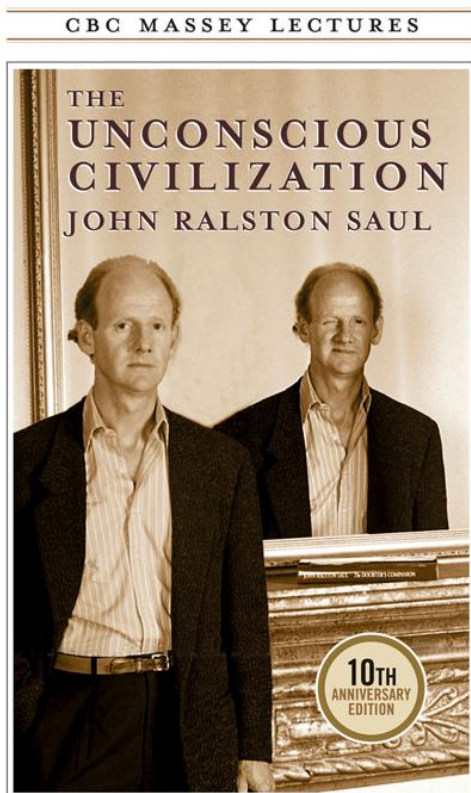




Rebellion Dogs Blog May, 2014

Standing: Is everyone heard in Alcoholics Anonymous?

“Who is *more contemptible* than he who scorns knowledge of himself?” John of Salisbury (1120 – 1180)



John Ralston Saul commentates on the relationships between citizenship, individualism and the public good. He argues that Western society, as a whole, suffers from “a fear of reality and a weakness for ideology.” As a way of describing our mental state while in the heart of addiction, AA members would be apt to describe ourselves as less in reality and more in delusion.

Today, let’s ask if AA as an organization ought to be mindful of our balancing act between reality and ideology. Are we as a fellowship losing touch with its own consciousness?

In his lectures and book, *The Unconscious Civilization*ⁱ, John Ralston Saul suggests that John of Salisbury would give a nod to the adaptation of his quote above to “What is more contemptible than a society that scorns knowledge of itself?”

For those of who fashion ourselves as stewards of The Alcoholics Anonymous Twelve Step/Twelve

Tradition way of life, here is a question that relates to AA reality and ideology:

- Is AA a fellowship with a manual, or
- Is AA a book-based society?

Are we a fellowship or are we a program? While we might want to retreat to the noncommittal, “aren’t we both?” let’s look first at our Traditions. Do these twelve principles defend and define a fellowship or a program? The answer is quite apparent. Unity, membership requirements, how we govern our groups, how the groups relate to each other, how we cooperate with society as a

whole, why anonymity—these tenets describe a fellowship. One Tradition, Tradition Five, reminds us to relate *our message* of hope to the still suffering alcoholic.

We are a fellowship. This reality is lost in our current vernacular. “When I joined *the program*,” is said so many times it is, to many, our collective reality. In fact, we joined a fellowship. Many of us applied a suggested program but there is no program to join. Am I splitting hairs? I don’t think so; I think this a fundamental explanation of some of the dogmatic tendencies in AA today.

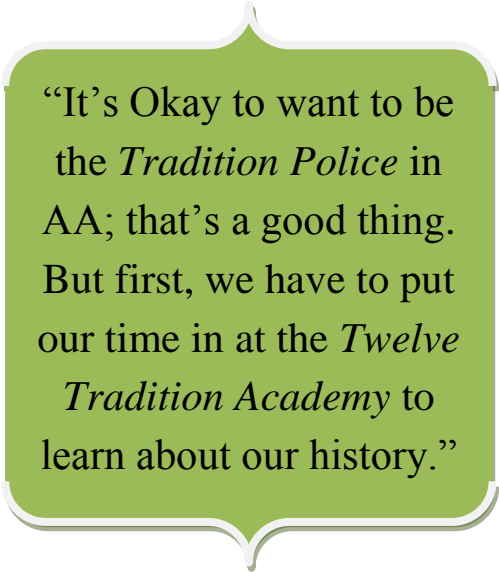
If we were a book-based society—and we are not—then the book would be sacred. The sacred book could not be changed, nor should the words inside be liberally interpreted. While this is a kneejerk reaction by many of the membership, *The Big Book* itself discourages us from this type of dogma, not once but twice: “The wording was, of course quite optional, so long as we voiced the ideas without reservation.” P. 63, “Our book is meant to be suggestive only. We realize that we know only a little.” P. 164

For comparison’s sake, let’s liken ourselves to a society of grade five math teachers. Since the late 1930s, the principles of math as it applies to grade five have not changed dramatically. Are we using the same text book to teach our children? No; we have found more contemporary ways to express these principles. While staying true to the same principles in grade five math, every generation of students gets the same or greater advantage compared to those who came before, based on these enhancements. How silly would we look if we reified the math-teaching process with a text book that was almost 80 years old, fearing that our mathematics would otherwise be watered down?

If this is an unfair comparison, I am all ears and eyes. Tell me why.

Recently I was chaired a panel at the 35th Eastern Ontario Spring Conference of AA in Ottawa Canada. This conference had something for everyone. Clancy I from Venice California was there. Big Book evangelist, Tom K from Boston was there. The old-timers panel was called “Sisters in Sobriety” with three 40 years+ sober women in AA. I was chairing a panel called “Unity Not Uniformity: Spiritual Variety in A.A.” which was comprised of Atheist and Agnostic members with long term sobriety. I talked about stewardship in AA. “It’s Okay to want to be the *Tradition Police* in AA; that’s a good thing. But first, we have to put our time in at *the Twelve Tradition Academy* to learn about our history.”

When we study our history we see that history does have a tendency to repeat itself.



“It’s Okay to want to be the *Tradition Police* in AA; that’s a good thing. But first, we have to put our time in at the *Twelve Tradition Academy* to learn about our history.”

Our principles suggest that individualism is no threat to unity. As stated in Warranty Six in our *A.A. World Service Manual*,

“Much attention has been drawn to the extraordinary liberties which the A.A. Traditions accord to the individual member and to his group; no penalties to be inflicted for nonconformity to A.A. principles . . . no member to be expelled from A.A.—membership always to be the choice of the individual; each group to conduct its internal affairs as it wishes—it being merely requested to abstain from acts that might injure A.A. as a whole; and finally that any group of alcoholics gathered together for sobriety may call themselves an A.A. group provide that as a group, they have no other purpose or affiliation. . . we A.A.’s possess more and greater freedom than any other fellowship in the world.”ⁱⁱ



“Those who don’t study history are doomed to repeat it. Yet those who *do* study history are doomed to stand by helplessly while everyone else repeats it.”

I listen to Ralston Saul’s *Massey Lectures* about “Unconscious Civilization” and I wonder if AA isn’t becoming an “increasingly conformist society that pays only lip service to democracy and individualism.” Is Individualism in AA today (the autonomy of members and our groups) seen as a single ambulatory centre of selfishness? Selfishness is a narrower, more superficial definition of individualism than our founders might have intended. Today, do we feel bound to unify, despite our differences? Or do we feel obliged to conform to a uniformed set of rituals?

Bill Wilson seemed comfortable choosing spontaneity and chaos

over control and order. Imagine if you or I were laying out the groundwork. Would we give groups and members such autonomy? While groups are asked to consider other groups or AA as a whole, policing that request is left to that group’s best judgment. Why? Bill W’s view was that Alcoholics Anonymous is self-correcting. While you can apply a theistic narrative if you wish, Bill was certain that adherence to the *principles* behind our Steps and Traditions were obligatory to a group’s or individual’s survival. Was it ever intended that we ought to be obligated to submit to these Steps or Traditions literally, as authority from Yahweh the Creator? No. The *principles*,

if followed, would work, in accordance to any creed or worldview. Any who stray too far away will not have to be policed or governed; they will fall by the wayside all by themselves. Based on the experience that informed our Traditions, Bill W. didn't seem so concerned that any individual or group could drag the fellowship down with them. It was the intolerance, not the refusal to conform, that he saw as detrimental.

In the story of Tradition Three from *The Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, Wilson relates this story about applying rules upon membership:

“Maybe this sounds comical now. Maybe you think we oldtimers were pretty intolerant. But I can tell you there was nothing funny about the situation then. We were grim because we felt our lives and homes were threatened, and that was no laughing matter. Intolerant, you say? Well, we were frightened. Naturally, we began to act like most everybody does when afraid. After all, isn't fear the true basis of intolerance? Yes, we were intolerant.

How could we then guess that all those fears were to prove groundless? How could we know that thousands of these sometimes frightening people were to make astonishing recoveries and become our greatest workers and most intimate friends?”ⁱⁱⁱ

So, according to AA lore, everyone lives happily ever after if and when we mind our own business and we don't take ourselves too seriously. What is “too seriously?” How about when we assume power or jurisdiction over another?

STANDING: losing your say in AA

In law, locus standi (standing) establishes who has a voice and who does not. *Free Dictionary.com* defines the term as, “The legally protectable stake or interest that an individual has in a dispute that entitles him to bring the controversy before the court to obtain judicial relief.”

In *Fire and Ashes*, Michael Ignatieff talked about lessons learned the hard way about how sinister the political ploy of undermining someone's standing can be. What if you no longer have a say in the political arena? Ignatieff came from a politically engaged Canadian family. His dad was active in Liberal politics and his childhood memories include dinner time political debate. As a reporter, educator and author, Michael Ignatieff had been teaching at Harvard where he had received his doctorate of history. Liberal insiders visited him and laid out a proposal to have him return to Canada and join the Liberal leadership race with the intention of eventually running the country as Prime Minister.

His key adversary, Steven Harper, leader of the Conservative Party of Canada ran smear campaigns with the tag lines, “Michael Ignatieff – just visiting,” and “He didn't come back for you.” The intended goal was not to rebut his criticism of how the Conservatives were running the

country. It attacked the man, not the message; it suggested that Ignatieff had no standing in a discussion of what was best for Canada.

“Swift-boating,” is the term Ignatieff uses for undermining ones standing in the political arena. It refers to a successful attack on democratic presidential nominee John Kerry and his Vietnam record. As he returned home a decorated vet, he was critical of US conduct in the war. Kerry had seen action on a Swift Boat up the Mekong River in Vietnam and his anti-war ranting on Capitol Hill offended American prisoners of war and other US troops and their families.

There is always some truth to swift-boating. Ignatieff had been out of the country for thirty years. John Kerry was critical of the Vietnam War. Does that make either man unworthy of leading their country? Well, they don’t get to make their case, if they lose their standing.

When AA groups for agnostics and atheists are being ostracized by some of the more rigid local Intergroups, the Intergroup bodies assume governing power to revoke the agnostic groups’ standing in AA. Hasty and angry Intergroup bodies don’t hear the group’s rebuttal. In Intergroup’s rationalization, the nonconforming groups forfeit their AA group status for the crime of not adhering to the literal translation of AA’s Steps that the majority of groups do.

That much is true; some agnostic groups interpret the Steps in a secular (no God) way while others don’t read the Steps in meetings at all. The fact—the AA truth—is that there is no requirement for the membership or groups to strictly adhere to the Steps exactly as written. Because someone says “You can’t pick and choose what you like about the Steps and change the rest and still call yourself an AA group,” doesn’t make it true. AA doesn’t grant Intergroups authority over deciding who is or is not an AA group, nor what conventional or unconventional rituals can or cannot be practiced. On the contrary, “leaders are but trusted servants, they do not govern.”

When members are told that in order to share, they have to identify as, “My name is _____ and I am an alcoholic,” their standing is being threatened. The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking. How we identify ourselves—addict, person in long-term recovery, by first name only or full name—is an individual decision.

We don’t have a winning record with inclusivity as a fellowship. The first group conscience of Alcoholics Anonymous that entertained giving standing to women in AA decided, “No skirts.” Voting on including African Americans in AA was “No Negroes.” The first LGBTQ groups that wanted standing were told “No sexual deviants in AA.” Young people have been shown the same bigotry, too. “I spilled more than you ever drank; what are you doing here?”

Almost all of us alcoholics have been denied standing just for being an alcoholic. Our word was nothing, our reputation was destroyed, our troubles elicited no sympathy. We were alkies, we were addicts, second class citizens. And sober, having suffered the indignity of it ourselves, we still dish it out to scapegoated *others* because their beliefs or some other characteristic

disqualifies them from legitimacy (in our eyes). This is natural for humans. Not *them* but each and every one of us.

Fire and Ashes talks about the reluctant move towards wider, more inclusive standing:

“America, and the democracies that take inspiration from it, are inching a step closer to that place glimpsed by Martin Luther King when he spoke of a distant country where people would be judged not by the characteristics, but by their character. Despite the victories that Obama has won, however, the country is still distant. Democratic societies that have outlawed discrimination nonetheless retain a complex code that still allows class, education and citizenship to be used to deny standing and to turn citizens from friends into foes in our politics.”^{iv}

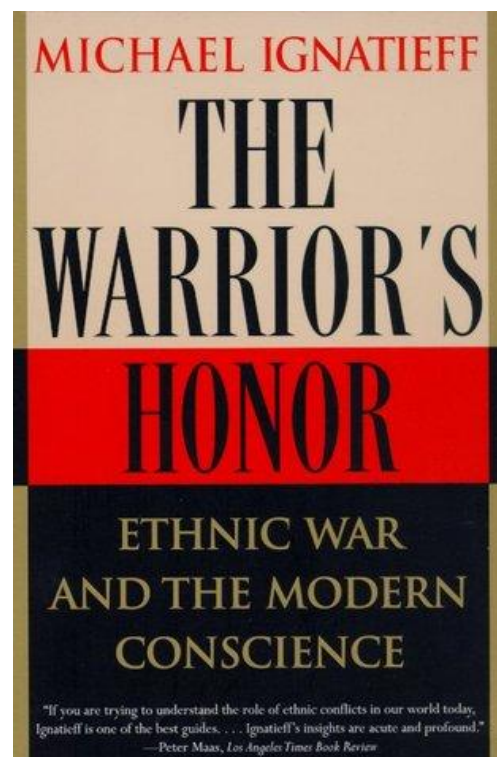
This isn't new territory for Michael Ignatieff. In his life as a journalist, Ignatieff was on the front line of conflicts between the Tutsi and Hutu factions in Rwanda, the Croats and Serbs in the former Yugoslavia were shooting at each other, and at the pre-911 Taliban affront on Afghanistan, before many American's could point out Afghanistan on a world map.

In *The Warrior's Honor*, Ignatieff draws upon the more conservative political scientist Samuel P. Huntington to help make the point that some of these differences we are talking about are not as simple as, “I like the New England Patriots and you like the San Francisco 49ers.”

“*The Clash of Civilizations*, by Samuel Huntington states that it is liberal ‘secular myopia,’ he argues, to think that ethnic difference is minor. ... Millennia of human history have shown that religion is not a *small difference*, he asserts, but possibly the most profound difference that can exist between people. The frequency, intensity and violence of fault line wars are greatly enhanced by beliefs in different gods.”

Ignatieff goes on to say about the warring Serbians and Croats, so many expressed “surprise at the astonishing rapidity with which fifty years of ethnic coexistence was destroyed, perhaps forever.”^v

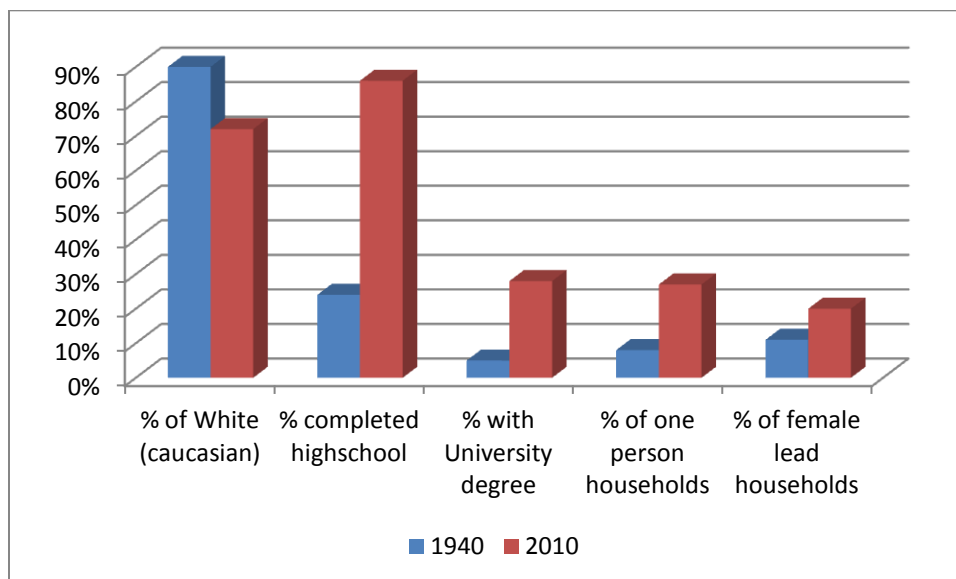
So it's one thing that we have meetings for the LGBTQ crowd or young people or for women. To be fair, AA was welcoming African Americans into the fold before Martin Luther King and Gay and Lesbian groups were part of AA when sodomy was still illegal and a dishonorable discharge awaited any gay man who came clean in the army. At least all of these



special meetings of young, gay or female albies were in agreement with the crowd as far as the “We Agnostics” line in the sand. On page 53 of the *Big Book*, we are confronted with, “We could not postpone or evade; we had to fearlessly face the proposition that either God is everything or else He is nothing. God either is, or He isn’t. What was our choice to be?” Most AAs through the ages agree on some Abrahamic Creator of the Universe or prayer answering, alcoholic saving power greater than our own will.

But when “God as we understand Him,” is “God is a myth,” or “I understand God to be born of fear and ignorance,” then this fault line difference is quite another thing. The reality that many stay sober without any supernatural dependency is a reality that, in some AA quarters, is giving way to a more dogmatic, uniformed God-conscious ideology of what AA is and has always been. Revisionist history is the foundation of the Back to Basics AA that *remembers* a time when everyone got sober and all the groups were harmonious. While there is nothing wrong with a literalist approach to AA, the problem comes when pluralism is abandoned and alternative paths to sobriety are dismissed as dry-drunk, second-rate alternatives or without standing.

Denying agnostic AA groups their standing in AA is a clear case of being discriminated against. Intergroups assume a governing role and avoid rebuttal by denying standing to agnostic groups. Are there more subtle systemic discriminations in AA, or as Ignatieff puts it, a “complex code that still allows class, education and citizenship to be used to deny standing?” Clues can be found in our demographics. Let’s look at how USA demographics (where ½ of AA members live) have changed from 1940 to 2010.



The USA looks very different over a 70 year period. What we call a family or household has changed. One person homes have risen from 8% to 27%; female led households have doubled from 11% to 20%. Americans are better educated; when AA started 5% of members had a university education. Now it’s 28%. America was 90% Caucasian when Bob and Bill met and in

2010, only 72% identified as white.^{vi} On the question of racial diversity, in the 2011 Triennial AA survey we see that AA is *whiter* than America as a whole: 87% of AA is Caucasian while only 72% of America is. According to the 2011 survey by SAMHSA, of the people being treated for alcoholism, 68% are Caucasian. Looking ahead, with a 100 year old AA, Caucasians will not be a majority in the USA (estimated crossover to be 2043). Is there something systematic in the rituals and literature of AA that gives more standing to white skinned members or men over women?

“God as we understand Him” doesn’t fit all AAs today in the one-size-fits-all way it did in 1940. As more Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and Atheists enter the rooms, what would be a more welcoming hand of AA for the newcomer of 2035 look like? Can we adapt? Will we adapt?

We say the Responsibility Declaration and we talk of AA inclusivity. Is our liberalism a myth (ideology) or reality? If we are inclusive, if we are accommodating, to what do we attribute the variance in statistics inside the rooms and the world just outside our meeting doors?

Ignatieff writes:

“Myth is a narrative shaped by desire, not by truth, formed not by the facts as best we can establish them but by our longing to be reassured and consoled. Coming awake means to renounce such longing, to recovery all the sharpness of the distinction between what is true and what we wish were true.”^{vii}

The Warrior’s Honor refers to the James Joyce line from *Ulysses*, “History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake.” With our emphasis on a spiritual awakening this idea should be like old home week for us. “Appendix II, The Spiritual Experience” describes most awakenings as being gradual. Maybe it’s a life’s work to renounce our longing for assurance and consolation. Could it be that it’s only human to surrender to self-constructed or mutually constructed realities that blot out the harsher truths? Constant vigilance is a more demanding master.

To follow the natural order of things is to resign ourselves to the finitude of all good things. AA, like any society, will decay if we follow our natural tendencies. To fend off this inevitability requires more than lip service to our brand of democracy. It requires each of us engaging in our citizenry and rising to the challenge, when anyone, anywhere reaches out for help. For AA to be there in 2035 we have to be firm with our principles and flexible with our method.

ⁱ <http://www.cbc.ca/ideas/massey-archives/1995/11/06/massey-lectures-1995-the-unconscious-civilization/>

ⁱⁱ http://www.aa.org/pdf/products/en_bm-31.pdf The AA World Service Manual (Twelve Concepts p. 74)

ⁱⁱⁱ Anonymous, *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, New York: Alcoholics Anonymous, 1953 p. 140 - 141

^{iv} Ignatieff, Michael, *Fire and Ashes*, Toronto: Random House, 2013

^v Ignatieff, Michael, *The Warrior’s Honor: Ethnic War and The Modern Conscience*, Toronto: Viking, 1998 p 54, 55.

^{vi} http://www.census.gov/newsroom/cspan/1940census/CSPAN_1940slides.pdf

^{vii} Ignatieff, Michael, *The Warrior’s Honor*: p 167