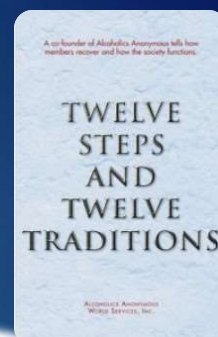


Anonymity & Social Media

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AREA 65 ANONYMITY PANEL
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Thank you for inviting me to be a part of this very relevant panel. I know, I know only a little. What I'm going to do is share my experience and thoughts on the topic.

I think it might be helpful to provide you with a little background as to my technology/social media experience. Since the 80's I've worked in the computer field holding titles from tech support to IT management to training specialist. I love technology in that it allowed me to live anywhere as long as I had a good internet connection.

Before I got sober, computers also gave me an alternate world to live in. I'd gotten to that phase in my alcoholism that I didn't trust myself to be out in public when I drank and I certainly couldn't afford to support my drinking habit in bars. So, being a computer nerd, I was a charter member of AOL and created a life online. Actually, chat rooms are the reason I moved from the west coast to West Virginia – it was the alcoholic geographic chasing love and trying to escape my alcoholism. The good news is, I got sober in West Virginia and found my way into service very early on.

Virtual Space

- ▶ The Brady Bunch revisited!
- ▶ Change: face-to-face in a virtual world
- ▶ How do we stay anonymous?



The pandemic put me back in that virtual space – but this time, it has been a much more positive, healthy experience. Technology tools have enabled us to continue to have regular meetings, workshops, board meetings and even a conference.

But how do we maintain our anonymity in a space that we don't always know who's on the phone or who's that person behind the profile picture of a cat and why don't they turn their camera on? It is a whole new world and AA has been forced to embrace technology at what might be considered warp speed for us.

A quote I heard recently is that alcoholics fear two things: Change. And the way things are right now. Because of our program, I believe we can learn to accept both.

This Means of Communication



Tradition 11:

“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.”

Why have we been so slow to adopt these highly useful, effective methods of communication? Bill W. and friends released a book to spread the word of recovery because that’s what medium was available at the time. Our founders wanted people to know how they had seemingly recovered from alcoholism and wished to share it.

Now we have ways to reach hundreds even thousands of people with one post – but we have paused. Why? Because of our traditions, primarily our principle of anonymity, which is often referred to as “the greatest single protection the Fellowship has to assure its continued existence and growth”.

Anonymity serves a couple of purposes – to protect those who don’t want others to know about their alcoholism. We want to assure particularly the newcomers, that they won’t be called out at the grocery store by someone they met at an AA meeting. Another reason is to keep the playing field level – we are all equal in this fellowship and no one should be using their membership in this program for personal gain – whether financial or personal status.

The Spiritual Significance of Anonymity



Tradition 12:

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

The first line in the essay on the 12 tradition says “The spiritual substance of anonymity is sacrifice”. To me that is about placing the group and others first. While we must be considerate of the newcomer and any other fellow member’s desire to not be outed as an alcoholic – perhaps a more compelling reason for our anonymity is our own humility. I say that because that’s a question, often asked in this world “What’s in it for me?” In this case, sacrifice gives its own gifts.

My willingness to remain anonymous and not claim the spotlight or demand credit for an accomplishment is a form of putting the group, the fellowship above my own desires. It’s a strong step toward unity. In the pamphlet P-47 Understanding Anonymity when it talks about the spiritual significance of the principle it says, “In it we see the cornerstone of our security as a movement; at a deeper spiritual level it points us to still greater self-renunciation.”

The best indicator I’ve found – for my online behavior comes from the spot-check inventory in that same pamphlet.

Understanding Anonymity



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

Practical vs Spiritual

Questions from MG-18 and P-47:

- ▶ Is my posting about the message or the messenger?
- ▶ Am I carrying the A.A. message in the hopes of helping someone else, or am I simply "shouting from the rooftops"?
- ▶ Am I being extra cautious about not identifying other A.A. members in photographs or statements?

In particular the questions I've put on this slide.

- Am I making a statement all about me? For instance, do I post something like "happy, joyous and free for 16 years today".
- Am I looking for the pat on the back because I'm finally doing what I should have been doing a long time ago – taking responsibility for my disease.
- Am I disregarding other's desires for privacy by posting their pictures without them knowing?

I've used this inventory and touted its importance for several years. Lately though, my beliefs have been shifting. You see, these are excellent questions regarding my behavior if I am posting something about my sobriety or A.A. However, should I, as an individual be posting anything at all related to AA on my personal account? Here's my reasoning, the internet is very much a public forum – whether we are on private groups or have the strictest privacy settings – there is a potential for whatever I'm putting out there on the internet to be more widely seen than I anticipate.

Then there is the spiritual side of anonymity which guides me toward "still greater self-renunciation". But the most obvious of all reasons – I'm posting on "Social Media" which is an electronic platform for social networking. Alcoholics Anonymous is not a social club.

Alcoholics Anonymous® is a fellowship of men and women who share their experience, strength and hope to help others to recover from alcoholism.

Hence my question, should we be posting anything about A.A. on social media as individuals?

Sharing Our Journeys



Heading to Atlanta to see 50,000 of our friends!

- ▶ Freedom to choose
- ▶ Avoid “self-will” run riot
- ▶ Your anonymity is not mine to break

AA does give me all the freedom I can handle, with a couple of caveats – that I don’t break anyone else’s anonymity and that I don’t harm AA as a whole. Is it ok if I post a picture of the gang going out to dinner after an A.A. event? Can that do harm to anyone or AA as a whole?

My friends and I took this picture at the airport. I share it today with permission but what if it was posted on social media? Tom talked earlier about data mining. A few facts such as Atlanta, 50,000 friends in 2015 would very easily allow technology to label me with a high probability of being in A.A. I could care less. My friends, my work, everyone that counts in my life knows I am in recovery. But what about the other people in the picture? What if one was a teacher and one a nurse? They may not be as open as I am. Is it ok to potentially break their anonymity with a “harmless” post?

The reality is that everyone can stay as private or open as they wish. I get to decide just how anonymous I want to be. AA gives me that freedom. However, when I post something, I should assume it may be seen on the public level. When I break my anonymity on these platforms, I may inadvertently break someone else’s too.

But I Like Being Connected!



- ▶ We want to share the good times!
- ▶ It is a way to reconnect and stay connected.
- ▶ Am I “practicing the principles”?

When we recover, we rejoin life. It would be unfair to ask everyone in the membership to stay off the internet – and especially social media! We are living in a world that is connected by electrons – and sometimes that takes the form of family pictures, high school reunion notices, or posts from groups with common interests.

Some members feel that peppering their posts or profile with AA jargon is ok, as long as Alcoholics Anonymous isn't mentioned. Others aren't comfortable with that because it can prompt replies that do mention AA or generate questions from people not in AA and who don't understand.

I've seen innocent posts by a trustee or delegate having dinner when they are in NY at conference or a meeting. I'd be willing to bet more than one reply is something along the lines of “thank you for your service”. But that is exactly the “personal” decision/inventory I am talking about. Am I simply checking in with family or friends or am I expecting likes or gratifying replies. It was that kind of personal inventory that made me pause before posting something not long ago when I recognized that I anticipated those virtual pats on the back, thumbs up, endorphin stimulating responses from others. I'm human and I will seek external praise. And that is ok – but I need to keep it right sized and within the bounds of my Higher Power's will – not mine.

A Way to Be Found



- ▶ Social Media is the source of news and information
- ▶ Is it also how we can reach the still suffering alcoholic?
- ▶ *"If the light is to be carried to the newcomer, he has to be brought within reach of it."* - Bill W. OGR

The question is CAN we utilize technology and have an online presence without breaking our anonymity? I'd say absolutely. But we should be thoughtful in our approach – I think of the phrase "we practice these principles in all our affairs" – both online and face-to-face.

And I would pose the question, should our use of social media with regard to A.A. be to establish a sound Public Relations policy and to allow our friends to recommend us? Can our society utilize social media and stay within the bounds of the traditions while avoiding our own self promotion? Can we carry the message without creating online stars and personalities within our fellowship which is bad for both us and them?

I believe we can. And I believe we must. Why? As Bill W. said in Our Great Responsibility – "if the light is to be carried to the newcomer, he has to be brought within reach of it." The reality is that social media is where people go today for news and information. A Pew Research study shows that 72% of the American public use some type of social media. And while young people were the earliest adopters, usage by older adults continues to increase.

Embracing technology



- ▶ YouTube
- ▶ LinkedIn
- ▶ Where else should we be?

While I question my individual use of social media for anything AA related, the technology would be a powerful tool for AA entities. For the GSB, it will take a thoughtful approach often utilizing our Class A non-alcoholic trustees.

YouTube, this week (3/3/2021), lists 5.51K subscribers and there are 113 AAWS videos posted to the site. The report from the CPC desk is that YouTube is getting very positive feedback as a tool for professionals. LinkedIn has over 1,100 followers and that is without any real content. When I checked in September it was half that number. I wonder how many more of our professional friends would be interested if there were videos and essays from our Class A trustees and other friends that talked about what AA is and what it isn't and why they believe in the program.

At conference this year we might be voting on a CPC update to the pamphlet "A.A. in your community". The update will also provide links to digital resources such as the Meeting Guide app, YouTube and LinkedIn. But even more exciting, the trustees committee is experimenting with audio samples recorded with our Class A non-alcoholic trustees that will provide the content in audio format. There's Dr. Al Mooney who can speak to the medical people, the honorable Christine Carpenter to the courts... and so on. This is a low budget project with the potential for creating an innovative way of communicating what A.A. is to our professional friends.

We Are Responsible



- ▶ What are my security settings?
- ▶ Am I pausing before posting?
- ▶ Am I breaking my own or others anonymity?

But what about those of us who want to use social media? We need to take responsibility. We can learn about the platforms we want to be on and do what we can to ensure we are communicating within the traditions. I admit most of the time I'm too lazy to check all the different settings. But I'm also a pretty private person online. If I decide to get on Instagram, it's up to me to learn about the privacy settings – or Twitter, Facebook – or even the Meeting Guide.

The reality is that the owners of many of these social networking platforms will most likely be trying to get all the information they can about me. That's how a lot of companies make money and information about their users is what they get for providing the means to communicate and network with each other.

Our privacy isn't really their concern – our anonymity – not at all.

Our Responsibility



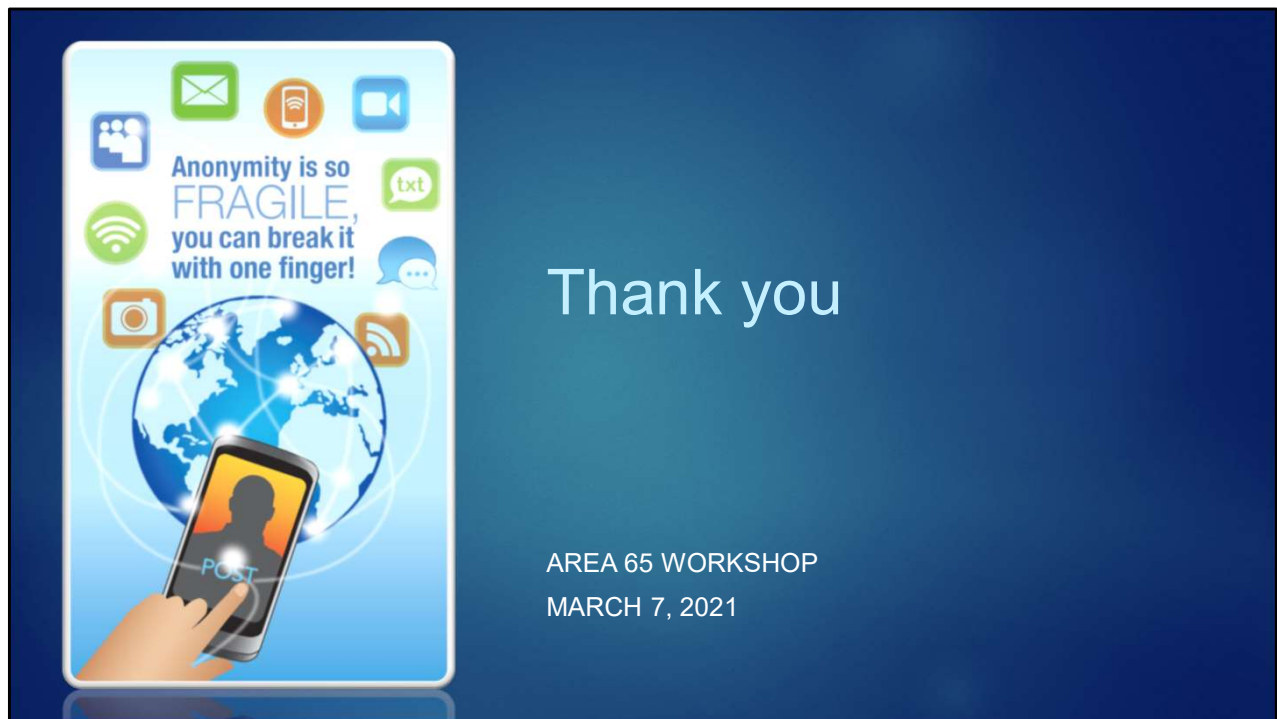
- ▶ Do we talk about anonymity at speaker meetings, conventions and other events?
- ▶ Would a workshop help?
- ▶ Is there literature about this at our meetings?

We can read the available literature like the AA Internet Guidelines or if we have questions, we can use groups like TIAA (Technology in AA) or the National AA Technology workshop. We can also study our principles and do the best we can to use these spiritual guidelines in all that we do.

When these kinds of topics come up and people start complaining about the anonymity breaks online, I often hear it's a sponsorship issue. But I think that is perhaps too simple. To me, it's also a group issue. Are we taking the time in our group conscience meetings to talk to our members about these topics? Are we helping them learn about anonymity and what it means both practically and spiritually?

Districts and Areas can also be a part of the solution by putting on workshops and having presentations – just like you guys are this weekend!

The information is out there. We all need to be responsible to help ourselves and others understand about breaking others anonymity if we don't carefully consider our actions – and then we have to work the other principles around those who may not care – or listen – or feel the same way we do about anonymity.



The bottom line is that it is up to me as an individual, to adhere to the spiritual principles that have not only saved my life – they have given me an incredible life. The only power I have is over my own actions.

I often talk about the fact that sobriety has given me choices. Who do I want to be today? Whether I'm online or in a line at the store, this program has taught me to be respectful. To recognize that I live in a world with other human beings who are going to make mistakes – just like me. If I expect forgiveness, if I would like more kindness, shouldn't I be willing to give the same to others? To help when I can and to ask for help when needed?

I have been granted the gift of sobriety and therefore have a responsibility to carry the message and to share my experience on how I've applied these principles in my life. I hope I have done that today and I thank you all for YOUR SERVICE.