

## **Disintegration or Over-Integration in Alcoholics Anonymous**

Kelly D., Area 35 Panel 66 Delegate

*“...we need it to protect A.A. against disintegration, while preventing over-integration...”*  
*Why We Need a Conference, Bernard Smith*

What was the message that Bernard was trying to carry to us in this portion of his statement? Let's look at disintegration first. The definition of disintegration is the process of losing cohesion or strength. Cohesion is often described as the action or fact of forming a united whole. Bernard apparently seen the potential for a “fracturing” or a loss of unity within Alcoholics Anonymous and was inviting us to be mindful of it.

Let's ask ourselves this: do we identify as one people having the same condition, or do we identify as distinctly different people who are having a similar experience? The literature we have produced over recent decades does answer this question. We have pamphlets for the Gay and Lesbian, the Native North American, Special Needs, the Black and African American, the Older Alcoholic and the Young People – to name a few. These pamphlets focus on the differences before they focus on the *common illness*.

Is it important for us to “move as of one mind,” or is it better to move in the same direction from differing perspectives?” Do we attempt to ensure that everyone thinks alike, or is having a common goal the better approach? Is our tradition of autonomy providing a wide spectrum of experience, or is it being misused as a breaking ground for “anarchy and chaos?” Has the lack of a “common malady called alcoholism” moved us to a place in which the phrase “...*except in matters affecting other groups or A.A. as a whole...*” no longer applies due to lack of cohesion and a loss of our singleness of purpose? Has this alleged autonomy become self-determination that is really just disguised avoidance of God reliance?

A review of the Conference Advisory Actions and the attitudes that seem to underlie them would make a strong case that Alcoholics Anonymous has migrated from providing a program to assist in finding a Higher Power and become an association of groups acting as their own Higher Power. Groups, in this reference, means both A.A. groups and ethnic, professional, or life experience groups within A.A. Are these the signs of the disintegration that Bernard was talking about?

Now let's look at over-integration. The definition of integration is the act or process of uniting different things. Over-integration appears to be a phrase coined by Bernard himself; therefore we will need to clarify what he was attempting to illustrate. The term “over” tends to imply to most of us that it is “beyond” or “in excess of.” The term would seem to apply best to the A.A. member themselves, especially since the most common usage of the term “integration” is applied to individuals rather than anything else. Diversity is the inclusion of different types of people (as people of different races or cultures) in a group or organization. Therefore, it is reasonable to believe that Bernard was pointing to a desire to include more or different people than was originally intended in the creation of the Society of Alcoholics Anonymous, or to do so in a way that would be injurious to A.A. Let's look at scenarios in which this may be possible.

Bill and the early AA's came to fully understand the dire consequences of attempting to make more of A.A. than God intended it to be. Time and time again those types of efforts turned disastrous for those involved. They also learned the disastrous impact of trying to "make anything happen" based on what they thought should occur. This had to be in Bernard's mind as he wrote about over-integration.

Promotion can be defined as "attempting to drive an individual to take a certain action" (what marketers today have termed a "call to action") or to create a specific scenario or event. Bernard, even more so than Bill, was adherent of the idea that everything will occur in its own time and through its own process. His sense appears to have been that God has His own timing and purpose in bringing this to fruition. This is very clear in his several talks.

Therefore, with an eye on the definition of diversity one can readily suggest that Bernard was proposing that Alcoholics Anonymous ought never encourage or drive inclusion of anyone by means other than their own desire to stop drinking, but rather to be "accepting" of those alcoholics who wish to be part of Alcoholics Anonymous and its program. The first approach (driving and encouraging) suggest the idea of power – the second (accepting) is derived from humility.

The question before us is whether this is what Bernard was warning us against? Also referencing Bill's writing from *AA Comes of Age* it states, "*In something of the same fashion this idea began to work out with other kinds of prospects. In the beginning we could not sober up women. They were different they said. But when they saw other women get well, they slowly followed suit. The derelict, the rich man, the socialite – all these once thought AA was not for them. So did certain people of other races and tongues and creeds. But when they clearly saw the alcoholic tragedy for which they were headed, they could forget their differences and join AA. As these new trends came into full view, we were overjoyed. Today more than half of AA's membership consists of mild cases and those who once thought they were "different."*

Let's look at integration. Integration is defined as *incorporation as equals into a society or an organization of individuals of different groups*. The mere adding of a group or class of people into a large body of people does NOT equate to "integration." The process of integration must always begin with that the identifying group wishing to be integrated become willing to set aside their differences with the larger body. They do not forego them. The differences merely become secondary to the vital common element which can bind them. In our case, the common element is alcoholism.

Therefore, were we to be truly committed to "integration" of those who come to us, our responsibility to them would be to help them understand that while they have individual attributes vitally important to them in their personal lives – in Alcoholics Anonymous the truly saving grace is that we are simply just alcoholics. Again, our literature approach for the last few decades has shown this not to be our perspective.

Bernard knew very well what the Big Book points out – that alcoholics are extremists. Therefore, it seems he wanted to point us to the extremes we ought to avoid, as we might be susceptible to these extremes.

Let's look at disintegration and over-integration from that perspective. Bluntly stated, disintegration is illustrative of an attitude of apathy, or let's say disinterest, by the body of people concerned – that is one extreme. Over-integration is, at its core, an attitude of arrogance, or self-power, in its attempt to “make something happen.” Clearly these are attitude based on the extreme of too little concern or its opposing attitude of too much concern. Our Big Book is very diligent in reminding us about the approach of “letting God set our ideal” for us. Could Bernard have been pointing us to that tried and true approach as a Society?

One final point our Big Book – on two occasions – uses the illustration of “*laying the kit of spiritual tools at their feet.*” It is not difficult to arrive at an understanding that we are not to place our message as a hurdle to overcome, a list of conditions to be met. Conversely, it also becomes clear that we are not to use our message as side barriers, funneling those who may have an interest in us into a membership they did not intend, or are not ready, to establish. And certainly, these things ought not to be done in order to meet some self-determined set of membership numbers or monetary goals.

Let's ask ourselves this final Question: are we trying to maintain our fellowship on more of an intellectual level rather than a spiritual, service level? Let's not forget this statement in the Forward to the Third Edition, “*Recovery begins when one alcoholic talks to another alcoholic, sharing experience, strength and hope.*”