



Making a case for atheist/agnostic groups in AA

By JHG

The idea that atheists and agnostics have the right to take part in the AA experience and fellowship does not involve a subtle or complicated mental juggling act.

The third tradition explicitly says, “The only requirement for AA membership is a desire to stop drinking.” Virtually no one in AA would outright slam the door shut and ban atheists and agnostics from becoming members, but there is more to actually including us than begrudgingly accepting our right to be members. Anyone who has ever been in a typical AA meeting knows that there is plenty of de facto exclusion. It often hurts to be an atheist in AA. All the god talk and the repeated claims that it is impossible to get sober without a Higher Power present significant obstacles for atheists and agnostics.

And closing meetings with the Lord's Prayer doesn't help.

Being allowed to join AA doesn't mean a thing if my experience causes me to not want to come back. I don't have to like everything I hear, but unless my experience gives me a glimpse of something I want, AA will be of very little use to me. It's a program of attraction. I have to want it in order for it to work. It is not enough to be able to sit meekly and silently in the back row. And it is insulting to be magnanimously tolerated if it comes with being told, “Keep coming back. Eventually, you will either find your Higher Power or you will get drunk.”

The true fulfillment of Tradition 3 rests on whether anyone who wants to stop drinking can feel at home in AA and participate fully. Being relegated to a marginalized position does not constitute membership in any meaningful sense.

It is natural that those who need to find a way to get sober without having to embrace the concept of a higher power would want AA groups where who we are and what we stand for is accepted.

However, contrary to AA's slogan, “Live and let live,” many AA members strenuously challenge the legitimacy of these groups. Even though no one is seeking to eliminate God from the AA program altogether, devotees of the “god of love” heap ridicule and contempt on everyone associated with atheist/agnostic groups. In spite of the inarguable fact that addicts are dying because of AA's intolerance towards those who do not accept that an interventionist God is responsible for their sobriety, many

members of “the last house on the block” thwart the life-saving inclusivity of these groups by snubbing them and refusing to list them in local meeting schedules.

When AA’s Twelve Traditions were crafted, one of the main guiding principles was a shrewd avoidance of a top-down organizational model. Tradition 2 is very explicit. Leaders don’t govern. Instead, they assume the role of “trusted servants.” The allusion in Tradition 2 to a “loving God” may be anathema to atheists, but this god is a nonessential ingredient in the process. The mention of God in this Tradition is intended to empower and liberate rather than bind. It is a deliberate move to discourage rather than promote any sort of religious or political orthodoxy. It is not referring to the almighty, sovereign god of the Abrahamic religions but instead imagines a commonality and a beneficence that is experienced through the “group conscience,” a bottom-up process that encourages the expression of divergent viewpoints.

The rejection of top-down thinking is also explicit in Tradition 9, which enjoins AA against becoming “organized,” and in Tradition 4, which grants the groups autonomy. AA’s bottom-up center of authority not only establishes a network that is able to function with very little administrative structure, it also enables and encourages maximum creativity, flexibility, and adaptability at the group level.

The heart of the traditions is Tradition 5, which outlines the “one primary purpose” of an AA group, which is “to carry its message to the alcoholic who still suffers.” The idea that the group has a distinctive message, “its message,” stands in sharp contrast to the twelfth step’s “this message,” but the fifth tradition’s implied notion that each group’s message is pliable and unique is consistent with the second and fourth traditions. The fifth tradition says what the group’s purpose is, to carry its message. The second tradition specifies how the group goes about shaping its message, through the group conscience. And the fourth tradition empowers the group to carry out the dictates of the group conscience without unnecessary interference.

To summarize the goals and intent of these Traditions: AA aspires to provide a solution that will work for anyone who wants to stop drinking, but recognizes that there is no one-size-fits-all formula that can achieve that.

There’s a saying in AA, “For every nut who walks in the door there’s a wrench that will fit them.” One of the main ways that AA is able to custom fit the solution to individual needs is the group. AA groups are crucial in fostering vital one-on-one relationships and in providing a sense of belonging. Different AA groups have different strengths. AA groups are in a position to craft a targeted message better than anybody else. Anything that interferes with a group’s ability to carry its message puts lives in jeopardy. Thus Tradition 4 says, “Each group should be autonomous except in matters affecting other groups or AA as a whole.”

The intent of the fourth tradition is very clear. The creativity of individual AA groups is not to be curbed in any way unless it involves “matters affecting other groups or AA as a whole.” The reason for the exception clause is not to protect the AA “brand” or to insist on any sort of orthodoxy. The goal is maximum effectiveness at every level of the AA organization. AA as a whole and AA groups are supposed to complement each other. The service structure that makes decisions on behalf of AA as a whole only exists to support the real work of AA, most of which occurs at the group level. AA as a whole is restrained from interfering with what a group deems effective, and the group is restrained from anything that would jeopardize AA’s general effectiveness.

The burden of proof is always on anyone who would restrict the autonomy of a group. Most AA members get that – thus the saying from AA folk wisdom, “All you need to start an AA group is a coffee

pot and a resentment.” This is of course a humorous reference to the fact that many AA groups are founded by disgruntled former members of existing groups, but it is also a true reflection of the conscious intent of Traditions 2, 3, and 4. The long version of the third tradition explicitly states, “Any two or three alcoholics gathered together for sobriety may call themselves an AA group, provided that, as a group, they have no other affiliation.”

That the existence of atheist/agnostic groups is controversial is very hard to understand, given that they seem like perfect examples of precisely the kind of responsiveness to the needs of its members that the fourth tradition is explicitly designed to encourage and support.

Those who would deny their legitimacy need show that there is something about them that infringes upon “matters affecting other groups or AA as a whole.” What do atheist/agnostic groups do that adversely affects AA? They do not turn theists away. They are not allied with any “related facility or outside enterprise.” Their purpose is not to promote or endorse atheism or any belief system that is alien to or in conflict with the primary purpose of AA groups. The sole reason for the groups’ existence is to fulfill the traditions’ explicit aim to carry the message of recovery to individuals who would otherwise fall through the cracks. Period. Full stop.

But what about the claim that the meetings misrepresent what AA is about and/or that they undermine AA unity?

Honest people can disagree about what would constitute a misrepresentation of AA. However, a good starting point for understanding what an accurate representation looks like is conference-approved AA literature.

Appendix II in the big book says, “Most emphatically we wish to say that any alcoholic capable of honestly facing his problems in the light of our experience can recover, provided he does not close his mind to all spiritual principles... We find that no one need have difficulty with the spirituality of the program.”

If we take these words at face value, we could even say that those who say that finding a Higher Power is necessary are the ones who are misrepresenting what AA is about. Atheist groups don’t promote atheism, but there is blatant promotion of religious ideas in many AA groups. No one ever suggests that meetings whose members flagrantly endorse religious beliefs be banned from AA or removed from the schedule – unless there is some kind of obvious and formal affiliation with a particular religion.

There is no question that the storm surrounding atheist and agnostic meetings is a threat to AA unity, but it is important to look objectively at the question of who or what is actually causing the disunity. Truly understanding the traditions generally starts with self-examination. Does AA’s first tradition require atheists and agnostics to set aside our own personal needs for the sake of putting the common welfare first? Clearly, the very presence of atheists and agnostics is a disruption of AA’s status quo, but do atheists and agnostics owe AA unquestioning docility? Do we just need to not rock the boat and adopt the stance of going along to get along? It is easy to put the blame on atheists and agnostics, but where is the actual fault? Atheists and agnostics are not imposing anything on anyone. We just want to find a way to stay sober without having to abandon our own core values and understanding. Is AA unity so fragile that it can’t survive the admittance of a small handful of non-theists?

The paradox of AA unity is that it is strengthened rather than imperiled by the fellowship’s diversity. “We are,” the big book says, “people who normally would not mix.” Joining together with people whose political views and social values might well be abhorrent to me demands somehow

getting beyond or putting to one side my own perspectives on the world. As in the well-known folk story about the blind men and the elephant, none of us has the complete picture.

The peaceful coexistence of radically different viewpoints with regard to everything except one common goal, staying sober, is what AA unity is about.

Maintaining a balance between having confidence in my own approach and being open-minded with regard to other approaches often requires a considerable amount of work. That each of us is sometimes going to err on the side of our own obsessions is predictable. My life depends on having a "design for living" I know I can count on. My way may not be "the right way," but I should be thoroughly convinced that it is absolutely the right way for me; otherwise, my commitment will wither when I need it the most, in times of crisis.

That there is no one right way doesn't change the fact that my own sobriety depends on finding the right way for me and committing to do what it requires, no matter how uncomfortable it might get. There is wisdom in the AA truism, "If your home group is not the best group in the world, you need to find a new home group." Most people know enough to realize that this is meant wryly rather than literally. The point is that finding a right way that feels exactly right for me is not too much to demand. The difference between an imaginary right way for everybody and a necessary right way for me can be difficult to keep in mind, especially if finding a proven solution I can count on feels like a matter of life and death.

But if AA unity is not about enforced uniformity, what is it about? Unity that is entirely open-ended is meaningless. Viable communities are grounded in shared values. There is ultimately more to unity than glossing over irreconcilable differences.

Even though there is no one right way to recover from addiction, arriving at something of a consensus regarding the core of what holds us together is crucial. AA is a "we" program. Recovery is not a solitary undertaking. Personal freedom cannot come at the expense of the we of the program. The greatest threat to sobriety is for the recovery community to be at cross-purposes with itself. The first tradition says, "Our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends upon AA unity." And in the aptly titled chapter, "There Is a Solution," the Big Book says, "We have a way out on which we can absolutely agree, and upon which we can join in brotherly and harmonious action."

There are two basic components to the kind of unity upon which personal recovery depends. First, there is the absolute empathy and support that comes out of having survived the life-threatening affliction of alcoholism. Second, there is the willingness, no matter how deep our differences, to "join in brotherly and harmonious action." Our agreement is possible because we have discovered a spirit of brotherly and harmonious action anchored in the shared experience of having come through the harrowing challenge of a disease that wanted us in an institution or dead. The operative word in the phrase "on which we can absolutely agree" is "can." It does not say "must." It leaves the onus on us to reach out in a spirit of love and tolerance.

For most of us, our sobriety and our very lives depend on ultimately being able to put aside our differences and open ourselves to the unparalleled personal transformation that comes with the identification and support of "one alcoholic talking to another alcoholic." The solution for us is in being a part of a community whose shared identity is deeper than our differences, deeper even than what can be put into words, and certainly deeper than banner-carrying, slogan-quoting and quasi-religious conventionality. Attempts to define or circumscribe our collective identity always leave

something out. Focusing on anything that excludes or divides, like theological assertions, puts lives in jeopardy.

Unity is paramount, but it's a both/and proposition, both united around a single purpose and multi-faceted in its particulars, allowing for a diverse set of individual needs. There is a shedding of our "terminal uniqueness" but, at the same time, an embracing of "to thine own self be true," a principle which is not solely for use on medallions.

Realistically, it is inconceivable that the prevalence of god talk in AA is going to go away any time soon, but neither is the dilemma presented by atheists and agnostics showing up at AA. The number of persons needing an approach to sobriety that does not rely on a higher power is on the rise.

The only real solution is to work toward building a culture that can accommodate the needs of both theists and non-theists.

Theists may be uncomfortable with atheist/agnostic meetings, but there is far more real harm - not to mention the violation of AA principles and traditions - involved in needlessly placing obstacles in the path of an atheist who wants to get sober than is involved in ruffling the feathers of those with an apparently messianic zeal for God.

The true spirit of AA is to ensure that the hand of AA is always there to help anyone, anywhere get sober and maintain their sobriety. That is the unique and ultimate purpose of our traditions. Let us not amid the current brouhaha let anyone or anything cause us to lose track of that.

JHG lives in a part of Texas where The Bible Belt is somewhat softened by conservative Roman Catholicism. A long while back, he went to church to get clean and was miraculously transformed from a pot smoking heathen into a Christian alcoholic. His idea then of a promising geographic cure was to go to seminary, after which, he spent a number of years as a Methodist minister. Unable to control his drinking, he eventually arrived at what the Big Book calls "the jumping off place," the inability "to imagine life with or without alcohol." His introduction to the idea of finding his own higher power ultimately led to atheism. JHG learned the traditions the hardest way possible, by trying to get other people to follow them, an approach that somehow has nevertheless produced valuable insight into his own motives and designs. He has an atheist sponsor and is currently married to another atheist whom he met in AA.

*Published on [AA Agnostica](#)
09 February 2014*