

What A.A. Literature Has to Say About Anonymity in Alcoholics Anonymous

Literature on anonymity referenced in this presentation:

BOOKS:

The Big Book Alcoholics Anonymous

The Language of the Heart

Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions

Dr. Bob and the Good Oldtimers

Pass It On: The Story of Bill Wilson and How the A.A. Message Reached the World

Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age: A Brief History of A.A.

PAMPHLETS:

A.A. Tradition: How It Developed, Item No. P-17

Twelve Traditions Illustrated, Item No. P-43

The A.A. Group: Where It All Begins, Item No. P-16

Frequently Asked Questions About A.A., Item No. P-2

This Is A.A., Item No. P-1

Questions and Answers on Sponsorship, Item No. P-15

Understanding Anonymity, Item No. P-47

LITERATURE SPECIFIC TO DIGITAL ANONYMITY:

A.A. Guidelines on Internet, Item No. MG-18

Anonymity in the Digital Age (poster)

Anonymity Online and Digital Material (Service Material from the General Service Office), Item No. SM F-197

Frequently Asked Questions About A.A. Websites (Service Material from the General Service Office), Item No. SM F-101

PART 1: Early inclusion of the principles of anonymity in A.A. Literature

We find three references to anonymity in the Foreword to the First Edition of the *Big Book Alcoholics Anonymous*:

“Is is important we remain anonymous because we are too few ...”

This statement most likely was written in the expectation that publication of the Big Book would very quickly bring thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of alcoholics to A.A.

“When writing or speaking publicly ...”

This likely was included because of baseball player Rollie H., who broke his anonymity in interviews with sportswriters following his incredible performance improvement after he got sober. There was no malicious intent here; Rollie was just stating a fact that when not drinking, his play improved. Interestingly, Bill W. stepped in to take over interview requests for Rollie, thus becoming himself one of the biggest anonymity breakers!

“Very earnestly we ask the press ...”

Once the Jack Alexander article appeared in the *Saturday Evening Post*, there were quite a few requests for print and radio interviews. By and large, the press was very respectful of our request to keep our alkies anonymous.

Mention of anonymity and the spirit of anonymity is found throughout our early literature.

Bill wrote many letters to the *Grapevine* covering this subject in the mid '40s, and of course the Twelve Traditions first appeared in the *Grapevine* in 1950 were published in 1953 in *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*.

There are three references to anonymity in *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, published in 1957.

The foundation of our Twelfth Tradition most certainly was built upon the many mistakes and anonymity breaks, which Bill lovingly referenced in the phrase, “ ... on anvils of experience.”

PART 2: Where we find information about anonymity in A.A. Literature

I would like to share with you some specifics about where we find information about the principle and practice of anonymity in our literature. I will be referencing Conference-approved literature as well as the A.A. *Grapevine* in my presentation.

I'll begin by sharing with you some points Bill W made about anonymity in an essay he wrote for the A.A. *Grapevine* that was published in January 1946. This was just three months before the Twelve Traditions as we know them today were published in the *Grapevine* under the title, "Twelve Points to Assure Our Future." This essay is included in the book *The Language of the Heart* in the chapter titled, "A Tradition Born of Our Anonymity."

It also is included in the pamphlet, "A.A. Tradition: How It Developed," which is Item Number P-17 in our Literature Catalog.

Bill wrote:

"... we are beginning to feel that the word "anonymous" has for us an immense spiritual significance. Subtly but powerfully it reminds us that we are always to place principles before personalities; that we have renounced personal glorification in public; that our movement not only preaches, but actually practices a truly humble modesty.

Bill goes on to note the references to anonymity in the Foreword to the First Edition of the book *Alcoholics Anonymous*:

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 known that our alcoholic work is an avocation.

When writing or speaking publicly about alcoholism, we urge each of our Fellowship to omit his personal name, designating himself instead as a member of Alcoholics Anonymous.

Very earnestly, we ask the press also, to observe this request for otherwise we shall be greatly handicapped.

I think it's important to note that right there in the Foreword to the First Edition, Bill didn't say that when writing or speaking publicly about A.A. we only use our first name; he urged that we omit our personal name altogether!

Bill goes on to say that while the stigma of alcoholism had been somewhat lessened at the time of his essay, many individuals were still extremely sensitive about their connection with Alcoholics Anonymous, and that many were coming to A.A. under assumed names. At the other end of the scale, there were individuals who believed anonymity was "childish nonsense" and wanted to cry their membership in Alcoholics Anonymous from the housetops. While most A.A. members believed in anonymity, Bill wrote, practice of the principle of anonymity varied a great deal.

At this point in the essay, Bill posed a vital question: Just where shall we fix this point where personalities fade out and anonymity begins?

And this is where we find the first hint of an actual written guideline for anonymity. Bill wrote:

If I were asked to outline a Tradition for anonymity it might run as follows:

It should be the privilege of each individual A.A. to cloak himself with as much personal anonymity as he desires. His fellow A.A.s should respect his wishes and help guard whatever status he wants to assume.

Conversely, the individual A.A. ought to respect the feeling of his local group as to anonymity. If his group wishes to be more anonymous than he does, he ought to go along with them until they change their views.

With very rare exceptions it ought to be a national Tradition that no member of Alcoholics Anonymous shall ever feel free to publish his name or picture (in connection with his Alcoholics Anonymous activities) in any medium of public circulation, or by radio.

Please note here that Bill said no member shall ever feel free to publish his name or picture “in any medium of public circulation.” This should be instructive to us today when we discuss whether it’s acceptable to publish our names and photos on electronic media, or when we get tied up in discussions about the need to change Tradition Eleven to reflect anonymity at the social media level. It’s already been covered!

Two months later, in March 1946, Bill wrote another essay for the *Grapevine*, also included in the book *The Language of the Heart* as well as the pamphlet “A.A. Tradition: How It Developed.” In this essay, he stated that since we had as yet no sharply defined policy, there was confusion in some quarters as to what anonymity ought to mean, and that we needed, therefore, “a perfectly clear Tradition which all A.A.s would feel bound to respect.”

And as we know, two of the Twelve Points to Assure Our Future that appeared in the *Grapevine* the following month dealt with anonymity.

Most of us are familiar with the references to anonymity in the book, *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, our greatest single source for information on the Traditions overall. I won’t go into detail here on what that book has to say.

We also can find a wealth of information about the history of all our Traditions, including our anonymity Traditions, in books such as *Dr. Bob and the Good Oldtimers* and *Pass It On*. To entice you to pick up those books if you’ve not done so, or you’ve not done so for some time, I would like to read a passage related to anonymity from *Dr. Bob and the Good Oldtimers* that you might find surprising.

These are the words of Warren C from Cleveland, circa 1940:

“He [Dr. Bob] said there were two ways to break the anonymity Tradition: (1) by giving your name at the public level of press or radio; (2) by being so anonymous that you can’t be reached by other drunks.”

Here’s another morsel from *Dr. Bob and the Good Oldtimers*, a quote attributed to Dr. Bob:

*“The A.A. who hides his identity from his fellow A.A. by using only a given name violates the Tradition just as much as the A.A. who permits his name to appear in the press in connection with matters pertaining to A.A. The former is maintaining his anonymity **above** the level of press radio and films, and the latter is maintaining his anonymity **below** the level of press, radio and films.”*

We find a great deal of historical information about our anonymity Traditions in the book *Pass It On*. The book dedicates 14 pages to the practical and spiritual aspects of anonymity. Included are details about the first anonymity break, which led Bill to reflect that the deeper purpose of anonymity was “actually to keep those fool egos of ours from running hog wild after money and public fame at A.A.’s expense.”

But perhaps the greatest treasure trove of historical information on anonymity can be found in the book *A.A. Comes of Age*. The index offers 16 entries connected with anonymity, including anonymity and egotism; anonymity as an escape from stigma; anonymity and politics; anonymity and sacrifice; and anonymity and the survival of A.A.

Most notable, *A.A. Comes of Age* includes the full transcript of Bill W’s January 1955 essay for the *Grapevine*, “Why Alcoholics Anonymous is Anonymous.” This essay details how Bill felt about anonymity 20 years after A.A.’s founding.

The opening paragraphs of this essay could have been written today:

As never before, the struggle for power, importance and wealth is tearing civilization apart. Man against man, family against family, group against group, nation against nation.

Nearly all those engaged in this fierce competition declare that their aim is peace and justice for themselves, their neighbors and their nations ... On this appalling dry bender, society seems to be staggering down a dead-end road. The stop sign is clearly marked. It says “Disaster.”

What has this got to do with anonymity and Alcoholics Anonymous, Bill asked?

His short answer was that we of A.A. have traversed this identical dead-end path, pursuing the phantoms of self-importance and money right up to the disaster stop sign. He wrote: We “faced about and found ourselves on a new highroad where the direction signs said never a word about power, fame or wealth.” This new road, Bill wrote, recognized that anonymity is the greatest protection our Society can ever have, and that “the spiritual substance of anonymity is sacrifice.”

These lines should sound familiar, since Bill included them in his essay on Tradition Twelve in *Twelve Steps and 12 Traditions*. I encourage everyone to read or to re-read this powerful essay, which can be found in its entirety not only in *A.A. Comes of Age* but also in the pamphlet I referenced earlier, “A.A. Tradition: How It Developed.”

We are extremely fortunate that in addition to these texts, we can find information about anonymity in a host of Conference-approved pamphlets. The first pamphlet I’d like to turn your attention to is “Twelve Traditions Illustrated,” Item Number P-43 in our Literature Catalog. As many of you are aware, this pamphlet is based on a *Grapevine* series and presents both the spirit and the practical application of our Twelve Traditions.

This pamphlet discusses the difference between personal anonymity and group anonymity, pointing out in its discussion on Tradition Eleven that alcoholics will not be attracted to A.A. if they don’t know that it exists or if they have a distorted, unfavorable impression of its members or its program.

In its discussion on Tradition Twelve, the pamphlet stresses that anonymity at its root is a simple expression of humility.

It states:

As Tradition Twelve reminds us, we have something stronger than our human personalities to rely on. Our principles come first – and they are not our own invention. They reflect eternal spiritual values. With this Tradition, both as individuals and as a Fellowship, we humbly acknowledge our dependence on a power higher than ourselves.

The pamphlet “The A.A. Group: Where It All Begins,” Item Number P-16 in our Literature Catalog, includes a section titled, “The Importance of Anonymity.” This subject is of such crucial importance to groups that the section comes at the beginning of this 49-page pamphlet, immediately following the description of A.A.’s singleness of purpose.

The section, which is divided into subsections on maintaining anonymity at both the group level and the public level, goes far beyond the issue of whether or not we should disclose our last names. It notes that anonymity often is referred to as the greatest single protection the Fellowship has to assure its continued existence and growth. It reminds us that it’s the A.A. message, not the messenger, that counts. It also reminds us that anonymity is a safeguard often of special significance to newcomers who may hesitate to seek help in A.A.

One of the 44 questions in the pamphlet, “Frequently Asked Questions About A.A.,” Item Number P-2 in our Literature Catalog, is: Won’t everyone know I am an alcoholic if I come to A.A.? Here’s how that question is answered in this pamphlet:

Anonymity is and always has been the basis of the A.A. program ... This means that the newcomer can turn to A.A. with the assurance that no newfound friends will violate confidences relating to his or her drinking problem ... Whatever the circumstances, no disclosure of the newcomer’s affiliation with A.A. can rightfully be made by anyone but the newcomer, and then only in such a way that the Fellowship will not be harmed.

We find similar content in another Conference-approved pamphlet aimed at the newcomer, “This Is A.A.,” Item Number P-1 in our Literature Catalog. That pamphlet includes this statement:

Anyone who turns to A.A. can be assured that his or her anonymity will be protected.

And of course, information on anonymity is included in the pamphlet, “Questions and Answers on Sponsorship,” Item Number P-15 in our Literature Catalog. Sponsors are encouraged to share with sponsees the relevance and spiritual value of anonymity, both on a person-to-person basis as well as at the public level,

including social media. Specific focus is placed on the sponsor's responsibility to share with the sponsee that anonymity stresses the equality in the Fellowship of all members by putting the brake on those who might otherwise exploit their A.A. affiliation to achieve recognition, power or personal gain.

In addition to these pamphlets, we have a pamphlet that deals explicitly with anonymity titled, "Understanding Anonymity," Item Number P-47 in our Literature Catalog. I would like to spend my remaining time with you familiarizing you with this pamphlet, as it is the best source we have at this time on the subject of anonymity.

The pamphlet gives an overview of the history of our Traditions of anonymity and then addresses three specific areas: anonymity on a person-to-person basis; anonymity at the public level; and the spiritual significance of anonymity.

From there, the pamphlet poses and answers 14 questions about anonymity to help us put the principle of anonymity into practice. And then for anyone still not clear about how our Traditions of anonymity should guide our actions, the pamphlet includes a spot-check inventory with additional questions geared to help us evaluate whether those actions may or may not be in conflict with the principles of humility and sacrifice that underlie our anonymity Traditions.

Here are a few examples:

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?

Am I avoiding the temptation to incite controversy through caustic argument or bullying others who may disagree with me?

The pamphlet also includes facts about anonymity in Alcoholics Anonymous. Here are some facts you will find:

A.A. members generally think it unwise to break the anonymity of another member even after his or her death in an obituary, but the final decision must rest with the family.

A.A. members may disclose their identity and speak as recovered alcoholics in radio, TV and Internet interviews without violating the Traditions as long as their A.A. membership is not revealed.

Experience suggests that A.A. members use their last names within the Fellowship, especially for election of group officers and other service jobs.

My fellow district Literature Committee chair, Alan T, will be presenting next on what our literature has to say about anonymity in the digital age, but I would like to leave you with this last bit of information from the pamphlet "Understanding Anonymity."

Publicly accessible aspects of the Internet such as websites featuring text, graphics, audio and video can be considered the same as publishing or broadcasting. Unless password-protected, a website requires the same safeguards that we use at the level of press, radio and film. Simply put, this means that A.A.s do not identify themselves as A.A. members using their full names and/or full-face photos.

Further:

When we use digital media, we are responsible for our own anonymity and that of others. When we post, text or blog, we should assume that we are publishing at the public level. When we break our anonymity in these forums, we may inadvertently break the anonymity of others.

Which is a very good reminder to us of the spiritual principles behind our anonymity Traditions: humility and sacrifice.

PART 3: Anonymity in the digital age

Searches for information on anonymity on aa.org can be overwhelming. You will find:

- 445 literature hits
- 448 newsletter hits
- 34 press release hits

The website has a wealth of information and is well-organized. Start by clicking on the **For A.A. Members** tab on the home page. When redirected to the **Information for A.A. Members** page, click on the **Anonymity – A Vital Spiritual Principle** link to find multiple resources:

- The Twelve Traditions (long form)
- The Twelve Traditions (short form)
- Anonymity Online
- FAQ About A.A. Websites
- Anonymity and Press/Media
- Anonymity and Professionals
- Anonymity and GSO Archives
- Ask a Question

If you click on the **Anonymity Online** tab, you'll be directed to a piece of Service Material titled "Anonymity Online and Digital Media." This piece has sections on the principles of anonymity; A.A. websites; social networking websites; email; Internet; videos and audios; and additional reflections on anonymity.

Within this service piece, you can learn how to maintain our Traditions of anonymity while setting up websites, using social media and email, speaking at conferences and speaking in public.

If you click on the **FAQ About A.A. Websites** tab, you'll be directed to a piece of Service Material titled "Frequently Asked Questions About A.A. Websites." This piece answers questions such as:

- How do we start to set up a local A.A. website?
- What A.A. information is suitable for a website?
- What about anonymity?

If you click on the **Anonymity and Press/Media** tab, you'll find links to:

- A note of thanks and a request for continued cooperation of media members
- Anonymity letter to the media from the General Service Office of Alcoholics Anonymous

If you click on the **Anonymity and Professionals** tab, you'll find an example of "A Newsletter for Professionals" which is aimed at members of the professional community who may come in contact with persons who want to stop drinking.

If you click on the **Anonymity and GSO Archives** tab, you'll find policies established by the trustees' Archives Committee pertaining to respecting A.A.'s anonymity Traditions when conducting research on living and deceased A.A. members.

In addition to these links, you also will find the following on the **Anonymity – A Vital Spiritual Principle** link:

- A.A. Guidelines on Internet
- *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*
- Anonymity Card
- Anonymity in the Digital Age
- *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*
- Twelve Traditions Illustrated
- Understanding Anonymity

And don't forget that the A.A. *Grapevine* has a wealth of resources on anonymity – about 200 articles, including a 1995 piece on anonymity on the Internet.

You also can find a wealth of information on other websites that may be especially helpful during social distancing:

Intergroup/Central Office serving Marin County and San Francisco

<https://aasfmarin.org>

Inter-group Association of A.A of New York, Inc.

<https://www.nyintergroup.org>

Baltimore Intergroup Council of Alcoholics Anonymous
<https://baltimoreaa.org>