

ACA Annual Business Conference Ballot Proposal, 2020

Submitted By the Saturday Morning Meeting, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Issue

We propose that WSO create a document regarding the experiences, strength, and hope of members who have faced situations in which individuals or groups have not followed the traditions or principles of ACA. We suggest that this document be published now as a pamphlet and/or online resource and later as a chapter in the next edition of the *Big Red Book*. We understand that the literature committee oversees ACA-related literature issues, but we believe that this topic is highly relevant and merits fellowship-wide attention and discussion. We note that the *Crosstalk* pamphlet has some examples of individuals' stories that are directly focused on various dimensions of cross talk. There is another example of the type of stories we have in mind in the current version of the *Big Red Book* in the section on Tradition 10. We would like to participate with our fellows in expanding this format to other dilemmas that we, as ACA fellows, face but often find difficult to discuss or resolve without the guidance that additional texts might offer. We imagine stories that:

- Address dilemmas related to various traditions or principles;
- Place our common welfare and ACA unity first; and
- Express experience, strength, and hope.

We have included several examples of such stories in the Appendix on the next page.

Background or History of the Issue

Over time in our recovery in ACA, some of us have had painful and confusing experiences with groups or individuals that have resulted from the traditions and/or principles not being followed. For example, we have participated in online groups that did not rely upon a group conscience in decision-making; we have seen individuals blocked from participation in online groups without recourse; and we have unwittingly subjected ourselves to 13th-step behaviors without realizing it until significant damage was done to us. These are just some examples of situations when we could have benefitted from reading the stories of others who had faced similar situations, stories such as those that address the meaning of the steps and traditions in the *BRB*, but focused specifically on dilemmas and solutions.

Argument in Favor

Particularly with the rise of online groups and with regard to sensitive issues, such as the 13th step—which can occur with sponsors or others who have many years in the program and to whom we might otherwise turn for advice—we believe that individual fellows as well as groups could benefit from reading about how others have faced, understood, and responded to, various dilemmas in ACA groups. These dilemmas, and the need for their resolution, seem to apply globally.

Example 1: Traditions 2 and 9

The organizational structure of the online group I had been attending for six months had seemed vague to me. At this time of my life, I desperately needed to attend as many groups as I could and I did not have access to face-to-face groups, so I was very grateful to have found an online group. There seemed to be a few people who took responsibility for organizing several meetings per week, and I was glad for their service. But over time I noticed that the online format used during meetings was changed even though no changes had been discussed during the group business meetings. I also learned that a small group of people exchanged emails about group issues and made decisions about the group, including regarding blocking certain members from participation, without taking a group conscience. The group had not appointed these members for such tasks. When I raised these issues in a business meeting, several members of the decision-making group explained why a group conscience was not sought in the online context. After the business meeting was over, they sent me a private email suggesting that I find a different group to attend if I did not like the way the group was conducted. This was a very painful and confusing experience for me that triggered feelings from my dysfunctional family: “To earn and keep our love, you have to accept our behavior and be like us.” The secretive process of conducting group business privately through email also reminded me of my family’s inability to manage conflict, and it reinforced the rules of dysfunction: “Don’t talk, don’t trust, don’t feel.” Through this process, I returned time and again to the *BRB*’s description of traditions two and nine. I considered it an opportunity to learn to trust myself in my interpretation of what was happening, that the use of email was actually concealing inappropriate uses of control and power by a small group that was not responsible to those they served. I did not know, though, how to honor tradition one and prioritize the group’s common welfare. I also did not know how to discuss issues in a way that would respect anonymity and avoid gossip. Ultimately, I left the group since it was not following the traditions and relied on my Higher Power to give me the tools and resources necessary to continue to grow in recovery even without these meetings, and that is what has happened.

Example 2: Tradition 7

Being financially solvent did not make us fully self-supporting. In my first home meeting, we always had enough donations to meet our financial obligations and keep a prudent reserve. However, no one volunteered to be the group’s treasurer, so we kept our cash donations in a tin and stored it in a crate with our format notebook, *BRB*, and other supplies. When rent came due, someone in the group volunteered to take enough cash from the tin to pay the rent. We kept track of how much money came in and went out by having each meeting’s leader write the amounts from the 7th tradition in a notebook where we then had a running total. Despite having no treasurer, we did have a member who had volunteered as the contact person with the facility that hosted our meeting. However, this member became unable to continue in this role due to failing health. The group had no regularly scheduled business meeting to address our challenges, and group members seemed to express distaste for having business meetings at all. So, we never replaced our contact person. Consequently, when the facility relocated, we had not received any of the emails warning us of the change or requesting that we pick up our group belongings. It was summertime, and due to various circumstances, many group members were away. When we returned, the facility had moved to a new location and our crate could not be located. After facility staff conducted a search in all of the places they could imagine that our crate might be, they declared that it must have been discarded. Additionally, the new location could no longer host our meeting on the same evening as before the relocation. Because we now had no supplies, no money, and no location, the group disbanded. This experience taught me to interpret the term

Appendix

“self-supporting” as more than just raising enough funds to meet our expenses. Self-supporting also means having consistent and reliable group members who do service to keep the group running, and self-supporting means having regular business meetings that the majority of the group’s members participate in in order to address group business before major issues arise. After all of this happened, I reflected back on whether I had made the right decision not to take on the role of treasurer myself. Despite this unfortunate set of events, I still believe that my decision not to do service in that way at that time and place aligned with the will of my Higher Power and True Self. I made the decision that was right for me without trying to control the outcome, and the outcome was quite a difficult one. Nevertheless, I believe that the disbanding of this unhealthy group has also made space for the establishment of a healthier one when the time is right.

Example 3: 13th Step

I assumed that someone with so many years in recovery was trustworthy. We had met after I had 10 months of recovery in ACA and had started to attend a new group in search of a sponsor. I had just immigrated to a new country and was trying to adjust to starting a new job and grieving a recent divorce. I was lonely and desperate for recovery and for connection. In this new group, I learned of the opportunity to do service by helping an experienced ACA member plan a social event and gave my telephone number to be contacted for the cause. But I began receiving texts from this person that were personal in nature. I appreciated the attention and was glad to connect with someone in recovery. I readily ignored red flags related to the style of this communication as well as my misunderstanding and misgivings about this person’s intentions and wishes. When the texts became calls and the calls started out about recovery but then sometimes included questions about sexual topics, I became even more confused. Rather than recognizing that confusion as a crossing of my boundary and limiting the contact, I interpreted it as an invitation to work harder at finding out more. I ignored much evidence that this person was not presenting recovery as described in the *Big Red Book*. I stayed in this situation for quite a long time, trying to figure out how to maintain the connection that I was so desperate for and that I thought my Higher Power had brought into my life even though I kept feeling uncomfortable and getting hurt. I recognize now how my personal situation made me vulnerable. I also know that the dissociation in me that is a result of the family disease of dysfunction causes me to ignore red flags. Somehow my thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are disconnected from each other and the result of that is that I don’t know how I feel about certain situations or what to do about them. I already had ten months in recovery, so I did not think the 13th step really applied to me, but it did. There was a power differential between us created by the different amount of time we each had in recovery as well as by my vulnerability. Additionally, I was new to the group and I had not given consent to be contacted for social reasons. This contact gave me opportunities to develop my relationship with my inner child and True Self as I became more aware of how I felt about things in the moment and what I needed, but it also made me feel unsafe in meetings and could have easily derailed my recovery process. Despite the fact that my group’s format includes the paragraph from the *Big Red Book* regarding the 13th step, I did not recognize this contact as 13th step behavior when it first began, and I experienced a lot of pain as a result. I wish I had had a better way to recognize 13th step behavior when it happened to me.

Example 4: Sponsorship and the 13th Step

Too eager to recover fast and be top of my class again. I felt so grateful, blessed even, to have found this fellowship. The clarity and sense of belonging it gave me felt great. I felt very positive and confident towards my recovery. All I needed now was a good sponsor. So I went looking for

Appendix

one. In that process I approached several experienced fellows. But one guy in particular stuck out. His deep program knowledge seemed enormous. Impressive even. So of course I fell for it all and thought: “That’s my guy!”

Quite quickly I felt even better about the program and my recovery process. However after a while I started noticing things that didn’t feel good at all, things that seemed contradictory to what I read in the *Big Red Book*. It slowly went from bad to worse. Violations of anonymity. Gossip. Critical and judgmental talk about most other fellows. Nobody really understood the program like he did. If only people would listen more to him and did what he told them to do, etc. It felt increasingly uncomfortable. So after a while I started confronting my sponsor with the things that I thought were wrong. But he always seemed to have a great explanation for why he spoke and acted the way he did.

Before I knew it I was also pushed into three different service positions. Receiving dozens of text messages a week, at all hours of the day. Telling me what to do, what to write, what to say, what to pray, etc. It felt increasingly uncomfortable, intimidating even. As I saw his increasingly controlling and manipulating behavioral pattern become more evident, I felt it was time to break with my sponsor. I mustered the courage to confront him and ask him to not contact me anymore, which he ignored at first. I felt used and abused. A weird mix of disappointment and shame came over me. Needless to say, I started beating myself up. How could I have been so dumb not to see this from day one?! Luckily I did not keep it to myself for too long and contacted other experienced fellows. Some of them even told me the same had happened to them with the same person. Sad but true.

Now looking back at my 13th Step experience I am even grateful it happened to me. It showed me many things about myself. My fear of authority figures. My deep desire to be recognized and acknowledged. My need to be in control and master things quickly. All of these things have been brought to my attention in the most unexpected and confronting way. Although painful at first, now I understand why. I know better now. Trust your gut. Trust yourself. Take it easy. One day at a time. Progress rather than perfection...

Example 5: Sponsorship and the 13th Step

He was like a predator and I was his prey. When I started in ACA, an experienced fellow started sending me messages. When I asked him how to start with a sponsor, he said he wanted to be my sponsor. It did not feel good, but I felt I had no choice. I just started. I assumed this was the way things go in ACA. I told him I had doubts about sharing things with him because he was a man, and I that I would feel more at ease with a woman. He said there were almost no female sponsors around and it would be good for me to overcome my anxiety with men. I could practice with him. At that time I was passive and had problems with authority figures. I would have felt guilty if I had refused him as a sponsor. All of the 14 Laundry List traits were alive in my contact with him.

He asked me to send pictures of my holiday. It did not feel good but I sent him these pictures. I felt I had to do something in return for the things he did for me. I did not want to lose the contact. I had mixed feelings about anonymity. I thought ACA was about anonymity. That’s why I came to the meetings and loved to share in the group. When I had doubts about sharing intimate things about my life with him he said I was isolating. I could not trust my own feelings. I assumed his arguments were right. I still feel ashamed that I let him set the rules.

Appendix

We started working the steps using the yellow workbook. I learned a lot from him, and he helped me with difficult situations with my family, my work, and friends. He was a clever and experienced ACA fellow, but I never felt at ease. I felt he had other intentions. I managed not to let him come too close. It made me anxious. I was often angry and nervous. Something was wrong and I could not put my finger on it. He kept saying I was judgmental and harsh and I needed to open up, to relax and let go. He sent me messages each day. It did not feel good, but I did nothing because at the same time it felt good that he was so helpful and almost seemed to know what I was feeling. He was like a father figure I never had; my father was an alcoholic. I did not know what to do. Sometimes I set boundaries. After I did that he would not answer my messages for weeks. When we talked about it, he was angry. Then I felt abandoned. Sometimes after an ACA meeting that we had both attended, he would send messages telling me how beautiful I looked. I felt embarrassed and at the same time uplifted by his attention. The contact continued for 3 years. The final end came when he asked me to come over to his house. I told him this invitation felt unsafe.

I ended up switching groups and attending a different ACA meeting. I feel much more at ease sharing without feeling his eyes resting upon me. I feel ashamed that I told him so many details about my personal life that I was not ready to share about and that he could manipulate me to do so. Later I heard he did this with other women as well. It proves my gut feeling was right. This experience taught me to take my gut feeling seriously and not doubt it anymore.