

**THE
FACE OF
ANONYMITY**



**FAMILIES
ANONYMOUS**

THE FACE OF ANONYMITY

One Member's Lesson

Introduction

Learning about anonymity was not on my mind when I walked into my first FA meeting! I thought I already understood the meaning of anonymity, but I was in for a big surprise. It means so much more than merely protecting one's identity! Over time, as I continued attending meetings, its true value to my recovery and that of other FA members soon became apparent. The significant lessons I've learned from anonymity, in its fullest sense, have bolstered me in my journey from fear and humiliation to courage and self-confidence. Had I not continued attending meetings, I would have missed out on the extremely valuable, life-changing lessons I have learned.

This booklet has been written with all FA members in mind: new, not so new, and longtimers. Looking at anonymity from different perspectives can strengthen all of us as we continue our journeys of recovery.

I distinctly remember hearing about anonymity at my very first meeting. I was assured that the outside world was not going to find out about my problems from this group! I recall feeling profound relief, coupled with a little scepticism, about such claims of silence. But I was there, so I decided to be discreet about what I said and observe how this ‘anonymity thing’ worked. During the next six meetings, I realised that the word *anonymity* frequently cropped up in our readings, discussions and literature. It became apparent that members strongly protected each other and their family members from public scrutiny and gossip. They did this, apparently with ease, by always using first names or descriptions that did not reveal personal identity. Members of longstanding might tell a story about someone else to make a point(omitting names) but would not dwell on that person’s actions or behaviour enough to reveal their identity. I gradually experienced a sense of relief, freedom and comfort that allowed me to tell my story and reveal the anguish of my failure to resolve my family’s problem. **The security of anonymity was my first lesson.**

As time passed, I began using the tools of FA to develop a programme of recovery that fitted my circumstances. I read FA literature and gradually realised that anonymity was a principal component of the FA programme. There were even two Traditions (Eleven and Twelve) that addressed this principle as well as many readings in *Today a Better Way*. Anonymity was a much bigger issue than I had ever thought! Even at FA conventions members kept their identities limited to first names (and last initials), which revealed that anonymity in FA was nationwide. I felt great respect for this principle. **Trust was another lesson learned.**

Anonymity even applied to Sponsorship. If a member had a sponsor, that sponsor was not identified within the group. I thought this was a little strange. Weren’t we all in this together? Didn’t we trust each other to keep silent about our members outside the meeting? Why couldn’t we be open about names of personal sponsors inside the meeting? I chose a group member who seemed wise in his recovery and asked him.

He explained that it had to do with the Twelfth Tradition; the part about placing *principles above personalities*. He said that a first name basis (no last names given) keep us all on equal standing. No member who is a ‘doctor, lawyer, merchant or chief’ in the community has a higher social prominence, more influence or greater responsibility than any other member in our FA group.

All of us are members with equal importance, bonded by the same basic problem: substance abuse among family members and friends. Though we might initially come to FA to find out how to help our loved ones, we learn to seek recovery for ourselves and to bring hope, strength and encouragement to each other by sharing our experiences.

As I pondered his explanation, new light was shed on anonymity for me. It became clear that anonymity keeps us all equal, allowing us to share ideas and value each other’s experiences without prejudice. This equality lessens the character defect of judging others. **Non-judgmental thinking: I could see how this lesson was healthy for me!**

But there was much more to placing *principles above personalities*. By keeping my mouth closed when my ego was ‘running on high’, I probably would hear my ‘words of wisdom’ spoken by someone else. What an ego deflator! Giving up my ego-based attitude really helped me perceive people differently. I made great progress in my quest for serenity after I gave up thinking I had all the answers. I noticed that others in our group had learned the same lesson as I had. We were all sharing the responsibility of keeping our group unified and healthy by being *trusted servants* rather than ‘authorities’.

Listening instead of talking – a great lesson in humility!

Probably the most amazing thing about anonymity was how it could diffuse the power of personality conflicts within the meeting. If group members had disagreements about the perception of an idea, no one had ‘the say so’ because each member’s opinion was valued as just that – an opinion. Opinions could be stated and

accepted or left behind. This really promoted unity for the common good in our group. **Another lesson; this time about respect for the opinion of others.**

Eventually I accepted the idea that drug addiction was a disease. Amazingly, the fear of embarrassment, guilt and self-consciousness fell away. My recovery even progressed to the point that I lost anxiety about people knowing my last name or why I had come to FA. After all, I was not responsible for my loved one's addiction: I didn't cause it, I couldn't control it and I couldn't cure it. What freedom! Nonetheless, I continued to conscientiously observe anonymity, because I could see others coming to FA suffering from the same feelings I had felt. I needed to do my part to help them feel safe and protected, as others had done for me.

The first time I met another FA member outside the meeting place, I was with non-FA friends. I froze inwardly, not knowing how to handle the situation or what to say. The people with me didn't know I was acquainted with this FA member (whom they also knew) and introduced us. The FA member shook my hand warmly and said, with a twinkle in her eye, that she was pleased to meet me. I relaxed knowing all was safe and followed her lead.

Another time, an FA member and I met accidentally, both of us alone among passing pedestrians. With a cautious glance around to see if we could talk without being overheard, we both took a moment to catch up on how we were doing, shared a few words of hope and encouragement and parted. That worked very well.

The most awkward experience I have ever had occurred when an FA member with non-FA friends saw me and immediately asked me something about the meeting. I said I didn't know and quickly changed the subject. It occurred to me that the FA member hadn't even realised that anonymity was being broken! Thankfully, those times haven't occurred often.

Since then I have set some guidelines for myself, so I am not caught off guard should accidental meetings with FA members occur. These guidelines help me maintain my own anonymity as well as that of group member:

1. I don't talk about FA with another member unless we are alone.
2. I remain noncommittal about other FA members or the group with such statements as: "So-and-so I think is fine. Why don't you give him/her a call?"

or (smiling) I say that the group is doing well.

I believe I am respecting the principle of anonymity described in our Twelve Traditions by being cautious about FA member identities outside the meeting place. Practising this principle strengthens my recovery by helping me be more caring of the feelings of other FA members. This lesson? **Anonymity protects us separately and collectively in the FA programme.**

In time, I grew enough in my recovery to think about 'giving back' to the fellowship that had done so much for me. Though I had been active in my group, I decided I wanted to *spread the word* in my community. I worried about what might happen to my anonymity were I to become involved in making FA known to the public. If my name were accidentally divulged, what would be the effect on my hard-won humility? Would my ego become inflated and again become a detriment to my recovery? Because I strongly believed in this commitment, careful consideration was necessary to preserve my identity and the integrity of my recovery.

A challenge like this needed a plan. I was directed to several FA resources (in our literature and on the FA website) which were most useful in providing guidance for spreading the word. I also observed other members running ideas or plans by the group at Business Meetings or in casual conversation. They often asked more experienced members to help them plan and carry out any actions needed on a project. The most effective plans were the ones that had whole-group participation. With members 'buying

in' with ideas about presentation and support in preparation, a project seemed to be a more productive success. This gave me security and confidence in my efforts – **a good lesson in how to gain self-confidence.**

The result was that my few ventures in public went well, because I had plans and group support before executing them. Spreading the word became another avenue in which I could practice the lessons I had learned.

As a result of my experiences, I've developed a few basic rules I now follow when doing public information work. These rules allow me to protect my anonymity and that of group members:

DOs

1. I **do** tell my story only and how much FA has helped me.
2. I **do** describe the meeting's informal setting with no pressure on newcomers and visitors to talk.
3. I **do** mention that there is no registration, dues or fees.
4. I **do** invite people to attend a meeting to see for themselves

DON'Ts

1. I **don't** encourage people to attend by telling them about mutual acquaintances who are attending FA.
2. I **don't** tell other members' stories.

It took time for me to develop a healthy respect for the deeper meaning of *anonymity* in the FA programme. During my first few months in FA, I had little understanding that breaking my anonymity or anyone else's would be destructive to my group, other groups and FA as a whole. Gradually, as I learned the lessons encompassed in anonymity, I began healing and changing.

Though anonymity may have some merit in the world outside FA, within our programme we can learn special lessons that help us grow and change in our recovery; lessons about:

security (feeling safe)

trust

non-judgmental thinking

humility

respect for others

a protective concern for members

self-confidence

As an FA member, I remind myself that I have a responsibility to nurture and protect the anonymity of every member locally, nationally and internationally. Practicing this principle keeps me humble, strengthens my recovery and promotes unity in the fellowship.

Anonymity builds character in its lessons and is the spiritual foundation of our programme!

Thoughts on Anonymity for study and discussion

- Anonymity helps us *place principles above personalities*
- Anonymity serves as an FA tool of recovery
- Anonymity encourages non-judgmental thinking
- Anonymity provides protection for all Twelve Steppers
- Anonymity preserves our identity
- Anonymity prevents arrogance, thereby promoting humility
- Anonymity encourages integrity
- Anonymity prevents gossip
- Anonymity does not come naturally; one must work at it
- Whom you see in FA
What you hear in FA
When you leave FA
Let it stay in FA

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