

Introduction

“Anybody can start something, but carrying it out is the real challenge. And all the rest of you are doing that job. You’re all founders in your own right, carrying the message.”

—Al-Anon Cofounder Lois W.,
to the 1987 World Service Conference¹

The wives of Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.) members began to gather for mutual support long before the founding of Al-Anon Family Groups. Initially, they came together because they wanted to support their husbands’ recovery. Eventually they decided to practice the Twelve Steps themselves, for their own spiritual growth. Years later, friends and family members of alcoholics came to believe that they could strengthen their recovery by uniting together as Al-Anon Family Groups.

Since then, two aspects of Al-Anon have continued to thrive in tandem—Al-Anon, the fellowship; and Al-Anon, the organization that Lois W. and her friend, Anne B., created to serve the fellowship. In recalling Al-Anon’s early days in a session at the 1968 World Service Conference, Lois was clear to specify that she and Anne were cofounders of Al-Anon’s World Service Office—Al-Anon, the organization—not Al-Anon, the fellowship, which was created by many anonymous members.²

The organization and the fellowship share a primary purpose: to help the friends and families of alcoholics. Both are committed to the spiritual principles defined by Al-Anon’s three Legacies: the Twelve Steps, the Twelve Traditions, and the Twelve Concepts of Service. Both are guided by Al-Anon’s largest representative group conscience, the World Service Conference. But these

two aspects of Al-Anon have separate roles to play and different responsibilities to fulfill. The spiritual relationship between them is defined in the Twelve Concepts of Service.

In a fellowship-wide group conscience in 1951, the early family groups agreed to organize as Al-Anon Family Groups. Lois and Anne wrote to the family groups known to them at that time, and asked if they would agree to “band together” and accept the Twelve Steps as written, with only one minor change. Not all groups responded, but Al-Anon Family Groups began among the groups that answered affirmatively, agreeing to come together in unity. Lois and Anne wrote to the groups regularly, and asked them directly to express their preferences on matters affecting Al-Anon as a whole. Al-Anon was small enough in those early days for the groups to reach a fellowship-wide group conscience through direct contact with the Clearing House, which was the original name for the World Service Office. Today, the group conscience process takes place at multiple levels within the service structure—from the volunteer committees to the Board of Trustees, and from the groups to the districts, Areas, and the World Service Conference.

Members and groups agree to abide by the wider group conscience by choice, not because any authority requires it. Lois wrote:

We speak of the Traditions as guides. They are only that. They are not laws, rules, regulations, or any other sort of compulsion. To those who are familiar with business or government, such lack of management control may be unthinkable . . .

[Al-Anon] holds together by means of a loving understanding among its members. Al-Anon is united—without organization, without management, without a chain of command or a set of rules—by its members’ willingness to be obedient to the unenforceable.³

Although greater unity was the original goal, there was not always unanimity along the way, throughout Al-Anon’s history. Inevitably, some members and groups found themselves in disagreement—or in conflict—with the fellowship-wide group conscience. While many were able to accept the group conscience for

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the sake of Al-Anon unity, at various times there were also some who could not let go of their original opinion and chose to go a separate way. *Many Voices, One Journey* is the story of those who chose, of their own free will, to accept the larger group conscience, for the sake of Al-Anon unity. As Tradition One states, “Our common welfare should come first; personal progress for the greatest number depends upon unity.”

Many Voices, One Journey leaves no doubt about the importance of Lois’s role in the development of Al-Anon over the course of 50 years, but none of Lois’s work at the world service level would have been useful if there had not been thousands of individual members of the worldwide fellowship, who—at their own initiative, and with little or no help from anyone—started Al-Anon meetings all over the world.

Al-Anon’s many pioneers remain anonymous. There are too many to mention, but they are the real heroes of Al-Anon’s history. They served at every level in their countries’ Al-Anon’s service structures. They shared their stories at meetings, in their local and national newsletters, and in Al-Anon’s Conference Approved Literature. They resolved to pursue a path of spiritual growth and had the courage to make positive changes in their own lives. “Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps,” they “tried to carry this message to others, and to practice these principles” in every aspect of their lives, in following Step Twelve. More than 60 years after they started the first Al-Anon Family Groups, Al-Anon members were participating in more than 25,500 Al-Anon groups in more than 130 countries.

Lois frequently said words to the effect that, “It takes only one person to start something, but many others to carry it out.”⁴ That statement may sound like nothing more than modesty, but it was based on Lois’s profound understanding of the nature of “good personal leadership at all service levels,” as written in Concept Nine. Lois understood the World Service Office’s role within Al-Anon. She knew when it was appropriate for the Office to take initiative, and when it was necessary to wait for direction from the fellowship. She also understood how important it was “to place principles above personalities,” as written in Tradition Twelve. Lois did not want her own role as a trusted servant (or the per-

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sonality of any other trusted servant) at the world service level to be a distraction from the fellowship's primary purpose.

Lois saw the presence of a Higher Power—"a loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience," according to Tradition Two—as the primary force in Al-Anon's growth and development. Al-Anon began with powerful tools and traditions that originated in Alcoholics Anonymous. It defined its own identity over time, as it matured and gradually separated from A.A. This growth process required members to demonstrate the courage to change as an organization and as a fellowship—just as they had summoned the courage to change in their personal lives. Sometimes change took place gradually, over a period of several years, or even several decades; Al-Anon does not force solutions.

This growth process followed a precedent set by Alcoholics Anonymous, which also found its primary purpose only after separating from another group that had shaped its origins—the Oxford Groups, an evangelical Christian renewal movement. As Al-Anon began to develop as a program for the friends and families of alcoholics, they formed their own meetings, developed their own Conference Approved Literature, and stopped reading the "big book" and other A.A. literature at Al-Anon meetings. They learned to let go of the alcoholic's recovery, leaving that to the alcoholic's Higher Power, as they put the focus on themselves and their own spiritual growth.

As with any Al-Anon book, the purpose of *Many Voices, One Journey* is to share recovery. The history of our program is important as a means to that end, not as history for its own sake. Members tell their stories—and Al-Anon's story—in their own voices, from the point of view of their own path to recovery. They speak for themselves only, in the context of their time. They use modes of expression that may have since changed, but were appropriate in their day.

In some respects, *Many Voices, One Journey* more resembles a daily reader than an ordinary history book. It is divided into short segments that can be read aloud at a meeting. Many of these segments are followed by questions for group discussion or personal reflection. While the book lacks the continuous narrative of a conventional historical account, it gives readers an authentic sense of what it was like to personally experience these times, by

sharing from archival papers, official documents, published articles, and personal recollections.

Many Voices, One Journey gives members an opportunity to peer into a cross-section of Al-Anon's past. It does not answer every historical question or cover events or details in every country—Al-Anon's story is too vast and complex to ever be told in its entirety. Instead, this book offers a glimpse of how previous generations pursued their own spiritual growth as they built a service structure and strengthened a worldwide fellowship. It shows how Al-Anon members applied the spiritual principles of the program to a wide variety of situations and circumstances. *Many Voices, One Journey* illustrates how Al-Anon's policies have changed over time, but the many personal statements by individual members included in the book should not be confused with Al-Anon's policies. Al-Anon's policies are statements that are approved by the group conscience process and published in the "Digest of Al-Anon and Alateen Policies" in the *Al-Anon/Alateen Service Manual* (P-24/27). Personal sharings in Al-Anon publications are similar to a sharing at a meeting—they reflect only the perspective of the person who shared.

From the beginning, Al-Anon's leadership wanted to include as many voices as possible. The founders made a practice of sharing leadership and seeking as wide a range of member participation as possible. They sought to strengthen the spiritual unity of the fellowship as they let go of fear and increased their own capacity to share, to trust, and to love. Throughout many challenges and conflicts, Al-Anon members continually renewed their shared commitment to the Twelve Steps, Twelve Traditions, and Twelve Concepts of Service—the three Legacies that are the fellowship's spiritual foundation. These Legacies have helped members to find the courage to change in their personal lives, and have guided the fellowship on a path of continuous spiritual growth that extends into the future, without limit.

Chapter One

Alcoholism and isolation

1925-1950

1925

Lois W. had a secret motive when she and her husband, Bill, left New York City in 1925 for a year as “motorcycle hobos.” Bill wanted to discover investment opportunities by visiting companies across the country and learning about them first-hand. Lois wrote:

My reasons for wishing to take the time off were quite different. Although I thought Bill’s stock theories were sensible, I wanted to get him away from New York, with bars (saloons they were called then) on many corners, and away from his buddies, both of which I considered contributed greatly to his excessive drinking. A year in the open, which we both loved, would give me a chance to straighten him out.¹

Lois believed she could change Bill by changing his environment and removing him from the bad influence of certain friends. She had been married to him for seven years. She was 34 years old. Her expectations were unrealistic, as several incidents on the motorcycle trip showed.

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One weekend, they were camping out in the country—far from the saloons, drinking buddies, and other negative influences of the city. However, Bill had supplied himself with enough liquor for the weekend. Lois did not admit that her plan to straighten Bill out had failed, at least for that weekend. Instead, she herself got drunk—in an attempt to teach Bill a lesson. She wrote:

As there was no one to see me “get potted,” I thought it was a splendid opportunity to hold a mirror up to him and to show him what a fool a person appears when drunk.

However, the moment was not auspicious after all, for Bill thought it a great game, and encouraged me to drink more and more until I was so sick I couldn’t hold up my head. In the morning, he had only a little hang-over—mine was excruciating, and all for nothing.²

Another incident on the motorcycle trip highlighted the contrast between Lois’s expectations and the reality of Bill’s uncontrollable compulsion to drink.

As we were about to cross the international border from Canada to the United States, we stopped at the entrance, because Bill said he wanted to get some cigarettes. This was nonsense, as cigarettes were more expensive in Canada—but liquor was cheaper. I could do nothing but wait and wait, hour after hour, parked on the bridge plaza, with no car keys or money, since Bill, who had been sober for some time, had them with him. I had no idea where he had gone, but finally started out on foot to find him. It was getting dark and the area was full of saloons. I searched every one of them until, at last I found him, hardly able to navigate—and the money practically gone!³

Nearly 50 years later, in the film, *Lois’s Story* (1971), Lois recalled that day. There was still hurt and pain in her voice as she blinked to hold back her tears and maintain her composure on camera.⁴

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Another woman might not have stood there waiting for so long, before trying to find her husband. Another woman might not have stayed so long in such a relationship, after such hurtful neglect. However painful this incident might have been, in all, Lois still considered the motorcycle trip to have been an improvement over what she would have experienced with Bill had they stayed in New York City. “The trip was a partial success from my standpoint ... because it slowed down Bill’s drinking temporarily,” she wrote nearly 50 years later.⁵

Lois had been inclined to see the trip as having been a partial success because at that time she had not yet let go of her belief that Bill’s drinking was at least somewhat manageable—by her. She saw the trip in a hopeful light, but she based her hope on the unrealistic expectation that she could eventually straighten out Bill’s life—or at least improve it a bit. She had not yet accepted that she was powerless over alcohol.

For discussion:

Lois did not mention Bill’s drinking in her original notes about the motorcycle trip, which she mailed home in letters to her mother.⁶ How much of my relationship with an alcoholic have I kept secret from my family and friends? How has my shame and embarrassment about someone else’s drinking affected the way I interact with my family and friends?

Lois thought that she could control Bill’s drinking by taking him away from what she saw as bad influences. What have I done to try to manage someone else’s drinking? If I see myself as a “good” influence struggling against the “bad” influence of drinking buddies, what am I saying about my attitude toward the drinker?

Lois had hope that her actions would stop Bill from drinking. What does “hope” mean to me? How has my idea of hope changed since I began in Al-Anon?

1934

Lois suffered through ten more years of Bill’s drinking as his disease progressed. He was hospitalized several times, attended Oxford Group meetings, and attempted several other “cures” before he found continuous sobriety. In late December 1934, while a patient at Towns Hospital in New York City, he underwent a profound spiritual experience. Five months later, when he was struggling to maintain his sobriety while on a business trip to Akron, Ohio, instead of resorting to drink, he reached out to another alcoholic struggling for sobriety—Dr. Bob S. Bill worked with him for a few weeks before Dr. Bob had his last drink on June 10, 1935, an occasion they later designated as the start of Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.).

Before the end of that month, Lois visited Bill at the home of Dr. Bob and his wife, Annie, where Bill stayed for about three months.⁷ “I loved Annie and Bob from the moment I saw them,” Lois recalled. “They were so warm, so gracious, so *good*... In the years to come, [their home] became a haven for those in trouble, both alcoholics and their families.”⁸ About Annie, Lois said, “Annie was a rock of Gibraltar, a guiding light, a tremendous personality Alcoholics and their families would consult Annie and seek her advice. She always seemed to be able to put her finger on the trouble, and to help them.”⁹

Annie’s daughter, Sue, considered her mother’s spiritual approach to alcoholism to have been a great influence in Al-Anon’s later development. She pointed to her mother’s spiritual journal:

*It’s all there—share with people, don’t preach, don’t argue, don’t talk up or down to people, share in terms of your own experience, be willing to live a day at a time, an hour at a time, surrender, pray for guidance, and have a daily meditation time.*¹⁰

Annie always reached out to A.A. newcomers and encouraged them to “Keep Coming Back,” a phrase that Al-Anon members use at almost every Al-Anon meeting. An early A.A. member recalled Annie’s personal warmth: