

## **Understanding anonymity on the Internet**

By Tom C., Associate Director of Communications—Literature

*“Anonymity acts as a spiritual leveler, regardless of who we are, and I receive the same protection as all other members.”*

Since attending my first meeting, anonymity has always been very important to me. At first, I based that importance on fear. I was afraid others would find out the secret my family and I had tried so hard to hide. The principle of anonymity helped lessen my fear. It allowed me to start opening up about myself, and I began to trust my fellow members.

The more I trusted, the more I welcomed these members into my life. In time, I even let them know my full name. Because of this, when I was in the hospital, they could easily find me. When there was a death in my family, they knew which room of the funeral home to request. Sharing my full name with others became extremely practical as I became more involved in service.

Still, I was always careful to follow Tradition Eleven, and I never revealed my face or my last name in public media when discussing my membership in Al-Anon. Before I was interviewed on radio and TV, I made sure that the interviewer accepted my desire for anonymity. As e-mail and social media sites entered my life, I selected an e-mail address that didn't contain my last name, and I never mentioned being an Al-Anon member on Web sites accessible to the public.

Practicing anonymity was no longer an issue of fear or shame for me, but of respecting Al-Anon's Traditions, and the idea that we share as equals. No Al-Anon member is any more important than another.

When I began working for the World Service Office, I found it comforting that although I would use my full name in corresponding with members, our WSO publications would never use my last name. Our literature does not even give the last names of our late cofounders, Lois W. and Anne B., even though most members know them. Again, anonymity acts as a spiritual leveler, regardless of who we are, and I receive the same protection as all other members.

However, no matter how thorough I am in practicing Tradition Eleven, keeping my anonymity is not entirely up to me and my choices. That became most clear when I recently did an Internet search on my full name and the word “Al-Anon.” I found numerous incidents where my anonymity had been broken—primarily from newsletters and reports posted on Al-Anon Area Web sites. I give this example not to criticize anyone, but to point out that the lack of understanding about maintaining anonymity—particularly on the Internet—seems widespread. I don't think these members or service arms intended to violate Tradition Eleven. Instead, this indicates that regardless of the amount of time in the program or experience in Al-Anon service, anonymity on the Internet remains a challenging, confusing matter.

Most of the documents I found gave only the first names and last initials of local members, but they made an exception for me and other WSO staff members. Although not everyone who works at the WSO is an Al-Anon member, it is a requirement for those who are Conference members. Yet not all members are aware of this.

Today if my anonymity is broken, I no longer feel endangered, but I do consider what I can do about it. In the case of the Internet, it certainly can't be undone. It is most likely impossible to retrieve this information from cyberspace, where it may exist for the rest of eternity. However, what I can do is help the WSO share information about all aspects of anonymity, and encourage all members to do the same. No one can do the right thing unless they know what the right thing is. Awareness can lead to action.

For that reason, the latest printing of *Why Anonymity in Al-Anon?* (P-33) includes all new wording. It can help members get a better understanding of anonymity and find practical ways to

apply and maintain it—especially in this sometimes confusing and challenging age of electronic communication. This major revision brings the pamphlet up-to-date with changes made in recent years to the “Digest of Al-Anon and Alateen Policies” section of the *Al-Anon/Alateen Service Manual* (P-24/27), which describe ways to protect anonymity on the Internet.

You can easily identify the revision, because it has a new cover design. Remember—when you buy from your local Literature Distribution Center, you support your local services.