

HIGHER GROUND

July 2020



(More of) **Women in AA**

The Story of Irma Livoni

In Dec of 1984, I had been sober for 2-1/2 years, and working with my sponsors Bob and Sybil Corwin since January of 84. Sybil had gotten sober in March of 1941, so at the time she was 43 years sober. We were driving home from a meeting and she asked me the date (to her it was just Sunday). I told her it was Dec. 8th, and that yesterday (Dec. 7th) was the anniversary of Pearl Harbor Day.

She said "Matt, have I ever told you about Irma Livoni?"

"Nope, who is she?"

She had told me that it was very different back in the 30's and 40's for a woman to be an alcoholic. Sybil said It was a time when women wore hats and gloves, and "respectable women" were not usually found in a bar, or at "whoopie parties."

Sybil got down her copy of the big book. She said, I want you to find the traditions in there, and read me tradition 3. It was a 1st. Edition Big Book. Thicker than mine. I looked in the back of the book, where I thought the traditions were, but couldn't find them. "I can't find them, Sybil." "Exactly. That's because we didn't have any traditions back in 1941 when I came in. And Matt, AA was in mortal danger of destroying itself, which is why we have traditions now." Then she had me find them in my 3rd. Edition B.B. and in my 12 & 12. I didn't read it all, just the caption heading, and then she started telling me the story of IRMA LIVONI...

Irma was a sponsee of Sybil's. She also became a member in 1941, just after Sybil. Sybil took her into her home. (Sybil told me that many people's bottoms were very low then, no home, no job, no watch, no car, nothing). Sybil said it was different then for a woman to be an alcoholic. That most of them had burned all their bridges with their families, and were looked down upon, even more so than male alcoholics. Sybil said she watched AA help Irma get sober, watched AA help Irma get cleaned up, watched AA help Irma get her first job in sobriety, and watched AA help Irma get her first apartment in sobriety. Then she said that on Dec. 5th, 1941, a self-appointed group of the members signed a letter to Irma and mailed it on that Friday, Dec 5th, 2 days before Pearl Harbor.

Here is a copy of the letter:

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ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS

Post Office Box 607
Hollywood Station,
Hollywood, California

December Fifth, 1941

Irma Livoni
939 S. Gramercy Place
Los Angeles, California

Dear Mrs. Livoni:

At a meeting of the Executive Committee of the Los Angeles Group of Alcoholics Anonymous, held Dec. 4th, 1941, it was decided that your attendance at group meetings was no longer desired until certain explanations and plans for the future were made to the satisfaction of this committee. This action has been taken for reasons which should be most apparent to yourself.

It was decided that, should you so desire, you may appear before members of this committee and state your attitude. This opportunity will be afforded you between now and December 15th, 1941. You may communicate with us at the above address by that date. In case you do not wish to appear, we shall consider the matter closed and that your membership is terminated.

ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS,

Los Angeles Group
Mortimer Joseph
Frank Randall
Edmund Jussen Jr
Fay D. Loomis
Al Marineau

I was stunned. "How could they do this, Sybil?"

"Because we didn't have any guidelines, any traditions to protect us from good intentions. AA was very new, and people did all sorts of things, thinking they were protecting the fellowship." Sybil then said to close my eyes and imagine my being in the following setting. Sybil explained that Dec. 7th, 1941 was Pearl Harbor Day (a Sunday). She said that that Sunday night everyone in LA was afraid that Los Angeles would also be attacked and bombed. There was a citywide blackout, people were so terrified. She said that on Monday Dec. 8th., President Roosevelt gave the speech that talked about "the date that will live in infamy" and that we were now at war with Japan and Germany.

She said, that was the day that Irma received her letter. There was only one meeting in the entire state of California when Sybil came in, in 1941. By December there may have been two or three, but Irma had nowhere else to go, no one else to turn to. No other group in California that she could ask for help. Sybil said, "Imagine only one or two meetings in your entire state, and being shunned by your family, and by society, and by the only group of people who were on your side, your AA group. Imagine them shutting the door on you and sending you such a letter, Matt." I shivered at the thought of it. It was Christmas time, the stores were decorated and now poor Irma was all alone. I thought about how it was in 1984 with 2000 meetings a week to choose from in Southern California. and then I imagined having no other help for a hopeless alcoholic.

Sybil told me that Irma never came back to another meeting, left AA and died of alcoholism. She wrote to Bill about the incident, and I cannot tell you that this is the reason that the following is a part of the 3rd. Tradition, but it certainly seems to apply.

From Tradition 3, page 141: ... that we would neither punish nor deprive any AA of membership, that we must never compel anyone to pay anything, believe anything, or conform to anything? The answer, now seen in Tradition Three, was simplicity itself. At last experience taught us that to take away any alcoholic's full chance was sometimes to pronounce his

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death sentence, and often to condemn him to endless misery. Who dared to be judge, jury and executioner of his own sick brother?"

JUDGE JURY AND EXECUTIONER... I remember looking at those words again and again, and they seemed to get larger and larger.

I hadn't really noticed EXECUTIONER when I had read it the first time at my 12 & 12 study group. Again I felt so bad for this poor lady.

Wow, those words really had a different meaning than when I had read the traditions before. So here it is, 23 years later, and each December 7th and 8th I always think about Irma Livoni, and how lucky I am, that we have traditions now. I also think of how lucky I was to have met Sybil and so lucky that she appointed herself my sponsor.

Years later I realized how everything she ever taught me was like gold. But in 1984 I had no idea who Sybil really was or how lucky I was to have her as my sponsor. She was like a piece of living history, but I really didn't realize how valuable that was in explaining WHY we do some of the things we do. Besides being one of the first women in AA, Sybil was the first woman west of the Mississippi. She also became the head of LA's central office for 12 years, and she became close friends with Bill and Lois. She and Bob even used to go on vacation with them. She used to tell me all sorts of stories about Bill Wilson and things he said to her. He was very interested in how AA would work for women, as there were very few women worldwide in AA back in 1941. Marty Mann came in before Sybil did, but very few stayed sober.

I learned that night that no one can get kicked out of AA. We can ask a disturbing wet drunk that he needs to settle down or we might have to ask him to step outside for that day, but we don't vote to kick anyone out forever. And we don't shun people because our guidelines, our traditions tell us that no one has to believe in anything (they don't have to be like me) and they don't have to conform to anything (they don't have to dress a certain way, or have no facial hair, or pay anything). Even if I get drunk again, I am still welcome at any AA meeting.

So that's the story about Irma Livoni. Feel free to pass this along to anyone you know who might be interested in knowing a bit about how and why the traditions got started. I think it sort of puts a face on tradition 3: the face of a woman I never knew, who got kicked out of AA. Who got drunk and died.

Matt (from Silkworth.net)



Sybil and Matt on her porch.

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William Silkworth in Plattsburgh during WWI

Group Anniversaries

Aug. 10, 1993 Willsboro Group

Aug. 15, 1989 Wilmington Group

District Meeting

Schedule

July 15 virtual – on Zoom

ID: 415-635-3486

PW: 051220

Aug. 11 Location/Platform TBD

Sept. 8 Location/Platform TBD

All meetings begin at 7:30

This Month in AA History

- July 22, 1873 Dr. W. Silkworth is born in Brooklyn, NY
- July 15, 1938 First documented use of the term *Alcoholics Anonymous* in a letter from Bill to Willard Richardson
- July 1950 First International Convention in Cleveland. *Twelve Traditions* adopted.
- July 2, 1960 Father Ed Dowling died.
- July 2, 1965 First Canadian Grapevine published “La Vigne”
- July 2, 2000 20 millionth copy of the Big Book given to Al-Anon in Minneapolis, MN

Upcoming Events

In the Clouds

July 31 & Aug 1 - Pennsylvania State Convention (virtual)
see: aapastateconvention.com

Aug. 1&2 - New York State Informational Workshop (virtual)
see: NYSIW.org

Aug 7-9 – Summerfest 2020 – from Eugene, OR (virtual)
see: aa-summerfest.org

Live (maybe)

Aug. 23 – Annual “Friends of Bill W.” Picnic, Point Au Roche State Park (Beach Pavilion), 10am.