

Tradition Twelve

(Adapted from Overeaters Anonymous)

Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all these traditions, ever reminding us to place principles before personalities.

Living by the twelve traditions of Shoplifters Anonymous requires that we adopt attitudes which seem strange at first to many of us. For instance, we place the welfare of the ShA group above our own desires. We give up our aspirations to govern our fellow members. We welcome to our meetings all people with a desire to stop shoplifting compulsively, no matter what we think or feel about them. We cease all attempts to use ShA to promote our favorite outside issues and enterprises. We give up all aspirations to gain professional status as ShA members. We give up all ambitions that we might someday be acclaimed publicly for our ShA recovery or service.

Behind all these self-sacrificing attitudes is a single spiritual foundation, so important to our Fellowship it is part of our name; anonymity. Without a foundation, no house can stand. It is essential that all of us understand and respect anonymity if ShA is to survive and we are to find recovery here.

Our experience with the many aspects of anonymity starts when we call in as ShA newcomers. At that point many of us don't want anyone to know we're coming to ShA or how we really feel about ourselves. In ShA we find a haven, a place to share our feelings and experiences with other human beings who also suffer from the disease of compulsive shoplifting. When we all respect the anonymity of others, we can trust that nobody outside these rooms will know we're coming to ShA unless we tell them ourselves. Because ours is a program of principles, not personalities, we expect that what we share here won't be gossiped about or judged, either inside or outside ShA.

Yet anonymity means a great deal more to us than just not gossiping. The quality of our recovery ultimately depends upon understanding anonymity as a spiritual principle, and how it enables us to change.

Many of us come to ShA carrying the excess baggage of a lot of shame and pride. We are ashamed that we've been unable to control our shoplifting by ourselves, and yet we're too proud to admit that we need help with our shoplifting and our lives. In order to recover, we're going to have to let go of shame and pride so we can actively reach out to others for help. As we practice anonymity, we begin this process of letting go.

To be anonymous in ShA means to be one among many, to accept ourselves as no better or worse than our fellows. This acceptance places us in a state of humility. It makes us teachable. We find ourselves listening intently to people whose last names we don't know. They may be younger than we are, or less successful by material standards. They may come from entirely different backgrounds. We listen because we identify with them. We've learned that they just may say something that will be key to our recovery. In ShA we're all on equal footing—reduced to helplessness by our compulsive shoplifting and

freed to recover by this miraculous program. Money, intelligence, and status made no difference in our becoming compulsive shoplifters and they make no difference in our chances for recovery.

Anonymity is not the same thing as secrecy. A 12-step pamphlet says, "It is not a break of anonymity to use our full names within the group." Several of us have found that our ShA service work is made easier when we fully identify ourselves, and it becomes easier for others to reach out to us when we need help. While we bend over backwards to avoid gossip, we need to remember "it is not a break of anonymity to enlist twelve-step help for group members in trouble, provided we are careful to refrain from discussing any specific personal information." For example, we might enlist such help without breaking a person's anonymity by saying, "Have you talked to Mary lately? She could use a phone call."

We need to remember, too, that not all members immediately let go of the gossip habit when we enter the doors of ShA, and there may be newcomers present who are unfamiliar with our traditions. Therefore, it may be best to share in a general way during ShA meetings and save the more intimate details for our sponsors or other individuals we have learned to trust in ShA. Those who have walked the twelve-step path before us know the sacred trust of receiving personal inventories and the importance of anonymity. Many of us find that the unconditional acceptance and trust that springs from the practice of anonymity opens us to one another in ways we have never experienced before.

In ShA we learn that our recovery comes to us through the principles of the program, not through personalities. We discover that we can learn from and work in harmony with people whose personalities we dislike, as long as we focus on ShA principles.

Many of us have also had the experience of setting certain members on pedestals, only to have them climb down or fall off. Sometimes we've tried to build our program around one person we admired, a sponsor or a speaker. The day inevitably came when that person failed us in some way, and our own recovery was threatened. It was then we learned the importance of placing principles before personalities. We have found through years of experience that the principles of ShA are failure-proof. They are the solid bedrock upon which we can construct meaningful lives.

Anonymity fosters humility and guards against reemergence of that blind self-will that leads to the compulsion to shoplift. Prevented by our traditions from placing ourselves or others in a position of distinction within our Fellowship, we find it easier for each of us simply to be a part of the group. Being a part of the group is essential to recovery from our disease of isolation. It means supporting and being supported by our fellow ShA members and sharing openly the joys and challenges of our lives. These are things we could never afford to do in any group where we were trying to make names for ourselves.

As we recover in ShA, we come to feel that anonymity is one of our most precious possessions. Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of our transformed lives, as well as of ShA's traditions. We are compulsive shoplifters, living in recovery, no longer in

bondage to shoplifting. We know that support for our recovery will always be here for us, as long as we remember to place principles before personalities, respecting these vital twelve traditions which bind us together in the Fellowship of Shoplifters Anonymous.