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Living the Traditions Today

By Mel B. and Michael Fitzpatrick

Foreword

For most Americans, Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) is synonymous with addiction recovery mutual aid. Few are aware of the dozens of alcoholic mutual aid societies that pre-date AA. These include early Native American recovery circles, the Washingtonians, recovery-focused fraternal temperance societies, Dashaway Association, Ollapod Club, Ribbon Reform Clubs, Drunkard's Club, Godwin Association, Business Men's Moderation Society, Keeley Leagues, Brotherhood of St. Luke, Jacoby Club, and the United Order of Ex-Boozers, to name a few of the more prominent. And, of course, adaptations of AA to other drug problems and secular and religious alternatives to AA have grown exponentially since the mid-twentieth century—the latter including groups such as Women for Sobriety, Rational Recovery, Secular Organization for Sobriety, Moderation Management, SMART Recovery, LifeRing Secular Recovery, Millati Islami, Celebrate Recovery, and the Buddhist Recovery Network—again to name just a few.

Two questions arise from the history of recovery mutual aid: 1) “Why is AA the standard by which all contemporary mutual aid groups are evaluated,” and 2) “Why did AA survive and flourish when so many of its predecessors did not?” Clues to these questions must be unraveled within AA's growth and international dispersion, its continuing adaptation to other problems of living, its influence on addiction treatment, and its larger influence on American culture. But understanding AA's achievements still does not identify the source of AA's historical survival, spread, and continued vitality.

When I began my research in the 1970s on the history of addiction recovery mutual aid groups, I started with the assumption that this mysterious source would be found in the unique set of prescriptions within AA's Twelve Steps and the larger recovery community in which the Steps are nested. That assumption was challenged when I found elements of AA's Steps and evidence of the power of sober fellowship in pre-AA mutual aid groups. (Many of those predecessors had viable programs of sobriety but could not find a way to survive as organizations.) More than three decades later, I've concluded that what most distinguishes AA from its predecessors and from its many contemporary alternatives rests more with AA's Twelve Traditions than its Twelve Steps. The Steps clearly contain ingredients for personal regeneration, but the Traditions provide the glue that holds together everything that is AA. Without the Traditions, AA may well have shared the fate of groups such as the Harlem Club of Former Alcoholic Degenerates—with future generations wondering if their past existence was fact or fiction.

Anyone who wants to understand the secret of AA's survival and success must become a student of AA's Traditions—a unique set of principles that shaped an organizational structure that even AA's closest early friends were convinced could not

work. Students of the Traditions must go first to AA's own literature on the Traditions, but Mel B. and Michael Fitzpatrick offer important new perspectives in their book *Living the Traditions Today*. Mel B. has a long history of contribution to the understanding of AA (e.g., *Ebby: The Man Who Sponsored Bill W.*; *Walk in Dry Places, My Search for Bill W.*; *New Wine: The Spiritual Roots of the Twelve Step Miracle*), and author Mike Fitzpatrick is building his own body of contributions on AA (*1000 Years of Sobriety*—with William Borchert) and Al-Anon (*We Recovered Too*).

Living the Traditions Today achieves two things. First, it tells the story of AA's Traditions: the contexts and circumstances and the people and the events in which each Tradition arose. Second, it reveals how the Traditions are interpreted and used as a tool of guidance and problem-solving within AA groups today. Both are achieved by letting past and present AA members speak in their own voices. These authentic messages are the greatest contribution of *Living the Traditions Today*.

Those who want to explore the secrets to AA's survival and success will find the following pages essential and enjoyable reading.

William L. White

Author, *Slaying the Dragon: The History of Addiction Treatment and Recovery in America*