

## STEP 12: COMPASSION AND ANONYMITY

The subject of anonymity bears strongly on any consideration of compassionate action as it is understood in the Twelfth Step. Our thoughts here are an extension of the brief consideration of anonymity in another of our Studies.

This little study on anonymity is unusual in that – unlike virtually every other study here – it is not based primarily on the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous. Instead, anonymity emerged as a key issue as a result of the early experiences of AA within and outside the Fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous, and was eventually enshrined in two of the Traditions and – very memorably – in the little card *Just For Today* which is still available through most AA Intergroups.

The two Traditions are:

Tradition Eleven:

*Our public relations policy is based on attraction rather than promotion; we need always maintain personal anonymity at the level of press, radio, and films;*

and Tradition Twelve:

*Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our Traditions, ever reminding us to place principles before personalities.*

The relevant part of the *Just For Today* card reads as follows:

*Just for today, I will do somebody a good turn and not get found out; if anyone knows of it, it will not count.*

Let us start with this thesis on anonymity and Step Twelve. It is quite simple, though it will need some explanation and some qualification: *Compassionate actions are always anonymous in nature.* To the maximum extent possible, we should ensure that our compassionate actions are performed anonymously. Of course, it's impossible for all actions to be performed anonymously -- since they usually directly involve another person, or other people, someone else will know at least to some extent who we are and what we have done. And as Br. Bob observed, the only way that a person ever gets into Program is because someone else broke his or her anonymity. But the general rule still holds: where possible, our compassionate actions should be anonymous. The touchstone of anonymity tends to be this: *Have we permitted or encouraged people to find out about what we have done, who otherwise would not have known?*

Anonymity was a feature of the AA program from the start: even the book for which the fellowship was named was called *Alcoholics Anonymous*. But the reasons for anonymity in those early days were different from the reasons that lay behind the Eleventh and Twelfth Traditions. The Foreword to the First Edition of the Big Book says, rather ambiguously, "It is important that we remain anonymous because we are too few, at present to handle the overwhelming number of personal appeals which may result from this publication. Being mostly business or professional folk, we could not well carry on our occupations in such an event. We would like it understood that our alcoholic work is an avocation." The link between the "overwhelming number of appeals" and the professional occupations of early members is not too clear, but what is clear is that from the beginning, AAs recognized that "alcoholic work" was to be performed anonymously, even though the reason given seems to be practical rather than idealistic. Later in the book, the author says, "We have concluded to publish an anonymous volume," and since that volume contained personal stories, it also seems safe to infer that anonymity

was a means of protection to some extent for these early AAs.

But the focus of anonymity in the Traditions is rather different, and reflects the experience of the fellowship in the intervening years.

The Eleventh Tradition addresses itself to the matter of keeping ourselves anonymous at the level of “press, radio, and films.” This may not seem to bear too strongly on the subject of anonymity and compassion, but as these words are being written an example has arisen within the author's experience to demonstrate that even the Eleventh Tradition has something to tell us about the spiritual issues surrounding compassionate action. An acquaintance is involved with visiting, and with coordinating the writing and visits of other people to, offenders on Death Row in some US states. This acquaintance decided to have an exhibition of art created by some of these offenders, the exhibition to take place at the acquaintance's place of worship. It seemed harmless to give a personal interview to a local paper. But this interview was then taken up, copied, and substantially re-edited by a sensationalist national newspaper in which the acquaintance was represented as an eccentric and misguided “do-gooder” and the works of art as being products of men who are not fit to live. It is easy to deplore this unfortunate act, but the source of the problem, upon reflection, turns out to be the association of the activity with this acquaintance personally. The story has no sensationalist interest if that connection cannot be made: in other words, the basic cause of the unfortunate outcome was the fact that this acquaintance did not remain anonymous.

In AA's early days, a well-known baseball player sobered up and attributed his recovery to Alcoholics Anonymous. While the initial reaction of some members of the Fellowship was delight, it was soon realized that, while the average member of the American public might conclude from this that AA was effective, if the player were subsequently to get drunk then that same American public might just as logically conclude that AA didn't work. The eventual result was the Eleventh Tradition.

But it is the Twelfth Tradition that focuses directly on the spiritual significance of anonymity. The long form of the Tradition reads, *[W]e of Alcoholics Anonymous believe that the principle of anonymity has an immense spiritual significance. It reminds us that we are to place principles before personalities; that we are actually to practice a genuine humility. This to the end that our great blessings may never spoil us; that we shall forever live in thankful contemplation of Him who presides over us all.*

The idea that compassionate action should be undertaken anonymously, to the maximum extent that that may be possible, is not of course unique to Twelve-Step fellowships. It is found in certain religions such as Islam (“If you disclose your charitable expenditures, they are good; but if you conceal them and give them to the poor, it is better for you” (Quran 2:271)) and Christianity (“When thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth: That thine alms may be in secret” (Mt. 6:3-4)). Although it is absent from others such as Buddhism, where compassionate acts can even be seen as a way to acquire “merit,” the general consensus seems to be that anonymity when it comes to practicing “charity” is a good thing.

In our practice of compassionate action, though, anonymity is more than “a good thing.” It is one of the marks of compassionate action; indeed, a supposed compassionate action that is not anonymous to the maximum extent possible cannot (according to our thinking here) even be called a compassionate action.

But why? Why should an action that is loving and charitable not be regarded as a compassionate action?

Let us explore again where compassionate actions come from. They come from our practice of Steps Ten and Eleven. In Step Ten we examine what we are thinking and feeling, and acknowledge that we do not know what to do. In Step Eleven, we determine by intuition and inspiration what we are to do, and we seem to be given the strength to do it. In both cases, we are turning ourselves away from what the ego appears to be suggesting and placing our entire dependence for guidance and power on something other than ourselves. It follows that, as we perform these actions, we should continue as much as possible to keep that “I” out of the equation. Our sole contribution to the performance of that action was to accept our helplessness, our complete dependence on something other than ourselves. In no meaningful sense, therefore, can we claim afterwards, or encourage others to think, that *we* were responsible for the commission of that action. If we lived in a world where everyone attempted to live a life based on the last three Steps, of course, no one would ever make the assumption that we *were* responsible for the action in question. They would recognize it for what it was: the natural consequence of living a life based on Steps Ten and Eleven. But the fact is that we *don't* live in that sort of world. We live in a world that is constantly looking for evidence that it is not necessary to live life in that way. Particularly if we live in a western country, we find ourselves surrounded by people who want to believe the complete opposite: that it is possible to act compassionately without living the spiritual life. And in order to believe that, they must find people who are exemplars of self-motivated, supposed compassionate action and make them into temporary heroes.

If we do practice Steps Ten and Eleven as a basis for determining what actions we should take, we will find increasingly that we shrink with distaste from such thinking. (At least, we will do so most of the time. Sometimes, though, we will find ourselves longing for that kind of adulation – it's a function of our humanity that this will happen, and Step Ten is there to take care of it for us when we do!) Many of us find that it is easier to cultivate anonymity as a habit if we deliberately refrain from telling *anyone* about our compassionate actions, *even friends in Program*. This takes us back to the *Just For Today* card, which we will remember reads: *Just for today, I will do somebody a good turn and not get found out; if anyone knows of it, it will not count*. We find that we are more at peace with ourselves when we refrain from telling *anyone* about *any* compassionate actions we may perform.

This is not easy. Most of us have had the rather unedifying experience of attending meetings on the Twelfth Step and listening to the pseudo-modest remarks of members who (we now learn) sponsor lots of people, perform incessant 12-Step calls, chair groups in prisons, and – at long last! -- are free to tell everyone in a meeting about what they have done simply because the topic happens to be Step Twelve. The *Just For Today* card tells us that – alas! -- these cannot be compassionate actions, because we have told someone about them. They “do not count.” Of course, compassionate actions, even if performed anonymously, “do not count” -- how can they? They are not done to *prove* anything or to *demonstrate* anything. They are done because we have no alternative. If we genuinely practice Steps Ten and Eleven, we cannot help but perform them. But they cease to be compassionate if we talk about them afterwards – for what reason could there be for mentioning them, other than self-glorification?

In the Sermon on the Mount, there is a verse that tells us that our spiritual practice cannot be discerned by others in terms of what we do. It can only be discerned in terms of *who we have become*. Our practice of the last three Steps is not, and cannot be, a function of the world's perception of the actions we take, but of the “light” that emanates from us because of who we now are. Mt. 5:16 says, *Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven*. The sequence is not to see our “good works” and therefore conclude that we are a source of light. It is completely the other way around: to perceive that we are a source of light and only as a result to see the good works. And when people do this, they will not make the mistake of thinking that

*we* are heroes: instead, they will understand that they are witnessing the workings of God as they understand God in this world.