

Resolving tradition violations, Part Two

This article was written by Sally E., a member of the World Service Board of Trustees, in July 1984. It represents her views at the time of writing.

Most of us would acknowledge that tradition violations occur with regularity throughout our fellowship. Sometimes they result from a lack of understanding of the traditions on the part of the individual or individuals involved. At other times, they are a result of the misguided philosophy of the "end justifies the means." Sometimes they occur out of a misinterpretation of the principles of autonomy and group conscience. Occasionally self-will is the issue, expressed as "we are going to do it my way or no way."

Communications and open discussion of the issues are two important ways to avoid tradition violations. But remembering that NA is a spiritual fellowship based on principles can resolve many difficulties before they become violations.

The trustees receive letters almost every day on one tradition question or another. In this article you will find examples of the most frequently addressed issues, along with some advice on how such matters should be handled.

One letter we received concerned a meeting held in a recovery house and primarily attended by NA members who were once residents of that recovery house, as well as individuals currently residing in the house. The former residents were grateful for having been introduced to NA by that recovery house and for the caring and sharing they experienced while there. The recovery house regularly held fund-raising functions for their facility and these were announced at the NA meetings as a matter of course. In-house residents, as well as new members coming to the meeting, had difficulty distinguishing between what were NA announcements and what were the recovery

house announcements. When someone informed the meeting that when these announcements were made at a meeting it constituted a violation of Tradition Six, the response was immediate anger that someone would attempt to interfere with their autonomy. Many felt that the member was nitpicking and should work their own program instead of judging and finding fault with them.

In another area, several members began attending prayer and meditation groups held at a local church. These members gained much from this and began to tell other NA members about it. Soon many NA members in the area were involved in the prayer and meditation groups. Some members then began distributing flyers at NA meetings about the prayer and meditation meetings and workshops. New members sometimes wondered if NA itself was a prayer and meditation group. When informed that this was a violation of the Twelve Traditions, the response was that they were merely practicing the Eleventh Step and encouraging others to do so. They stated that the members in their area wanted these flyers and they would continue to provide them.

In another letter the trustees learned of celebrations of a birthday that were announced in NA meetings, even though the person celebrating his birthday was going to do so at a meeting of another Twelve Step fellowship. When informed that this constituted a violation of Tradition Six, the member in question stated that it was his birthday and he could celebrate it wherever he wanted to.

In another situation, a large speaker meeting in a rapidly growing area almost always had a speaker from another Twelve Step fellowship. The secretary indicated this was imperative as the area contained mostly newcomers who needed to learn how to work the Twelve Steps and practice the principles of the program. He, therefore, felt it imperative to choose those individuals who had time and experience in working the steps. The fact that these individuals were not NA members was not important he said; other Twelve Step fellowships have the same steps and traditions and the steps and traditions are what is important. He felt that maybe later, when more NA members had more time, they could start using them as speakers, but not right now.

These are very common violations of the Twelve Traditions. Many of us, when we first came to Narcotics Anonymous, wanted a "do it my way program." We agreed with some of the steps and thought they were useful, others we thought were the pits. Many of us decided that we would apply and use some of the program and disregard the parts we felt were really hard or conflicted with our "comfortable" recovery. Through experiences of many years, sometimes through painful relapses, it has been found that having a "my way" program does not work. As individuals we had to learn to follow directions in working the steps. The same is true of the traditions.

The traditions exist in order to keep the fellowship true to the purpose of recovery and so that the philosophy of NA will not change. Adherence to them ensures the growth and continuation of our fellowship. We must apply them to the problems our fellowship encounters as they are written, rather than how we think they ought to read. If we do, we are able to assist others to recover in NA, and our fellowship grows in an atmosphere of love and acceptance. When the Twelve Traditions are not followed, as they are written, our experience has been disunity, chaos, and controversy. In that atmosphere, the recovery of newcomers and older members is imperiled.

The handling of a tradition violation is often a very sensitive matter and requires a great deal of tact and diplomacy; skills a recovering addict is often short of. Most of us have been wrong so often in our lives that it feels good to be right for a change. The tendency is to rush into the discussion, hurl an accusation or two, point a finger, say "you're violating our traditions" and demand change. This type of attitude is self defeating. We need to be protective of our traditions, but we need to balance that with tact and diplomacy. Actually the growth and development of tact and diplomacy are manifestations of having worked the steps.

A key point we need to keep in mind as we resolve a violation of traditions is that no one in recovery sets out to intentionally harm the fellowship. We want to see our fellowship grow. We do not consciously choose disunity in our recovery any more than we consciously chose to live miserably during our active addiction. Once we realize this, we can approach the

individual or individuals involved from a humanitarian perspective in a spirit of helpfulness and cooperation. We should not make the situation a confrontation from the "I'm right and you're wrong" point of view. Many of us have learned that being right does not always equate with being happy or solving a problem.

The first step would be to approach the individual on a one-to-one basis. Take time to think of alternative solutions that are within the traditions before approaching the individual. For example, in the case of the secretary who is using speakers from other Twelve Step fellowships, explain how this violates Tradition Six. Acknowledge that it is difficult to find NA members with long clean time who live out of the area but are willing to travel to share at that meeting.

In the case of the recovery house, suggest that the house place a bulletin board outside the meeting room and post announcements of its fund-raising activities there.

Suggest to the members of the prayer and meditation group that they use word of mouth on a one-to-one basis to share with other members about the prayer and meditation group. Or use a bulletin board outside the meeting room.

Suggest and encourage the NA member celebrating his birthday in another Twelve Step fellowship to celebrate it in NA too. Tell him how much you would like that, and how helpful it is for newcomers to see someone commemorate recovery birthdays in NA. It gives the newcomer to our program hope and inspiration. If he wants to celebrate his birthday in another program also, that celebration should be discussed only in that program. NA and other Twelve Step fellowships are separate and activities or meeting events in one should not become part of the other.

One way to help with these matters and keep within our traditions is to provide the individuals with copies of articles written on the traditions. These articles appear in each issue of the *Newsline* and previously published articles are available from the World Service Office upon request. Allow the individual time to think about it and talk to other members before broaching the subject again. Always treat the individual with respect and dignity.

If there is no positive response even after exercising all of the tact, diplomacy and helpful suggestions you have been able to muster up, the next step should be taken at the next business meeting of the group. Present the situation, along with the alternatives, and ask that the meeting adhere to the traditions. At each point in the dialogue request or suggest change; don't demand. If the meeting continues to violate the traditions, take the matter to the area service committee.

A letter written to the ASC should be prepared. It should provide accurate, unbiased facts along with alternative solutions. Request that the area write to the meeting, asking them to adhere to the traditions. If the problem is not solved in this way, the matter should be presented to the regional service committee. If the situation goes beyond the meeting level, controversy, disunity and chaos are sure to result.

Education is most helpful in promoting an understanding of the Twelve Traditions. Tradition workshops and "Learning Days" sponsored by an area or region go a long way towards developing unity and understanding of our traditions, thus preventing or cutting down on violations. A couple of examples of how tradition violations have been handled within one area and region are included here also. The first was initially handled ineptly and the second very appropriately.

The region is a very large one and contains a lot of members with long term clean time. Several years ago, a well established area in the region, which also happened to be the most active, had a step study meeting which was using literature other than NA approved literature. The meeting had been doing this for some time when other members began to protest. Personalities got involved, accusations flew, lines were drawn and people were firmly planted on one side or the other. The meeting refused to relinquish this practice and in an area business meeting the area service committee voted to let the meeting continue this practice. At that point the region demanded the meeting comply with traditions and refused to recognize the area ASR at meetings of the region. The region also passed a motion to take the meeting out of the regional directory at the next printing. The area again debated the issue and decided to withdraw from the region and began to

make plans to print their own directories. The regional and area committees were so engrossed in the controversy that little thought seemed to be centered on the still-suffering addict.

It was decided by the region to take the matter to the board of trustees. The board of trustees made the determination that only NA approved literature could be read in meetings. However, if members of that meeting on a "word of mouth" basis wanted to meet informally before the meeting to read whatever they wanted to, that would certainly not constitute a violation of the traditions. Some members began to meet a half hour before the meeting to read other literature, and at the official meeting only NA approved literature was read. After a time the practice of reading the other material before meetings ceased voluntarily.

Another meeting in a well established area was the largest meeting in the region, drawing several hundred people each week. It was a half speaker and half participation meeting, and had the reputation of having very good NA speakers. Having all these people at one place at one time, it seemed to some entrepreneurs a golden opportunity. Some individuals began to sell things to members after the meeting. Soon they were making announcements towards the end of the meeting and setting up tables with gold jewelry, Hawaiian print shirts and a whole lot of other things for sale. Some members watched in horror as their favorite meeting turned into a flea market. An approach to the individuals involved brought no response. At the next business meeting, the issue was brought up and the group conscience chose adherence to the traditions. Group conscience was that the NA meeting rented the hall for a meeting and not to provide individuals with a place to peddle their goods. If members wanted to sell things they could do so outside the meeting hall, but no announcements would be made and no tables provided.

If we can just keep in mind that the Twelve Traditions are not a matter of having it your way or having it may way; it's having it our way through adherence to our Twelve Traditions. Our program works.

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