

## Elder Statesmen versus the Bleeding (Bleating) Deacons

Do we as "elder statesmen" govern by exerting power or influence, controlling newcomers, and building political alliances or do we serve by sharing service and rotating out of leadership allowing God, through our group conscience to lead?

...our so called elder statesmen are often perceived to have power and/or influence. Through the development of down line representation (e.g. Sponsees) at the district or area level, these elders maintain their influence, which may be so permanently established at the district or area level that newcomers often surrender. This stifles change and growth for these local fellowships." (CA Newsgram Article, Third Quarter, 2002)

**Dictionary definition of "bleeding (bleating) deacon"** n. a person who believes himself indispensable to a group, esp. a person who becomes so over-involved in a group's internal management, policies, or politics as to lose sight of its larger goals; (hence) a person with a negative, moralizing character, who acts like the sole source of wisdom.

The term "Bleeding Deacon" is a corruption of an old New England term from the 18th or 19th century. The original term was Bleating Deacon, evoking a farmer's image of an old goat in the pulpit.

When the term was first applied it was intended for those people who have a set of cries such as "it will never work" or "if it ain't broke, then don't fix it." The actual term used was "bleating beacon" [sic] (as in sheep). The A.A. Grape Vine even ran a series titled "The Bleating Deacon's Corner."

**On page 123, *Alcoholics Anonymous comes of Age*, Bill Wilson states:**

Does A.A. have a REAL leadership? The answer is "Yes, notwithstanding the apparent lack of it." Let's turn again to the deposed founder and his friends. What becomes of them? As their grief and anxiety wear away, a subtle change begins. Ultimately they divide into two classes known in A.A. slang as "elder statesmen" and "bleeding (bleating) deacons." The elder statesman is one who sees the wisdom of the group's decisions, who holds no resentment over his reduced status, whose judgement, fortified by considerable experience, is sound, and who is willing to sit quietly on the side lines patiently awaiting developments. The bleeding deacon is one who remains convinced that the group cannot get along without him, who constantly connives for re-election to office, and who continues to be consumed with self-pity. A few deacons hemorrhage so badly that they get drunk. At times the A.A. landscape seems to be littered with bleeding forms. Nearly every old-timer in our society has gone of through this process in some degree. I have myself. Happily most them survive and live to become elder statesmen. This the real and enduring leadership of A.A. their is the quiet opinion, the sure knowledge, and the humble example that resolves a crisis. When sorely perplexed, the group inevitably turns to them for advice. They become the voice of the group conscience. They are, in fact, the true voice of Alcoholics Anonymous. They do not drive by mandate; they lead by example. This is how Tradition Nine was evolved. This is why A.A. can never be organized under any known form of government.

**On page 119-120, *Alcoholics Anonymous comes of Age*, Bill Wilson states:**

*Relapse* and disintegration are not penalties inflicted by people in authority; they are results of personal disobedience to spiritual principles. We must obey certain principles, or we die.

The same stern threat applies to the group itself. Unless there is approximate conformity to A.A.'s Twelve Traditions, the group too can deteriorate and die. So we of A.A. do obey spiritual principles, first because we love the kind of life much obedience brings. Great suffering and great love are A.A.'s disciplinarians; w have no others.

Therefore it is now clear that we ought never to name boards no govern us...It is in this spirit of service that we elect the A.A. groups' informal rotating committees, the Intergroup Associations of the area, and the General Service Conference for A.A. as a whole.

"If anything is going to destroy A.A.," says Dr. John Norris, a nonalcoholic physician, friend of Bill Wilson's and for many years chairman of A.A.'s board of trustees, "It will be what I call the 'tradition lawyers.' They find it easier to live with black and white than they do with gray. These 'bleeding deacons' – these fundamentalists are afraid of and fight any change." (Source: The New York Times Magazine, February 21, 1988)

*AT JUST WHAT point does a person become an old-timer, anyhow? What special status goes with the title? Is there really any need for the old-timer? After all, we are living in a changing world. To coin a phrase, is the old-timer's experience "relevant"?*