

May Someone in A.A. Write About Others in Her Group?

The magazine's Ethicist columnist on upholding rules of discretion in a recovery community.



By Kwame Anthony Appiah

Jan. 19, 2024

You're reading **The Ethicist** newsletter, for Times subscribers only. Advice on life's trickiest situations and moral dilemmas from the philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah. [Get it in your inbox.](#)

We have a writing group whose members share their fiction and nonfiction with one another. One of our members attends Alcoholics Anonymous meetings and has begun to write about others who attend. She does not mention their names, but the descriptions of the members include profession, physical appearance, hobbies and other specifics that might identify them. She has not mentioned to these people that she is writing about them and does not plan to, but she would like to publish her stories for the general public. She has a degree in creative writing and notes that well-known authors have written about members of their A.A. groups, e.g. Raymond Carver. What are the ethics of writing about others in a substance-abuse support group without their consent? — Name Withheld

From the Ethicist:

What do we talk about when we talk about anonymity? Membership in an A.A. group involves a great deal of trust, and those who benefit from membership have a profound obligation to respond to that trust with trustworthiness. In general, I don't think we should begrudge writers their inspirations, including those that come from our own lives. There's always a chance of that when you have friendships with writers. But what's shared in an A.A. meeting is emphatically not meant to be put to public use, and breaking a confidence is breaking a confidence even in the service of art.

And for the record? Raymond Carver, who attended A.A. meetings at least once a day over a transformative month in 1977, stated clearly that he never used the stories he heard there as source material, and indeed that he never attended meetings with this in mind. He wasn't going to exploit this small, good thing. It's significant that your writing-group member hasn't told the others in her A.A. meetings what she's doing; she evidently fears they will think of it as a betrayal. With good reason. If members of her meetings recognized themselves in her stories, whether or not they thought they would be recognized by others, they would be justified in responding with outrage.

To be sure, your colleague can't be expected to avoid writing about absolutely anything she learns in the meetings. And it may be hard to draw a sharp line between a recognizable use of the details and a creative adaptation of them into fiction. But that's exactly the sort of thing that, in the spirit of trust, it would be appropriate to discuss with people in the A.A. group, whose candor has been predicated on a strong norm of discretion. Alcohol isn't the only thing that can be abused.