting, “We don’t do that here!” Sometimes I spoke to someone after the meeting to explain a Tradition and then listened to them. Again, people responded with acceptance.

Tradition One has taught me that unity does not mean uniformity. It has also shown me that what is good for the group is probably good for me as well. If it isn’t good for me, I can always find another meeting or I can take a closer look at my own feelings. I am certain that Tradition One is there to keep my Al-Anon meeting an important part of Al-Anon as a whole. We don’t need to be an isolated entity. We don’t need to ignore the Traditions and enforce our own self-will, either. That was what I was like before I came to Al-Anon. Tradition One has given me tools to change some of the things I can. That’s why I keep coming back for more.

TRADITION ONE gives me balance. On the one hand, it is not good for me to control or dominate my group. On the other, I do not need to become a shrinking violet and submerge my needs under everyone else’s. The simple truth is that I am a group member, equal in importance to everyone else.

OUR
COMMON
WELFARE
MUST COME
FIRST

I do not take up too much time sharing, because the Tradition tells me that everyone has the right to share. When I share I try to stick to the topic, because that is how the greatest number will benefit. It is better for me to apply a topic to my life than to dwell on my problems. I try to share my experience, strength, and hope for the good of the group. Even if I am in pain, I can share what I am learning from that pain because it is part of my experience.

I take responsibility in the group and do various jobs. I find speakers, set up the room, and chair meetings. I do not take too much responsibility because it is

our group, not my group. Our common welfare means that everyone needs to pitch in and do their share.

All of this leads to unity. Unity means that we work together for our common goal. In our recovery from the effects of someone else's drinking, the goal is personal progress for the greatest number. We work together best when we carry out the Traditions, because the Traditions unite us rather than divide us.

I try to remember Tradition One outside of Al-Anon. At work, if I remember our common welfare and unity, I am more likely to work well and enjoy it. I am less likely to spend the day depressed and wishing things were other than the way they are. At home, I try to remember that I am not the boss. Everyone's opinions and ways of doing things are just as valid as mine.

I recently took a trip with two US friends, a mother and a daughter, who were visiting England. I drove them around a particularly beautiful part of England. The daughter was getting crabby, and I started feeling miserable. I thought the mother and daughter were paying far too much attention to each other and very little to me. How dare the young woman moan about being tired when I was doing all of the work! I was driving down treacherous country lanes, not knowing for certain where I was going. Where was the appreciation?

I decided to stop myself. My friends had traveled thousands of miles to be with me and to see England. They might never come back. What was the good in being divided like this? The two of them were angry with each other and I was feeling sorry for myself. I thought, "Our common welfare must come first," and my attitude changed. They were my friends and we were having a vacation. It was up to me to be a part of our little group. I was the driver but I was not responsible for their moods. I suggested that we see a few more villages and then stop for tea. They still may

have been angry with each other, but we took time to refresh ourselves. My focus pleasantly changed from myself to our trip.

I had time to wonder at the simple wisdom of the Traditions and to try, through attraction, to give them to someone else.

Working Tradition One

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

- ✦ How can I apply this Tradition to my everyday life?
- ✦ How do I use this Tradition in my meeting?
- ✦ How does this Tradition give me the right to offer my opinion? How can I do this without dominating or having to “win”?
- ✦ What does “common welfare” mean to me? My group? In other areas of service work within Al-Anon?
- ✦ What does “unity” mean to me? My group? In other areas of service work within Al-Anon?
- ✦ Do I consider myself to be open minded? Always?
- ✦ Am I willing to respect others’ views? How?
- ✦ Am I willing to accept and appreciate what others are able to give?
- ✦ Am I expressing myself for unity or for manipulation and control?
- ✦ How do I keep Al-Anon unity in mind when expressing my opinion?
- ✦ How am I flexible?
- ✦ Am I bringing anything positive to this group? My family? My personal relationships?

- * Do endless sharings at meetings hinder the unity of the group? If so, how can this be handled?
- * What other ways do groups suffer when members dominate meetings?
- * How can I be a part of the solution of my group's problems not a part of the problem?
- * Am I giving with love? How?
- * Do I listen with love to those I dislike or don't agree with?
- * Am I an informed Al-Anon member, supporting my group, district, Area and World Service Office in all of their affairs? How can I become informed?
- * Do I welcome newcomers in the same manner as my long-time Al-Anon friends? Am I willing to change?
- * When I share, am I honest in sharing the good as well as the bad? Do I listen to the wisdom of long-time members? My Sponsor?
- * Do I understand that there are no rules, but that there are suggested guidelines created for the common welfare of Al-Anon groups worldwide? How will this change my participation in Al-Anon? In my family? With others?