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Foreword

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Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.) is the standard by which all recovery mutual aid groups are judged. It has earned this distinction by its longevity, its growth and worldwide dispersion, its influence on the professional treatment of addiction, and its widespread adaptation to other problems of living. Beyond A.A.'s well-known Twelve-Step program, at least as impressive is its unique structure as a fellowship, protected by its Twelve Traditions. Both have contributed to the history of ideas, engendering an unending stream of research studies, books and articles.

The twin challenges faced by any recovery mutual aid group are to define a program of personal recovery and to define how it will operate as an organization, including its membership boundaries. Alcoholics Anonymous achieved these through its Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions. Since their initial formulation, the Steps and Traditions have been continually reinterpreted in light of changing personal and cultural contexts. As historians of A.A. and similar movements, what we find most significant in recent decades are the growing varieties of recovery experience within and beyond A.A. It is within this context that the

history of AAgnostica and its newly released book, *Don't Tell*, are best viewed.

Since the founding of Quad A (Alcoholics Anonymous for Atheists and Agnostics) in January of 1975, a wing of unconventional believers has grown within A.A. There have been other efforts of members who broke from A.A. to form secular recovery support organizations (e.g., Women for Sobriety, Secular Organizations for Sobriety), but Quad A was a milestone in that it sought to establish a non-theistic approach to alcoholism recovery within A.A. At the same time, others have sought to advance a more Christianized understanding of Alcoholics Anonymous and its history. Both movements will exert a significant influence on the future of A.A. as a program and fellowship of recovery. Where these diverse branches meet is the testing ground for A.A.'s future. This is why *Don't Tell* is an important book for anyone interested in the future of Alcoholics Anonymous and the future of alcoholism recovery -- as well as for those looking to read some fascinatingly different stories of "what we used to be like, what happened, and what we are like now."

They go by many names: "freethinkers," "agnostics," "atheists," "humanists," "secularists," "unconventional believers," but each also claims the names "alcoholic" and "A.A. member." All are represented within the pages of *Don't Tell*. Since its 2012 founding, AAgnostic has emerged as the voice of these pioneering dissidents who are seeking space and legitimacy within Alcoholics Anonymous. In the pages of *Don't Tell*, readers will find their stories, their ideas, their concerns about their exclusion from Intergroup listings and even from some A.A. meetings, and their frustration at the lack of a more substantive -- some would say "more Christian" -- response within Alcoholics Anonymous to the non-believer seeking recovery from alcoholism. What do we think, as long-time students of A.A.'s rich story? The essence of Alcoholics Anonymous as fellowship is the practice of the Twelfth Step of its program: carrying its message to another alcoholic. This is how A.A. began, William Griffith Wilson seeking out Dr. Robert Holbrooke Smith so that he himself would not take a drink that hot June afternoon in 1935. This is how A.A. grew, Wilson haunting the corridors of Towns Hospital in New York City, Smith using various diagnoses to smuggle a rag-tag bunch of drunks into Akron's St. Thomas Hospital. Now, over 75 years later, in an age when an ever greater percentage of young people answer "None" when queried about their "religious affiliation," an Alcoholics Anonymous that refuses fellowship to those unconventional in belief would seem to be gravely endangering its future: to whom will it carry its message? . . . and, more importantly, who will carry its message to coming generations of alcoholics? Many individual A.A. members have experienced defining moments that tipped the scales from active addiction to sustained sobriety. Alcoholics Anonymous itself, precisely as fellowship, has faced and continues to face defining moments that test its character and fate. We believe the A.A.'s current response to efforts to widen the doorways of entry into A.A. by nonbelievers constitute such a defining moment. *Don't Tell* is must-reading for anyone invested in the

outcome of this potentially historic watershed.

In reading *Don't tell*, we were reminded of earlier periods in which Alcoholics Anonymous faced challenges, reminded also of some of the carefully wise words of A.A. cofounder Bill Wilson about the future of A.A. as a fellowship and organization:

The process [trial and error] still goes on and we hope it never stops. Should we ever harden too much, the letter might crush the spirit. We could victimize ourselves by petty rules and prohibitions; we could imagine that we had said the last word. We might even be asking alcoholics to accept our rigid ideas or stay away. May we never stifle progress like that! (Wilson, Twelve Suggested Points for AA Tradition, AA Grapevine, April, 1946)

We have to grow or else deteriorate. For us, the "status quo" can only be for today, never for tomorrow. Change we must; we cannot stand still. (Wilson, The Shape of Things to Come, AA Grapevine, February, 1961)

Let us never fear needed change. Once a need becomes clearly apparent in an individual, a group, or in AA as a whole, it has long since been found that we cannot stand still and look the other way. (Wilson, Responsibility is our Theme, AA Grapevine, July, 1965)

Alcoholics Anonymous, like its predecessors and its current alternatives, must define as a fellowship how to distinguish between changes that help fulfill its ultimate mission and changes that in retrospect will be understood to have been a diversion from that mission. If that mission is, as its Twelfth Step suggests and its own story affirms, carrying its message to other alcoholics regardless of their race, gender, sexuality, religion or lack thereof, or any other accidental quality, A.A. has in living its Third Tradition -- "The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking" -- consistently chosen to risk erring on the side of inclusion. The story of that Third

Tradition holds a profound lesson about Alcoholics Anonymous and change -- the revelation that change, even about "basics," is not only possible but that it can be a mighty service to A.A.'s true essence. For that Third Tradition originally read: "The only requirement for membership is an honest desire to stop drinking." Set forth in the 1939 "Foreword" to the book Alcoholics Anonymous, the wording was changed and the term "honest" dropped in 1949, at the time of the first publication of the "short form" of the A.A. Traditions. The official explanation given for that change just might also apply in its own way to present concerns about a change that would welcome unconventionally believing members:

As A.A. has matured, it has been increasingly recognized that it is nearly impossible to determine what constitutes an "honest" desire to stop drinking, as opposed to other forms in which the desire might be expressed. It was also noted that some who may be interested in the program might be confused by the phrase "honest desire." Thus . . . the descriptive adjective has been dropped.

Broadening, welcoming change, the story of its key Third Tradition suggests, is of the essence of Alcoholics Anonymous.

Ernest Kurtz, Author, *Not-God: A History of Alcoholics Anonymous, The Spirituality of Imperfection*

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