



Common Sense Recovery:

**An Atheist's Guide to
Alcoholics Anonymous**

by Adam N.

Common Sense Recovery: An Atheist's Guide to Alcoholics Anonymous

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Preface

Sometimes I feel like a spy. It can be very exciting, kind of thrilling. But sometimes I feel alone, isolated. Unseen. Unheard. I am a member of two sub-cultures within the broader American culture in which I have been born and raised. Unfortunately, these two sub-cultures within which I currently dwell tend to be in direct opposition. First and foremost, I am a recovering alcoholic. Like so many of my kind, I have found freedom from my addiction to alcohol and other drugs through the sub-culture we call Alcoholics Anonymous. This culture has strong roots in Christian tradition, and places a heavy emphasis upon religious belief. For decades I have worked very hard, with an emphasis on the latter half of the third step, to get comfortable with some form of religious or spiritual way of seeing things. Try as I might, I could not succeed. In the end, I have found great peace of mind and happiness through being true to myself and accepting that I am an atheist. That is, I do not believe in God, or gods, or anything supernatural, and avoid like the plague the usage of vague and meaningless terms like god, spirit, spiritual, or higher power. This places me in a second sub-culture altogether, that of the non-believer.

So I am like a double agent. For years now I have had to act like an interpreter. I take the religious ideas and language of AA and translate it into atheistic language, language to which I can relate and which means something to me. I am the atheist embedded. I am surrounded by people who speak a foreign language and who might be vaguely, if not overtly, hostile were they to know my true thoughts. But I also find I am often more tolerant of religious thinking than many of my atheistic brethren. For one, I have studied and tried to walk the 'spiritual' path and have some empathy for their struggles. For another, I am sensitive to the fact that many of the life saving principles embodied in the twelve step recovery programs are borrowed or developed from religious sources. I have a great deal of respect for that. I do not hate religion per se. I just think it is outdated. It is time for us to move on, grow up. It is a very exciting time to be alive. I say that as a lover of science and scientific discovery, as an atheist and a lover of truth, and as the fortunate recipient of all the community building which modern technology enables and encourages. Very exciting time indeed!

So, one day I set out to clarify for myself exactly what the religiously laden language spoken within the rooms of AA meant to me, to translate it into atheistic, humanist terms. That is what this work is about. I sought primarily to clarify the core, operative principles which saved us all and kept us living, and to divorce them from the obfuscating religious language. Thus clarified, I could

sit in meetings or read 'approved' literature without getting ticked off, sidetracked by confusion, irritated, frustrated or resentful. I could just calmly translate the spiritualese into humanese, and get on with my own recovery. Writing this work helped strengthen me in terms of my sobriety, and my atheism as well.

I figured to write in obscurity until the worms ate me. Much to my surprise, it appears I am bound for some degree of exposure whilst still upright and ambulatory. This is perfect. Having just read *Coming Out Atheist*, I have been convinced by its author, Greta Christina, that we Atheists have a moral obligation to come out of the closet. This is especially true for those of us within the twelve step sub-culture. I genuinely believe that lives depend upon it, and that we are practising the twelfth step when, as Atheists, we challenge the status quo and, if only slightly, widen the doors of AA to those who may feel excluded or put off by the religious emphasis, but who still suffer from active addiction and alcoholism. So, as frightening as going public may be, I do so enthusiastically, with the heartfelt hope that my thoughts might be helpful to fellow atheists and agnostics as they make their way along their own life-saving and awe-inspiring path of recovery.

My Life in a Few Pages

My name is Adam. I am an alcoholic and a drug addict. I opened my first bar when I was 9 years old. It was constructed from Drambuie liqueur boxes and had "Adam's Bar" colorfully spray painted across the front. With my parent's blessings, a noteworthy hint of pride in fact, I mixed their Gin and Tonics, Rum and Cokes, Martini's to order, the whole shebang. Eventually I earned underground notoriety as the only bar in the U.S. Virgin Islands open on Good Friday.

When I later took to my own serious drinking, I never looked back. I'd never felt so much freedom from fear, self consciousness, and anxiety. I had never felt so good about myself, never fit in so well. I became a full time consumer, an alcoholic mid-level drug dealing teen in New York City's Central Park. Progression ensued, my dreams and ambitions and curiosity and motivation all washed away in an ever deepening sea of Jack Daniels, Rolling Rock and Heineken. The slide was greased with daily marijuana, occasional serious

hallucinogens, and an on-again-off-again furious obsession with cocaine. I escaped New York City just as heroin started to become the fad amongst my peers, later to find that it cut a wide swath of death and destruction through my posse of friends and acquaintances.

I was shipped by my loving family off to the sunny left coast, where I was supposed to continue my schooling. There, unsurprisingly, unoriginally, I majored in sex, drugs and rock-n-roll. In these I excelled. Unfortunately, the University of California failed to recognize my genius in these fields as academically pertinent. The inevitable bottom approached and, with everything falling apart and a rapidly expanding emptiness inside me, I was ready for change. It was at this point that I began to become consciously aware of personal 'powerlessness' at its most devastating. Having seriously made up my mind to change, I found myself entirely unable to do so! Every attempt to stop or moderate failed miserably. I cried to my Mommy and Daddy. Within a week I was on a plane, drinking those two or three sad, pointless, 'goodbye' beers, on my way to the deep frozen tundra of December Minnesota to the adolescent treatment ward at Hazelden.

My sober life began there, a new and entirely different life, with Alcoholics Anonymous at its core. Everything started to change. The boy who had been unable to go hours without a drink or a drug was OK with being completely clean and sober for days, weeks, months, years. The unemployed and unemployable juvenile delinquent became an excellent employee, quickly rising to trusted positions in management. No longer was I a constant drain on friends and family, a source of worry, someone to be avoided. Instead I became a loved, welcomed, useful member of family and society. The woman who had dumped me now married me. The angry, grungy boy who had scowled and spit at staring children on the streets of New York City now stayed at home to nurture and love three of his own, chasing them giggling around playgrounds, teaching them how to garden, dancing and singing with purple dinosaurs on TV, curling up and reading them bedtime stories at night. Neighborhood mothers entrusted him with their own little angels. From academic probation to Highest Honors; from cheater and philanderer to stable, reliable husband; from untrustworthy drunkard to good, trustworthy man.

This is a true story. This amazing transformation was entirely true and real, and entirely the effect of Alcoholics Anonymous in my life. Even more remarkable is the fact that, in AA, these stories are not so much remarkable as fairly common place.

But after twenty years of this good life, I grew tired of AA. I grew restless, irritable, and malcontent. I heard nothing new, had heard it all before, and was totally over it. Meetings just felt like a waste of my valuable time. The slogans ceased to be wise aphorisms and morphed into moronic truisms. Long lingering reservations were allowed to blossom. AA felt more and more like a cult of the simple minded, shot through with an unspoken hive agreement to genially submit to mindless dogma, to willingly accept fairy tales as profound truths. I had struggled with and tolerated and attempted to translate the religious language into something I could relate to for half my adult life. But the distance grew and grew. Alcoholics Anonymous, with its god-this and spirit-that, came to feel more like an unnecessary burden than a life saving necessity. I ceased to relate, dissecting and critically analyzing my way right out of the life raft that had saved me from certain death.

At first, rationalizations worked fine. I was in service to others, caring for kids and family all day long. The teachings of AA were, in fact, deeply imbedded within me. I remained clean and sober for three years with no meetings, no sponsors, no Big Book, and no real work with other alcoholics. But slowly, imperceptibly, I began to change. Self pity, depression and anger and cynicism began to dominate my life. I was a sitting duck. With no defence against that first drink or drug, it was only a matter of time before something happened. And then something happened.

What followed was a torturous year and a half of active alcohol and narcotics addiction. Bad for me. Maybe even worse for my loving sister and family, for my wife, who had known only a sober husband for our entire marriage, and for our three teenage children, who had never known their father to take a single drink, much less be a stumbling, nodding, slurring, embarrassing drunkard. Newfound levels of despair and hopelessness coupled with the familiar misery of old. I dragged my embarrassed, prideful ass back into AA on numerous occasions. From respected old timer to pathetic newcomer – the shame was beyond description. But the disease was too strong. Once again I faced the reality of my own powerlessness. I could not stop. I'd stay sober days, weeks, even months, but eventually succumb to the lies screaming in my head, drowning out the 'program's' teachings. The overwhelming demons could only be quieted by my concession to their destructive commands. Once again I'd enjoin the futile pursuit of chemical well being, chasing the happiness I imagined was only available in pill and powder, herb and bottle.

The experience was positively medieval. I could almost see the demons that owned me, each day growing stronger, louder, larger. Meanwhile the angels who had guided me for so long grew smaller, weaker, receded cowering into

the shadows. Overpowering obsession coupled with an unending justificatory monologue in my head, literally forcing me to drink. I could not stop. I was powerless.

Finally, I surrendered myself to a local treatment facility, locked down for 30 days away from temptation, in order to break the cycle. There I re-awakened and began once again to employ the principles of recovery that had guided me for so much of my life. I reentered AA once again, deep into middle age, a newcomer yet an old timer, yet neither. I came back with the best attitude an arrogant, over-educated, self loathing narcissist could muster. Repetition was fine. Simple slogans were fine. Whatever you told me to do, I'd do. I worked the steps again, surrender and self reflection and confession and restitution.

But, while my two decades and more of sobriety had been filled with excellence and goodness, I believe I had held something in reserve all along. I am, when all is said and done, an atheist. Once again god, spirituality and religion were front and center in my life, screaming at me from every page in the *Big Book*. This time around I fully awakened to the fact that, in spite of decades of effort to change, I was, in my heart of hearts, a non-believer. This struggle to be something I was not was at the heart of my relapse. I mouthed the religious language of AA, I talked the talk. But at a very basic, core level, I was never able to buy it hook, line and sinker.

The Atheist Embedded

Like it or not, the religious viewpoint predominates in Alcoholics Anonymous. An honest reading of the primary text is enough to convince anyone. The chapter entitled We Agnostics, for example, is not a welcome embrace so much as a sales pitch intended to draw non-believers gently into the fold, towards the inevitable end of their being convinced. The stated goal of the book is to guide us toward the kind of spiritual awakening which will solve our drink problem and put us on a better path. From the point of view of the more devout religious members, this means to get us to god consciousness.

Hard as it might be to tell based solely upon my arrogant, atheistic ranting, I have seriously tried throughout my life to put on religious garb. I have lived and worked all twelve steps, numerous times, reciting the various step-prayers associated with them for decades; gone to numerous Catholic retreats; joined Unitarian churches; studied Buddhist belief, behavior, written word and visual art; practised yoga and meditation; read Aquinas and Anselm, Tillich, Buber, Thich Nhat Hanh and many more, studiously immersed myself in every drop of approved AA literature and recovery oriented self-help works, from Emmet Fox to *The Road Less Traveled*, that I could get my hands on; practised daily prayer and meditation for years; prayed to icons of Sakyamuni & Maitreya, Saint Francis, Jesus Christ, The Christian Cross, to giant redwoods, the ocean, to door knobs, and, perhaps most importantly, the ever infamous Porcelain God. You name it, I've tried it.

In spite of my very best efforts, I am unable to be convinced of god, spirit or soul. Perhaps that formative first decade of life, being raised from birth in an entirely atheistic environment, was definitive. But, fortunately, I am in good company. Many excellent and devout persons, from Milarepa to Muhammad to Mother Theresa, have grappled with faith, have struggled with doubt. Many good and wise people have also given up the struggle, have contentedly embraced life as non-believers. What I am proposing is the unconditional acceptance of this latter alternative. This is the viewpoint with which I am most comfortable, which seems right to me.

Don't get me wrong: I love Alcoholics Anonymous. I truly believe it is the best game in town, as far as beating alcoholism and drug addiction is concerned. Today I am a grateful, active and involved participant, having attended AA meetings for over half my life. Yet I have always grappled with the religious components of AA. At best it's been 'fake it till you make it'. Yet all along I've been plagued by the nagging sense that I had joined a mind numbing cult whose membership requires a 40 point drop in IQ.

I have been able to achieve lasting sobriety through AA. But I have had to do a lot of reading between the lines along the way. I've had to make sense of religious language. Like a spy forced to remain in a foreign land, I've had to learn the interpretive skills necessary to survive, to understand their experience in light of my own. I've become adept at translating what is said so that it makes sense from a humanistic, secular and scientific point of view.

The following is a series of reflections based upon my years of experience as an atheist embedded in Alcoholics Anonymous. My claim is that god is optional,

not required, for a successful recovery program. But you will get seriously chewed out by some well meaning, protective old timers if you talk like this at an AA meeting. The fact that the thoughts that I am articulating here would be considered blasphemous if spoken aloud at a meeting, well, that's why I'm writing this essay. My hope is to see atheism normalized within the recovery community. Atheism should not be stigmatized. We should not have to hide our beliefs, to 'come out of the closet' and risk being ostracized. But the truth is that atheism is mostly just tolerated. The most common response we encounter is a charitable smirk implying that, if we hang on long enough, we will eventually "come to believe" as the theists do.

A further point worth considering, however, is whether we might be more effectively of service, reach more suffering alcoholics. We might save more lives. There may be millions of alcoholics and addicts out there suffering and dying while we sit comfortably in the rooms of AA proclaiming its effectiveness. I will not cite the various studies which have thrown this confidence into doubt. The reader can easily find them for him or herself. Suffice to say that, as a matter of fact, the number of alcoholics who come to AA and remain long term is much smaller than the number of potential members who stay away from AA altogether, or who come to AA and don't 'get it'. If we truly care about the alcoholics who still suffer, if we truly wish to be of service to others, we have an obligation to be open-minded about exactly what message we are carrying, its effectiveness and accessibility.

I firmly believe that, while the religious emphasis may indeed be beneficial for some, it sends away at least as many as it saves. Many of these go on to suffer the horrid fate, the 'hell' if you like, that only addicts and alcoholics can know. We sober members remain in the rooms, patting each others' backs, consoling ourselves with the thought that the man or woman will return 'when they are ready'. 'If the god thing scares them away, alcohol will beat them back', we like to say.

We also like to say 'If it ain't broke, don't fix it'. But don't such self-congratulatory recitations merely serve to salve our feelings, consoling those few of us who do 'get it' so that we do not have to face the hard, stark possibility that recovery methodology might be made roomier, more all inclusive? If god is truly optional, we may be unnecessarily turning away people who need and want what we have. We then compound this sin by consoling ourselves with the a posteriori rationalization that 'they weren't ready yet'. As recovering alcoholics, certainly we are familiar with this process of erring, then subsequently rationalizing our behavior. This was a primary

modus operandi for us for years, and we all know it did not automatically cease when we put the plug in the jug.

In spite of my ego, I am not one to say that all this talk about god, religion or spirituality is right or wrong. What the hell do I know, really? I am simply sharing my experience as a non-believer in my efforts to make sense of and employ the main concepts and practices. I write this essay as a project to help me get clear on all of this for myself, to come to terms with the gap. But, as I write, I gain hope that others will be aided by this interpretive narrative, that these kinds of thoughts might make the contemporary recovery methodology more accessible to those who are similarly unable to buy the religious slant of Alcoholics Anonymous.

Spiritual Caulk and The Great Puppeteer in The Sky

One of the most profound insights I've discovered in atheist literature is that god concepts serve the purpose of filling in gaps in our knowledge. 'Miracles' like lightening and earthquakes and sudden changes in personalities were considered inexplicable. In order to satisfy the natural human hunger for explanation deities were invoked. To this day god serves the same purpose. Simply put, when we do not understand how something works, we chalk it up to god. God serves as a metaphysical caulk, a generic all purpose filler that effectively fills in the gaps in our understanding.

One time at an AA meeting at San Francisco's 1010 Valencia I heard a woman talk about a ride on a city bus. She was fairly new to sobriety, feeling pretty shaky at the time. As she rode the city bus she looked up and, there on the seat directly before her, she recognized a fellow member of AA. This chance encounter and their subsequent interaction helped her through a difficult time. She interpreted this as a miracle. She described it as 'god working in her life', a very common expression in the rooms of AA.

This is what I have come to refer to, yes, somewhat derisively I confess, as the puppeteer god. It refers to the idea that god arranges worldly matters to reinforce our AA lifestyle, to miraculously guide our 'spiritual' development. This god is very helpful, offers us numerous opportunities for growth, but never gives us more than we can handle. On good days god even finds us

parking places when we are on the verge of being late for some important event, like an AA meeting or a job interview. The puppeteer also likes to miraculously inspire our sponsor to call us just when we most need to hear from him or her. I understand the comfort such beliefs bring. A safe, orderly world. Like a household in which a caring, attentive parent oversees all.

But I wondered as she spoke, hadn't this other fellow been on that bus before? Undoubtedly when she was still 'in her cups', that same rider was right there, sitting before her unnoticed. In fact that very same rider might have been sitting across the way, waving a Big Book directly in her face just the day before! But she would have been unable to acknowledge this fortuitous encounter and all the mutual good that it afforded. Wasn't the difference, the real deal maker in this scenario, our speaker's newfound willingness to perceive and imbue with value this most excellent opportunity for enhancing her recovery? Wasn't her newfound openness and willingness really the crux of the matter, regardless of theistic interpretations?

I find it very difficult to relate to the sharing of AA members whose Higher Power arranges the world to fix them. They utilize god to fill in the void in their understanding when interesting and impressive things happen in their lives. To me this just smacks of mental laziness. I feel very uncomfortable in meetings where this sort of thing takes place. I think they are dismissing the power of genuine willingness in their lives, denigrating the incredible capacity of humans to embrace change and transform for the better.

If you choose to interpret recovery experiences in this way, you are left with some inexplicable and particularly onerous implications. For example, why did god not similarly come to the rescue of Freddy, or Jim, or Alice, or Tom? Each of them has relapsed and are now out stumbling drunk or shooting up in an alley somewhere! Why did the puppeteer not come to their aid? Is there a merit system involved? Is it karma? Unlikely to be the case, as we all know assholes who have been spared, yet sweethearts who have succumbed.

I believe that the real work in our bus rider's life is being done largely by her newfound attitude. She is open to solutions and opportunities to grow her recovery that, prior to this time, she could not even have recognized. She is ready for new, life changing experiences that could move her forever away from the needle and the bottle, and instead towards sober well being. This mindset, of open-mindedness and willingness, is essential to recovery. Theistic interpretations are not. And it is this newfound mindset that's really doing the heavy lifting here. Not god.

Courage to Change

Prayer and meditation are among the most obvious examples of definitively religious practices considered essential to recovery. This morning, ironic though it may be, I prayed before returning to these blasphemous writings. Why? Because I need a daily restoration to sanity and this activity is a learned and habitual component in that process.

But the heavy lifting in prayer is not done by anything outside of us. The puppeteer deity does not meet our requests, or deny them, or even hear them. Through prayer and meditation we make fundamental changes to ourselves. It is an act of commitment and re-commitment to a new set of values. But there is nothing that is literally miraculous involved, no outside deity at work. Praying for people, places and things does nothing to affect the people, places or things in question. What it can do is change us, and thereby our relationships with the people, places and things in question. What prayer does is simply change our thinking, our emotions, our action choices, and thereby everything about our relationships with the rest of the world.

AA members often jest that we should be careful what we ask for. A common interpretation is that, when you begin to pray for something, to ask god for something, god will present you with opportunities to develop or earn that thing. Say, for example, you discover in your inventory process that you suffer from impatience. Recognizing this as a defect in your character, you subsequently pray for increased patience. The popular mythology in AA is that, at this point, god will place before you a frustrating series of circumstances intended to shine a spotlight on your impatience. "Our higher power presents us with opportunities for growth." Having become ready to have this defect removed, god now tests, or forges, us through exposure to temptation. That god gives us what we need in order to allow us the opportunity to develop our character is a historically common theistic interpretation.

But it is fairly easy to see how a non-believer, or conversely, if you will, one who believes in human potential, can interpret such experiences as simply highlighting our newfound sensitivity and awareness, along with our newfound willingness to change. Occam's Razor, or the Law of Parsimony, suggests that, all other things being equal, we should employ that explanation which posits

the least extra parts, as it were. Certainly employing supernatural deities to explain straightforward psychological and social phenomenon directly conflicts with this most common sense philosophical principle.

Consider, for example, the sixth and seventh steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. These prescribe for us that we become willing to have god remove all of our defects of character and humbly ask him to do so. If we work the steps with genuine honesty, open-mindedness and a willingness to change, we will have come to identify our negative tendencies and reached a state of willingness to change. From here on out, if we are genuinely interested in changing, we will be hyper-aware of these traits and their consequences in our daily life. This newfound sensitivity to both the trait and its impact on self and society are sufficient, when coupled with an awareness of viable alternatives, to fully explain the process.

This is what happens when we identify problematic tendencies (steps 4 & 5), and subsequently become willing to change (steps 6 & 7). Through this process of honest and critical self reflection we are now more acutely aware both of the behavioral propensities and of their negative effects upon self and society. We have heightened our awareness and see these things at work in our lives with greater honesty than ever before. Most of us are aware that some practice is then required, as we strive daily to employ different behaviors when the occasion arises to do so. In this manner we slowly but surely change our habits of word and deed regarding the problematic behavior.

$$\begin{array}{c} \text{An introduction to viable alternative attitudes and actions} \\ + \\ \text{A genuine willingness to change} \\ + \\ \text{The passage of time} \\ = \\ \text{All the defect removal we need!} \end{array}$$

The result of this process is that we can be significantly transformed. Some defects are removed quickly and easily, perhaps because they are directly correlated with using behaviors. These fall to the wayside as physical sobriety begins. But many defects of character we must grapple with slowly over time. Willingness to change includes being honest enough to identify the defects, to

face their effects on ourselves and those around us, to see the daily flare-ups, to learn alternative attitudes and actions from our fellowship or literature, and then to practice the implementation of those alternative methods in our daily lives. On this 'one day at a time' basis we experience slow, yet certain, incremental change. We gain nothing by understanding these profound transformations as dependent upon theistic intervention. In fact, we may be inclined to take less responsibility, to wait for the miracle rather than work for the change.

Sometimes a genuine spirit of willingness will create moments of inspiration, moments of sudden change. This, too, should come as no surprise. These rapid changes are miraculous, indeed, in the sense that they are often life changing and profound. But whether the change is slow and incremental or sudden and immediate, neither requires theistic interpretation. In fact, by so doing, we may be denigrating the amazing and wondrous capacity of humans to change for the better. Perhaps taking the blame for the bad, while giving god credit for the good, is an antiquated and counter-productive tradition.

The changes brought about by a life in AA can indeed seem profound, even miraculous. We are surprised. One day we could think of nothing but alcohol or drugs, and would obsessively, energetically and compulsively shape our lives around the need to use them constantly, regardless of the horrendous damage done to ourselves and to those around us. The next day (seemingly) we are caring, sober, responsible, unselfish and kind people, almost entirely transformed. We do not recognize that there is within us this capacity for transformation which is perfectly and entirely explicable on humanistic grounds. Because the change is beyond our understanding, we apply the spiritual caulk, the fill-all in our understanding that is 'god'. But the caulk is not needed. Miracles happen every day. I know. I am one of them. If you are reading this, you are probably one too! But god is not required to make sense of them. In fact, in so doing, we denigrate and belittle our own innate capacity for transformation and positive change.

Straight From the Book

In the beginning, there were no twelve steps...

In the eighth story of the book *Alcoholics Anonymous*, titled *He Sold Himself Short*, the author enumerates the “Six-Step program” of recovery (263)! This is what our founders did to get and stay well. Much of this was gleaned from the Oxford Groups. The allegedly divinely inspired twelve steps were in fact no more than an elaboration on these six fundamental principles. They were not handed down from god, but were simply the result of human reflection and the distilled experience (pun intended) of a bunch of sobered up drunks.

The six fundamental principles of recovery are:

1. Complete deflation.
2. Dependence and guidance from a Higher Power.
3. Moral Inventory.
4. Confession.
5. Restitution.
6. Continued work with other alcoholics.

These describe actions and attitudes which have been essential to my enjoying a sustainable, useful, and contented sobriety. Their importance cannot be overstated. The emphasis upon religion, on the contrary, can be and generally is overstated. The most interesting thing about this list is the absence of a strictly religious emphasis. Higher power is mentioned once. In my view this is easily reconcilable with a secular view, as we learn to depend upon and accept guidance from our fellow AA's, sponsors, and the wisdom of the larger fellowship as a whole. On the other hand, God, higher power, “Him” and spiritual awakening are specified 10 times in the twelve steps of AA!

Also from the book...

Towards the end of the chapter titled Into Action we find some more important new actions and attitudes. Paragraphs beginning with “On awakening...”, “As we go through the day...”, and “When we retire at night...” offer up very specific, applicable reminders, gleaned from our collective experience, of how we might handle life better than we had prior to getting sober. For example, upon awakening we are to ask that our thinking be

“divorced from self-pity, dishonest or self seeking motives.” (86) Since being introduced to this practice I have regularly done this, but again suggest that maybe my willingness to consistently cultivate and affirm these laudable standards is the active ingredient. Prayer serves as a deep reminder and affirmation of such newfound values. I need to re-commit to these on a regular basis, often multiple times a day. Similarly, I need to “pause, when agitated or doubtful”, (87) cultivating a mental state of surrender and acceptance, in order to avoid acting upon selfish, fearful or otherwise destructive impulses.

This one small section of the *Big Book* lays out some profoundly valuable and immanently practical advice for us. When we live this way, we are very different people with very different lives. How many active addicts go to bed constructively reviewing their day to determine where they had been “resentful, selfish, dishonest or afraid” in order to repair the damage and do differently next time? (86) I distinctly recall maudlin tears and pitiful sobbing pleas for forgiveness, but nothing even remotely resembling a calm moment of prudent self reflection! Being a hard-core blackout drinker, I had many mornings when I came to with absolutely no recollection of the previous night’s events. But I would be willing to bet that I had not spent the latter minutes of my evening ‘constructively reviewing’ my day in any coherent or productive sense!

I read or recall this particular section on an almost daily basis. It is of the utmost importance to my continued recovery, from the way I start my day, through the reminders to pause, to clearing myself of selfish motives, being open to insight and inspiration, all the way to the constructive self reflection when my head hits the pillow at night. Bill W. and the authors of the original text make numerous references to god in these instructional pages. These are just a couple of examples. Many more could be outlined. But I believe that the conclusions would all be the same. The important, operative principles, though at one time associated with god, religion or spirituality, are all strong enough to stand on their own. And it is these operative principles, devoid of theistic interpretations, which should be our focus.

Fake It Till You Make It

When I was a fairly young sprite in recovery, with only 4 or 5 years clean and sober, my sponsor, known as ‘Spiritual’ Ed, introduced me to the Stag 12 X 12 group. There I found the kind of crusty old timers so definitive of Alcoholics Anonymous. A mere youth in my mid 30’s, I found myself surrounded by 50, 60, 70 year old geezers who had been sober as long as I had been alive. And there, hanging on the wall of that hallowed yet dingy meeting hall, I found the following saying:

“We cannot think our way into right living, But we can live our way into right thinking.”

This simple statement encompasses one of the essential principles of sustained recovery. As irreligious as this may sound, much of recovery simply boils down to behavioral conditioning. We are what we do. The most important way to change character traits is to consistently practice different behaviors. This is true regardless of our mental state. The thoughts and motivations behind our behaviors will follow suit, given time and consistent effort. This is the gist of the common AA expression “Fake it till you make it.”

The most obvious example is, of course, that treatment for alcoholism primarily consists of not taking the first drink. If we can do this long enough, the cravings weaken until they are merely thoughts. Then the thoughts, too, weaken, so long as we do not let them build a nest or put down roots. They come with less frequency, with less intensity, until one day we realize that they have been replaced by a new and different set of thoughts, values, beliefs and behaviors. We find that we have recovered from a seemingly hopeless state of mind and body. The drink problem has been solved.

When I have experienced thoughts or cravings, I have been much consoled by the realization that, if I choose not to nurture or act upon the thought or craving, it will begin to diminish in both frequency and intensity. This gives me hope for the future. I guess you could say I believe in this empirical fact, I have faith in this observable, measurable phenomenon. At some point, days, weeks, or months down the road, the haunting demons will wither and atrophy from disuse until they are essentially impotent. And as long as I maintain a lifestyle which encourages continued recovery, they need never again regain their once dominant status.

Now that this fundamental problem has been solved, we alcoholics and addicts are freed, readied and empowered to apply this simple secular recipe for change to all the other areas of our life. Do the next right thing for long enough

and, sure enough, your thoughts, desires and values can all be radically transformed.

Science is Not a Four Letter Word

A lot has been learned since Bill and Bob first met. I like to think that they did not so much set things in stone as set them in motion. We would be doing ourselves and all the suffering alcoholics, now and in the future, in and out of the rooms, a huge disservice if we failed to recognize the ways in which a rapidly expanding body of knowledge might enhance our efforts. So, for example, there is an ever growing body of scientific data to support the view that positive thinking and associated actions can literally re-wire our brains circuitry.

I am not an expert on the subject matter, and this is not going to be a science paper. But let's consider just one important area of investigation which will suggest the kind of exploration I think we have an obligation to pursue. Recent findings in the neuro-sciences suggest that the human brain is more malleable than once thought to be. Our experiences can actually rewire our 'plastic' brain! Simply, when we form habits of behavior, such as drinking or any of the destructive habits of thought associated with the alcoholic lifestyle, we forge strong pathways in our brain, neural connections that are reinforced over and over again, becoming stronger and stronger each time we repeat the patterns of thought and behavior.

The good news is that change is possible. The even better news is that positive change, consistently different thoughts and actions, will re-wire our neural pathways, literally changing our brains structure. The more we engage in the new behavior, the more that particular set of neurons fires together and wires together. The new connections, perhaps very tenuous at first, grow stronger and stronger with each reinforcing positive thought and activity. Meanwhile, the old pathway literally begins to atrophy from non use. The old habits fade, while the new ones become stronger and stronger with each repetition!

I find it encouraging that we have this growing body of evidence supporting many of our traditional teachings. Repeated alternate behavior choices can actually restructure our mental map. 'Fake it till you make it' is scientifically verifiable! 'Living our way into right thinking' is not a mere slogan on the wall, but an empirically verifiable technique for altering our brain chemistry and, thereby, our entire lives. How encouraging to know that, as hard as it may be at first to have an 'attitude of gratitude', habitually cultivating one through practice and repetition can, over time, literally change the way we see the world at the most basic level!

One of the more influential books I have ever read in my own personal recovery is Chuck C.'s *A New Pair of Glasses*. Amongst many other insights, the book offered up the idea that god was in fact, simply, a new way of seeing the world, a new pair of glasses. This idea is suggested throughout the *Big Book*. The whole point of the AA experience is to initiate a "psychic change" (xxix), one which will "revolutionize our whole attitude toward life" and "toward our fellows". (25) (Here, as in many places, I intentionally edit out references to god, spirit or higher power. This is a main thrust of my insight: that many of these tools and concepts stand alone, independent of obfuscating religious language.) They may no longer be with us, but I suspect that Bill & Bob, Carl Jung, Dr. Silkworth & Chuck C. would all have been impressed by the correlation between this focus on a new pair of glasses and contemporary findings in the brain and behavioral sciences.

So, scientific findings support our experience: we can act our way into right thinking. We can ultimately enjoy lasting, whole scale changes in our personalities through seemingly small, incremental changes in behavior. Every time we experience a desire to drink and, instead, go to an AA meeting, call a friend or work with a newcomer, we weaken that demon and strengthen that angel. We do the next right thing and, at some point, we realize that all these slow incremental steps have produced a significant, 'miraculous' transformation. Our brain is literally being rewired, slowly but surely reprogrammed.

The AA tradition is to call this kind of change 'spiritual' for two reasons. First, because of tradition! This sort of personal transformation, prior to the last couple hundred years of human history at least, was generally considered the sole province of religion, the handiwork of angels and deities. Secondly, the caulk again. We find the radical change inexplicable, so we apply the magic, one-size-fits-all explaining power of theism as a metaphysical caulk in order to satisfy the never ending human thirst for understanding.

Again, these responses are not only unnecessary; they are demeaning and disempowering in a very important sense. Our recovery is not up to angels, demons or gods. It is up to us. We are responsible for taking the necessary actions that ensure the necessary changes which make for lasting, contented sobriety. Furthermore, supernatural explanations such as this give the false impression that we know all we need to about the phenomenon in question. As such, they tend to stand in direct conflict with the kind of curiosity and exploration which will grow the recovery sciences and our understanding of the relevant social and psychological processes.

The Real Higher Power

The most miraculous and inexplicable force at work in Alcoholics Anonymous may be fellowship itself. Even the most devoutly religious members depend upon our society, upon the power of the group. Often they will describe their fellow AA's, in a typical example of religious interpretation, as the mouthpiece through which god speaks to them. The fellowship is understood as a mere vehicle, or as a temporary expedient to be replaced by the real Higher Power when the newcomer finally 'comes to'. But the experience of most recovering alcoholics is that what guides and sustains us on a day by day basis is peer support, empathy, mentor guidance, and the emotional reinforcement of group membership. In short, what keeps us sober from day to day is fellowship.

Consider these three suggestions, probably the most common ones made to an alcoholic who is suffering:

1. Go to a meeting
2. Call your sponsor
3. Work with another alcoholic

What do all three have in common? They all entail immersion in the society of recovering peers, a meaningful connection with our newfound tribe. Reams of data from social psychology, evolutionary biology and a host of other disciplines attest to the essential role played by peer groups and societies in determining both our values and our action choices, in shaping our thoughts and behaviors. Scientifically, mounting evidence suggests that the social group is the source of an important kind of basic emotional nurturance that is fulfilling to tribal hominids such as we at a most fundamental level. Our brain evolved to be exactly what it now is over the course of 5 million years spent in small, familial tribes, within which complete immersion and total dependence were essential for our very survival. We are, at our core, not so much individual animals as we are pack members. Gathering in fellowship is the most important practical tool we have borrowed from religion and the church. But,

in the end, the power of the group is undoubtedly a little less miraculous, and a little more explicable, than once thought.

The tribe functions as the disseminator and teacher, the source of encouragement and reinforcement, that which empowers the addict to live a better life on a daily basis. The fellowship offers new ideas, role models who practice them, wise guidance and counsel, reinforcement of values and goals, and essential emotional rewards to its members. It empowers us to practice new and different behaviors until they become new and different habits. As time passes our membership within the tribe is the source of life enriching friendships. But it also becomes an important source of a newfound sense of value and purpose as, over time, we transform into seasoned members who reap significant benefits from passing guidance and support on to the next member in need. This life sustaining mutual exchange is a huge part of recovery. It builds a web which sustains us all, a web of support that is fundamentally tribal. Our lives are saved, shaped and defined by the herd. We survive by running with the pack. The fellowship is the most tangible instantiation of a 'higher power' in our lives. I would argue that we need seek no further.

For humans, isolation is death. Community is life. We overestimate the value of religious belief and faith in god: in fact the community of fellows is the vehicle, whether it is church, temple, ashram, therapy group, mosque, sangha, a meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous, or the meeting after the meeting. Keep in mind how miserable and close to disaster Bill Wilson was in spite of his life changing experience at Towns Hospital. AA lore unwisely exaggerates his alleged spiritual experience. This was, in all probability, merely a side effect of the quasi-toxic, hallucinogenic Belladonna Cure being administered at the time. But when Bill went out into the world and engaged with other alcoholics, he ultimately found what he was looking for. It was not more white light, or god, or a higher power that he found, but a drunken country doctor named Bob. The lasting good they created is a society of peers who gain strength in numbers, loving support from each other, and wisdom from their collective experience.

For hundreds of years Euro-American thinking has been largely Hobbesian, by which I mean that we have a tendency to think of ourselves as individuals in a war of all against all. Of necessity, such excessively individualistic archetypes give rise to social contract theories. That is, we separate, warring individuals need something to come between us, to grease the social wheels, to ensure group cohesion. Morality is generally thought of as a variation on this social

construct, by which we surrender selfish preferences in a compromise to retain a mutually beneficial social order.

But we are in a historically transitional period. Across a wide range of disciplines the Hobbesian view is being challenged. In the replacement paradigm we are no longer intrinsically selfish, with externally imposed, contractual forces serving to mitigate our otherwise unfettered covetous nature. We are, in fact, equally motivated by pro-social impulses from within. This school of thought is an offshoot of the insights of none other than Charles Darwin himself, amongst others, who observed that sympathy was a fundamental human emotion. Moral emotions, pro-social hunger, dependence upon the tribe, all of these things are hard wired into us. We are as much inclined to cooperation as we are to competition. We may be innately aggressive, yet we are similarly predisposed to empathy and sympathy, compassion and cooperation. Individual powerlessness and dependence on the group are as definitive of who we are as is our much vaunted individuality.

If there is any truth to these thoughts, and an ever expanding body of scientific findings suggests that there is, we might come to some important conclusions. One is that immersion in fellowship offers us exactly the life sustaining support we need, feeding us at a core level, bringing us an increased sense of personal value, purpose, emotional fulfilment and peace of mind. Rejoining the herd may be more scientifically life changing than old school thinkers would have it. The kindling, or rekindling, of essentially human pro-social emotions is a large part of what we call recovery. Of course, recovery in this sense is a great deal more than putting the plug in the jug. It is about creating, or recreating, ourselves as comfortable members of a flock and, as such, comfortable human beings. In short, by gathering in herds and caring, in giving and cultivating an unselfish mentality, in becoming a part of, we are nurturing an essential aspect of ourselves as pack animals. We experience this in the fellowship of AA, and this extends out into 'all our affairs', which means, of course, into the various families, tribes, packs and communities of which we are members.

Religious tradition often depicts humanity as the source of all evil, while god is the source of all good. In any AA meeting around the country you can hear people mirror this view. We see 'self will' as the source of all our troubles. But, when something really good motivates or befalls us, we are quick to give the credit to god. Whether religious or secular in its structure, this kind of thinking is just a variation on the aforementioned paradigm: humans are intrinsically selfish, weak or bad, while all good and healthy motivations come from outside of us, whether by some form of social contract or via the benevolent intercession of a supreme being.

I would like to suggest that we challenge this self destructive viewpoint. Instead, let us recognize that a hunger for the good is an essential part of being human. God didn't invent AA or write the twelve steps. Desperate, hopeful humans did. God didn't bring us to AA. We came, beaten and bedraggled, because some unfulfilled part of us hungered for something better. God doesn't fix us. Immersion in fellowship, simple rules for right living, and our willingness to change are the things that fix us. And these things restore us to a sanity and balance that is completely, naturally human in every way.

Ears and Sows

Honesty, Open-mindedness and Willingness to change are said to be the indispensable keys to recovery. H.O.W. has become most popular, as in "HOW it works". But this common expression of definitive values may be the result of nothing more than our curious obsession with acronyms. Sit in the rooms of AA long enough and somewhere along the line you are going to get your fill of acronyms. But surrender is key, too. Why not the SHOW of recovery? This would most certainly apply to a number of our more character filled meetings! Why do we not praise S.O.W.? Unfortunately, most of us would agree that The SOW of Recovery just doesn't have the right ring to it.

Nonetheless, surrender is indispensable. This is the first of the six steps discussed earlier, the 'complete deflation'. We addicts experience key moments in which the limitations of self will are recognized, consciously or not. An honest willingness to face our hindering self-faith arises. We enter a psychological state of newfound openness in which we become willing to let go of long held beliefs, prejudices, and opinions. Generally a result of some form of personal calamity, hitting bottom with either the bottle or with some character defect running amok in our lives, such moments of extreme duress and the subsequent recognition of limitation are sometimes followed by surrender. Open-mindedness is intimately connected with surrender. They are both aspects of a transformative willingness, or willingness to transform, that is at the heart of recovery. These are all key aspects of hitting bottom, and subsequently embracing recovery, which are entirely explicable on secular grounds.

This hopeless condition and subsequent surrender is not the entire picture, however. Into this darkness a ray of light needs to shine. Most of us experience this in human form, generally another member of AA. Somewhere along the line we encountered some person or group of persons who had stopped the madness, maybe changed a bit for the better. These fellow humans are the seeds planted in our minds, waiting for the rains of despair to nurture them. Ebby T. was Bill's seed, Bill was Bob's, and so on down the line to you and me. This is how most of us come to AA. When we finally get here it is human sponsors and human filled meetings and literature written by humans which guides us towards the light of recovery. The fellowship of AA is the life preserver which comes to our aid, prevents us from drowning in our sea of despair. God, religion and spirit just muddy the waters. Did I mention that we also love metaphors?

Surrender is just one of the key elements in our toolkit. Many of these Essential Attributes of Recovery, we'll call them the E.A.R. just for fun, are traditionally associated with religion. But these EAR's can be understood independent of religious belief. Consider, as a thought experiment, those 'religious' persons you have known who fail to display the 'spiritual' characteristics of humility or open-mindedness. Certainly each of us has encountered religiously devout members who are stubborn, too self assured, close minded. Some embody the exact opposite of our essential qualities of H.O.W.! Conversely, consider more secular persons you know who embody the E.A.R., independent of any religious belief. Certainly you know some very humble, honest, open-minded persons who, now that you think of it, have never uttered a word about god, spirit or higher power.

Another E.A.R. we need to cultivate in order to successfully change our lives is humility. As may have occurred to you, this is also one I need to continue developing! But I know enough to say that humility is, on a simple level, merely awareness of the fact that, alone, we are weak. On our own most of us are unable to overcome a problem with the crippling magnitude of addiction. However, with the support of the society of recovery-oriented persons, our newfound tribe, we tap into a greater power which allows us both to get sober, and also to get on with the process of making the needed positive changes in our lives.

Humility entails the ability to truly know that we do not know, to be open to new ideas, practices, and beliefs. Bill Wilson himself, in the *Big Book* itself, says that we know but little, and suggests we have an open mind to new developments which will guide us in our recovery. Ironically, the more devout, religious members are often the ones who have the biggest problem with this

sort of humility. This is not coincidental. Religious thinking tends to stand in direct conflict with the kind of exploratory, curious thinking which, in my opinion, should be an important part of our lives as recovering persons. The more religious members I know tend to be overconfident in their beliefs, certain they are right about them, and sure that the rest of us must ultimately come around to their way of thinking if we wish to get things right.

Worse still, theists tend to believe their answers settle the important questions once and for all, bringing an end to the need for any further inquiry whatsoever. This is not humility. Humility is genuinely believing that we know only a little. Humility is not a perspective which leads us into a mental cul-de-sac, but an open road stretching to the horizon. It leads not to overconfidence but to curiosity, wonder, and a thirst for exploration. We should be very interested in how we might better understand the recovery process, especially when we reflect on just how many of our brothers and sisters relapse or never get clean in the first place.

Surrender and humility are foundations for changing old patterns and replacing them with new ones. A willingness to do things differently arises. Inspired by the pain of desperation, these newly heightened psychological states, this *SHOW*, is where the true work is taking place. At first, this willingness expresses in simple things, like following directions: go to meetings, don't drink between meetings, get a sponsor, work the steps. Over time the meaning of surrender deepens and broadens to include a lasting and pervasive psychological attitude of acceptance. "We have ceased fighting anything or anyone"(84) says the *Big Book*. More will be said below about this crucial state of mind when we discuss AA's 'Let Go and Let God'.

Honesty is also a big part of this process, and another EAR. As self deception is key to the ongoing behavior associated with active addiction, an essential component in the relevant psychic transformation is the reversal of dishonest patterns of thought, and their replacement with honest ones. The most essential first step in this newfound lifestyle: honesty about drugs and alcohol, their true role in the addict's life, and the impact of addiction on the people around them. But other layers of self deception are peeled away as we continue to live by AA principles. We begin to see how alcohol and drugs are but a symptom of our disease, and start the lifelong project of getting real about our defects of character. We begin to practice honest self appraisal and confession with the fourth and fifth step, make lifelong practice of them in the tenth. This process of coming clean is psychologically and socially essential. In so doing, I start to become the kind of person I can live with, can feel better about being. My society begins to see me in a different light, and a new,

healthier, more nurturing dynamic between self and society begins to develop. This dynamic cycle reinforces recovery. New habits start to put down deeper roots. The need to use chemicals begins to recede.

Service to others as a value, like confession, also receives plenty of association with religious traditions. Yet both can and do stand on their own two feet. From what has been said before, a fairly obvious argument for the value of service has to do with our definitively social nature. In direct antithesis to the self-involvement of active addiction, the recovery lifestyle involves, in the quintessential argument for 'acting our way into right thinking', a high commitment to service towards our fellow humans. Caring about and actively helping others is a perfect antidote to the self obsession which characterizes the addict mind. In so doing we build the kind of nurturing, integrative social relations which support a sustainable recovery.

Additional therapeutic value is undoubtedly gained by the fact that, in service to other alcoholics, the addict's defects are magically transformed into assets. His pitiful past now serves as the springboard both for his new life and, of equal importance, for his newfound sense of value to the larger communities of which he or she is an integral part. This gives the recovering person a sense both of purpose and also of value. This is why so many recovering persons either 'sponsor' or enter into recovery oriented professional pursuits. Recovery is further reinforced by the fact that this purpose and value are grounded in his continued abstinence and participation in active recovery. Through service the addict engages in a cyclic reinforcement of benefits, good both for the recovering person and for the larger society of which he or she is a part. Everyone benefits from this new found mission to 'carry the message' and 'practice these principles in all his affairs'.

These are just a sampling of the principles which guide our new lives. Upon closer inspection one can see that these EAR are not separate and distinct qualities, but interrelated, multifaceted and multi layered. For example, when we first arrive honesty may mean being honest about drinking and drugs in our life, our powerlessness over them, their power over us. The next layer might be to start being honest with those around us about thoughts and urges and triggers. Another layer has us honestly facing the powerlessness and unmanageability in our lives as regards things other than the chemicals. Then we may find ourselves facing the real consequences of our behaviors on those around us with a newfound rigor. The value of honesty continues to reshape our lives, our characters, and our behaviors, as, growing older in sobriety, we make a daily practice of self reflection, owning our motives, confession of wrongful thoughts and choices, and continued honest observation and re-

affirmation of individual powerlessness. The multi-layered and ongoing effects of embracing and fully living with these cultivated mind sets are definitive components of lifelong sobriety. Yet, to beat on the dead horse, none of them require that we believe in god, religion or spirit. They may require a 'church' in a sense, as in a supportive fellowship of like minded persons, but they do not require religion per se.

Am I being a hypocrite? After all, I am suggesting we need to be open-minded and surrender our old ideas. Yet I appear to be arrogantly critiquing 75 years of recovery methodology based upon old ideas I myself have clearly proven unable to surrender. This may be a valid critique. But maybe not. It is also true that I have spent half of my life trying to be something I am not, trying to believe in something that, in my heart of hearts, has always felt to me like a lie and a fairy tale. I've worked for 25 years to surrender beliefs that are at the core of my being in order to follow AA's teachings. Throughout all these years I have fully engaged in the project, have been willing to let go of all my old ideas, have embraced religious pursuits, practices and ideas with desperation, passion and zeal. Only now has it occurred to me that I can surrender to those things that really make the difference: the psychological and social principles which are truly doing the work, without also surrendering reasonable and valid beliefs which, to me, are just plain old common sense, such as

a) do not believe in anything for which there is absolutely no evidence, or

b) do not believe in fairy tales, make believe, or invisible best friends.

If we are to be truly open-minded, and most especially if we are interested in furthering the cause of carrying the message to the many alcoholics and addicts who are still suffering, we should remain open to the possibility that god is an outdated, antiquated human construct that, while essential to getting us this far on the path, can now be released, like training wheels from a youngster's bike, allowing us both to take greater responsibility for our own continued recovery, and to more successfully navigate the road ahead... Oops. More metaphors. Sorry...

We Agnostics Are Not Broken

The word spiritual is used a lot in AA. We are taught that we need “to pick up the set of spiritual tools laid at our feet” (25), that we must live by a simple set of ‘spiritual principles’. But spirituality is a vague, even meaningless term. What exactly are we saying? Certainly the tools of recovery are very profound in their impact. They are all encompassing. They change our actions, but more essentially our values, emotions, our entire lives even! They bridge the gap between the psychological and the social and are too big for either category. Being so all encompassing and important, so big, it is understandable that the words to describe them might elude us.

I suspect that this is all there is to it. Spirituality, like god, is a concept we employ simply because we have come to the edge of our current understanding, have pushed no further, and it is at this point that our words fail us. Like our ancient ancestors facing a volcano or hurricane, our understanding of the processes at work is undeveloped, simple, riddled with caulk and imaginary filler. We are in awe and, quite literally, speechless, so we attribute the big thing before us to something magical or supernatural. Being in awe is fine, but it seems out of place when dealing with something so obviously medical, psychological, social, scientifically understandable and, importantly, life threatening as alcoholism and drug addiction.

Understanding that spirituality and god are terms employed when people have come to the edge of their comprehension helps me on a daily basis when I sit in AA meetings and listen. Whenever I hear god, spirit or higher power, and can avoid falling into resentment or giving in to feelings of alienation, I try to think of it as a kind of shorthand for the life sustaining, beneficent values, attitudes and actions. I just delete the religious implications and substitute my own understanding. I have always had to do this. The difference for me this time around is that I no longer feel like I am cheating, or faking it, or hanging on until I finally ‘come to believe’. This is it! I have arrived. I am exactly where I need to be.

Contrarily, the AA main line advises that, if we agnostics and atheists hang around long enough, we should eventually come around to the more religious point of view. We will ‘come to believe’. Our higher power will now be called god. We may join or re-join an established religious tradition. Like it or not, this is a main theme in Alcoholics Anonymous. The chapter in the *Big Book* entitled *We Agnostics* is itself a thinly veiled argument that some form of belief in god, however you can come to understand it, is necessary for recovery. In some ways the emphasis on open-mindedness in the *Big Book* points in exactly the opposite direction from mine. The *Big Book* seeks to gently guide the newcomer away from atheistic convictions and towards traditional religious

beliefs. I am arguing that we keep an open mind because, contrary to core teachings, spirituality and god may be entirely irrelevant to recovery!

To go a tad farther, it may actually do addicts and alcoholics and our recovery a real disservice to rely on such nebulous concepts. They can mask our responsibility. The presumption that recovery is supernatural or divinely inspired conceals our role in the project. Furthermore, we denigrate humanity and our natural capacity for positive change when we relegate our recovery to non-human, supernatural powers. Theistic interpretations like that stand in diametric opposition to learning more about the psychology, social psychology and neuro-science of recovery. After all, if god is doing it, we need waste no time or energy trying to figure out how it works or how we can do it better. This strain of thinking, so prevalent in AA, explains the stony silence elicited by anyone who talks about recovery in terms of science, academic disciplines, or learning more and improving our understanding of the processes involved. If you talk about the magic of your higher power, its smooth sailing. But talk about re-wiring our neural pathways and you can hear the proverbial cricket chirping.

The contemporary form of Judeo-Christian thought which predominates in AA suffers from a mistaken and highly pernicious assumption about human nature: people are inherently evil, and all good things come from god. This cultural habit, though fundamentally religious and distinctly Judeo-Christian, lives on in contemporary secular thought. For many years the argument that humans are inherently selfish has held sway in both academic and popular discourse. We jumped enthusiastically upon *The Selfish Gene* and the fact that chimpanzees were aggressive hunters and killers, confirmations that we are inherently bad beasts. Meanwhile, a few miles down the road, Bonobos were anonymously humping away, engaged in perpetual appeasements and a vast array of pro-social behaviors that equally illuminated our deeper nature, yet failed to make the evening news.

Only in our more recent history has a more scientifically informed, balanced understanding developed. In this newer perspective we are of a more dual nature, inherently selfish, yet also innately altruistic, sympathetic, cooperative and compassionate. These pro-social qualities are not external, forced attributes, but inherent aspects of our human nature. Reminds me of a parable I heard at a Christian men's retreat once. The short form: A black dog and a white dog are at war inside of me. Which one is winning? Whichever one I feed!

In sum, we agnostics, atheists and non-believers are not only not broken, we may in fact be onto something. We may be the forerunners of a new way of looking at recovery which does not pass off responsibility to supernatural entities or processes, and which presupposes that radical transformation is an entirely natural, explicable phenomenon which can be cultivated and nurtured. From my point of view, the whole linguistic tradition of calling us 'non-believers' is backwards. We do not play 'make believe' anymore, that is true. Yet we truly do believe: we believe in humanity, in human goodness, and in the innate human capacity for positive change.

A final philosophical, and decidedly conciliatory, point should be made here. We may all in fact be trying to do the same thing. All of us in recovery are trying to establish a closer connection with the real force or forces which bring about sustained recovery and a quality life. To some extent the argument is simply a semantic one. What name we ascribe to the life sustaining principles does not so much matter. We are both seeking the power behind the throne. We may speak different languages, but we are all fellow travelers on the same path.

Let Go and Let God

Today I heard a great little story at my home group of Alcoholics Anonymous. The man sharing, whose name is not Joe but we'll call him Joe, was only 36 days sober. He recounted how he had gone to a family gathering to celebrate his grandmother's birthday. He'd parked his truck in a muddy ditch outside the house, and was immediately accosted by an "an angry, aggressive red neck." The stranger was ready to get into a fight with Joe over his trucks proximity to a newly gravelled driveway. Joe laughed, thinking the man was kidding. Of course this merely heated things up the more. As Joe headed up the family path, his sister emerged. The sister and the redneck neighbor, clearly with some less than pleasant history, proceeded to get deeper into it. At this point Joe, who has been striving to avoid a violent confrontation, begins to feel obliged to step in, as his sister is now being verbally abused.

Then suddenly a thought occurred to Joe. Maybe, he thought, I'll test this new AA stuff out and see if it really works. Instead of fighting, he calmly agreed to

move the truck a few inches back, ameliorating the angry man. Simple enough. Problem solved, drama averted.

But the real AA lesson was in what happened afterwards. Joe let go. Period. He moved on. He went into the house, hugged his grandma, had something to eat, and let go of the whole episode. His sister, on the other hand, remained flustered, apologizing repeatedly for the altercation. When it was time to depart, she again apologized. But Joe had let go. The incident no longer had any power over him, no longer aggravated him.

We alcoholics are disturbed by our capacity to re-sent, or re-feel. We cling to hurts, slights, fears, unfulfilled wants. We nurture them, fuel them, build our characters upon them. Over time such destructive habits of thought can become deeply entrenched, our personalities sadly warped. One look at the world around us and you can see that this is not unique to alcoholics. It may, however, be more problematic for us than it is for most 'normie's'. It leads us to some very bad places.

In his story titled *Acceptance Was The Answer*, Dr. Paul very effectively describes the essential role of a changed subjective state in ensuring the kind of emotional and mental stability we need to cultivate. This mental state of letting go, of acceptance, is a cure for much of what ails the alcoholic mind. His story contains some of the more popularly reiterated and practised techniques for staying sober and not going crazy: Putting on a 'new pair of glasses'; focusing on the good rather than the bad; emphasizing gratitude; talking about feelings; accepting persons, places, things and situations as they are; focusing our 'courage to change' on "what needs to be changed in me and in my attitudes." (417)

In a few simple pages some of the most profoundly useful tools of recovery are laid at our feet. For the purposes of my essay, two important conclusions can be derived. The first is that, while Dr. Paul does mention god, none of the oft cited tools he lays out rely upon religious/spiritual belief. Read it for yourself and you will see. Secondly, Dr. Paul's story was not a part of the founder's ideas, nor even a story that made it into the first edition of the *Big Book*. Yet his ideas are very popular in AA and help many people to contented sobriety. This means that AA is growing and changing, and that is both an important point, and a good thing! The program for recovery from alcoholism and addiction was not so much set in stone in 1939 as it was set in motion.

Dr. Paul makes a forceful case for why and how we alcoholics and addicts might release our death grip on the universe. We cannot long live sober and contented lives without changing this pivotal mindset. We, who have struggled with our world for so long, trying to shape it to fit our tastes, twisting our emotions and our relationships into malignant knots in these vain and pointless pursuits, have finally begun to awaken to our proper place in the scheme of things. Acceptance and letting go are humility in action, or inaction as the case may be. Serenity, the very peace of mind that allows us to live long, contented, sober lives, stems directly from developing this humility, this ability to healthily, constructively detach from the things that disturb us.

Clearly we needed to cultivate this new way of thinking. But, for this alcoholic, "Let go and Let God" always felt like make believe, like a game of pretend. The good news for the atheistically inclined is that we do not need to Let Go and Let God. We simply need to Let Go. Period. No god required. We do not need to turn over the universe to a deity. We simply need to turn it over.

Interestingly, it may be the case that turning over control of the universe to a self conceived deity is actually a way of seeking to retain some measure of control. Let Go and Let God still has a rider on it. After all, it is our own conception of god to whom we are letting go. So when we turn it over to god 'as we understand him', we are really still hanging on. We are saying, in effect, I will surrender control of the universe to something I believe will do right, will do what is best, will manage things well, or some variation on a similarly consoling scenario. This may be a soothing expedient, a way of introducing the principle of letting go to someone who is not habituated to doing so. After all, it is easier to let go when we believe that some benevolent force is going to take over the reins and make sure things come out as they should. But is this truly a deep faith? Or does it still retain a self referential quality, a kernel of control? Maybe not self will run riot, but self will thinly veiled?

The conditional surrender that is 'Let Go and Let God' runs the risk of leading to some very disheartening experiences. When bad things happen to good people who believe in god, they are often taken aback. The deity of our understanding is supposed to be looking over everything. It is supposed to be making sure, as a benevolent puppeteer would do, that all comes out well. Bad things are supposed to happen to bad people, good to good. Most believers believe in some kind of 'karma'. But this isn't how the real world works, and believing it is just sets us up for a fall.

The more religious members of AA hold that 'nothing in god's universe happens by mistake.' God cares for us, and the universe is designed to aid us in our spiritual growth and development. Everything is ordered, everything has a purpose. These beliefs are very important to the theistically inclined, and serve an important purpose of emotional consolation. But sometimes they may serve no other role than to comfort. If so, then, as Bill W. himself is oft quoted, we must be wary when, at times, we allow the good to be the enemy of the best (12 & 12, 138). Ironical though it may sound, belief in god may sometimes actually stand in the way of true surrender, deep acceptance, and the all important learning to let go.

One of the goals of recovery should be to mature sufficiently that we can be OK without the surrogate controller role that god often plays. As an atheist I surrender to whatever is. If it turns out that there is no creator, I'm fine. If it turns out that "life originated out of nothing, means nothing, and proceeds nowhere" (49), which Bill articulates as if it were a self-evidently hideous eventuality, I am OK with that. Scientific findings do not threaten my understanding of things. In fact, they add to the glory, majesty, and wonder of things. They add elements of positivity and hope for the future, as opposed to a desperate clinging to tradition and the ways of the past. And if, when I die, I am no more than worm food and, hopefully, some very fond, lingering memories in the minds of those I've touched, so be it. It would be nice if there were a heaven and I got to live on forever and ever, preferably with forty virgins and a nice set of wings. But my surrender cannot be mitigated by consoling beliefs, cannot be contingent upon comforting imaginings. I need to turn it over to whatever is, as is, whether it fits my imaginary schema or not.

In conclusion, I must once again proffer the argument that our conservative, religious perspective as AA members might be standing in the way of our effectiveness. Theorizing or speculating are, as a general rule, mistrusted and frowned upon in Alcoholics Anonymous. But some of us are curious about the why's, and that may be a good thing.

For example, why are alcoholics prone to death-by-resentment? Do we actually learn and subsequently cultivate the dubious skill of working ourselves into a tizzy in order to rationalize our drinking? By practising this self-destructive mental habit we could feel more or less perpetually wronged. As the world will rarely if ever comply with our exacting standards, we can look forward to a constant string of disappointments, each offering up a satisfying justification for a good bout of self pity, rage, or an all out bender.

Or, conversely, are we wired this way, prone by nature to resentment? I have not studied the issue, but I would guess that alcoholism is physiologically and psychologically related to Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder. Speaking for myself, anecdotally, they seem to share a lot of similar characteristics. If so, then this would help to explain why resentment is so problematic for us, and learning acceptance so very important. Learning to let go is especially challenging, and especially freeing, for people with such forms of mental disease.

Secular recovery paradigms encourage research and investigation into these types of questions. But chalking such things up to the work of an unfathomable higher power does not. Increased knowledge and understanding might help us develop a deeper, richer tool kit. We might be able to help more alcoholics and addicts into lasting recovery. Eschewing superstition may be important to our more effectively carrying the message to the still suffering alcoholics and addicts out there.

Set in Motion, Not Set in Stone

Alcoholics Anonymous is a temporary phenomenon. It is a historically contextualized response to a problem, or constellation of problems, which existed way before 1939, and will probably be with us well into the foreseeable future. Again, not an academic paper here, and I am not super well informed on the history of treatment modalities through the ages. But I know enough to see that AA is constrained, both in terms of temporal resilience and cross cultural accessibility, by its heavy Judeo-Christian emphasis. Taking atheism seriously, and in particular the “Recovery Sciences”, is not really a threat to AA. On the contrary, such an approach is all about taking what works in AA and expanding upon it, a synthesizing approach which guarantees the kind of elasticity and flexibility which will ensure the survival of the best of what AA has to offer for the generations to come.

We knew very little about alcoholism in 1939. While there is a sense in which we do not know MUCH more today, we do know more, and a great deal more knowledge will be acquired and applied in the future. AA should be flexible, vibrant and vital in order to stand the test of time, to work even better in the days, years, and decades to come. Rather than stagnate on 80 year old ideas, some of which may be well beyond their prime and may significantly limit our

effectiveness, we should strive to synthesize and grow. Let us be quick to see where the NON-religious people are right, and make use of what THEY have to offer.

As individuals in recovery, we are taught that stagnation equals death. Members are told to remain active in the program, 'green and growing' as some say, or face sober misery and the potential for relapse. One often hears that the recovering alcoholic is either moving away from a drink or towards one. We are used to this idea, of stagnation as death. Maybe this is true for AA as an institution as well.

All of this may be true, yet we owe a great debt of gratitude to religion. This is where I find most atheists to be entirely off track. Most atheists I have encountered are more virulently anti-theist than a-theist. While I believe in the kind of conciliatory view that rationally, objectively acknowledges the strengths of both sides, I fear my writings are ultimately doomed to the scrapheap for lack of accessibility. I am too critical of god, religion and spirituality to be understood by most AA members, who will undoubtedly feel threatened by what I say in these pages. Yet I am also too appreciative of religion to be accepted by most atheistically inclined readers, many of whom angrily abhor AA as a cult of the worst kind.

But I say we thank god. Thank god for AA. Religion was prominent before AA. This is where most of our founding members got their ideas. I, for one, am grateful for what has been handed down to us, the guidance and direction proffered by religion in getting us this far along the path. The importance of fellowship, for example. This obviously pre-dates religion. Understanding the deep and essential role of community, peer and tribe in recovery is vastly important. Evolutionary biology and social psychology will continue to offer us insights in that direction. But its current practical role in recovery stems directly from religious traditions like Christianity, the Oxford Group in particular. Confessional: straight from Catholicism. Prayer: speaks for itself, and remains a valuable tool even for atheists like myself.

Meditation: much to be gleaned from Buddhism, the basics are often taught at treatment facilities. Yoga: deeply intertwined (get it?) with religious tradition, this is now commonly introduced at treatment centers as well. Both of these "non-western" practices are fairly common, albeit in rudimentary form, both in treatment facilities and amongst many contemporary recovering folk as aspects of their recovery program. Their inclusion speaks to the importance of religious traditions in offering us valuable tools. Yet they also speak to the fact

that we can incorporate new ideas. And both Yoga and meditation are practices that stand on their own, without any need for theistic belief systems.

Many of the values so essential to our new way of life have also traditionally been associated with religious teachings, and, for that, we owe a debt of gratitude as well. Surrender, humility, service to others, these are quintessentially religious values. Another example is the seven deadly sins. One is not generally thankful for sins, at least not when thinking of them as sins, that is. But it turns out this classic list is a fairly comprehensive enumeration of our most glaring shortcomings. As such, they offer us a handy guide for taking our inventory, and for getting a handle on what we need to change in our thinking and our behavior. These are all key components in the process of moving away from our destructive propensities and towards what some people call a more spiritual life. I prefer to say that such things are keys to a more rewarding, fulfilling, and meaningful life, as I find the concept of 'spirituality' suffers from a terminal ambiguity.

So, if I am so filled with gratitude, why rant at all? Because I genuinely believe that religious belief is an antiquated, outdated and ineffective vehicle for conveying these important values and practices. Religion was once needed to understand the stars, before astronomy. It was once needed to explain volcanoes, until geology. Plate tectonics was not even 'discovered' until the last century. Demons and angels were needed to explain our behavior. Exorcisms and burnings no doubt were performed on our kind.

Maybe it is time to separate the wheat from the chaff. Keep the fundamental principles embodied in the steps, keep the fellowship, the peer 'influence', the HOW's, the EAR's, the SHOW's. But lose the magical interpretations and their tendency to create an environment hostile towards empirical observation and study. God's services are no longer required. Like a ferry boat that has taken us safely across the river, when its work is done, we eventually disembark and walk freely on the other side. We do not curse it when it's work is done, nor return to it. Likewise, we can be thankful for that one memorably excellent teacher we had in high school. But we don't go back and sign up for her class again and again and again.

Am I missing something? Is there something irreplaceable, some aspect of religious belief that cannot be co-opted by secular means with either equal or greater efficacy? I rack my brain, and I come up with only one thing. The great fact that atheists must confront is that, for us humans, comfort trumps truth. Religious belief is comforting, and the comfort it offers is often more important

to people than cold, hard reality. The strongest critique of my argument is that religious belief offers considerable emotional and psychological consolation and reassurance to those that believe. Somehow, turning things over to god is more comforting than turning things over to fate, nature, time, or other such impersonal, uncaring forces of the universe. While I believe that this was touched upon in the above section on god concepts having a self-referential quality, I also freely admit this is nonetheless a problem for my ravings. The comfort afforded by faith in traditional gods may be very important to help us sensitive sickos get through the day in one piece.

But we must consider the price of holding onto such beliefs. How important is the comfort we get from theistic interpretations if they stand in the way of our maximal effectiveness, our accessibility, our ability to reach those in need? Are being intransigent and emotionally soothed more important than creating a genuinely all inclusive environment, one which encourages inquiry, investigation and synthesis? From the religious point of view, the problem of alcoholism is completely solved. They turn a blind eye to our abysmal 5% success rate, to the non-believers who don't make it. From their point of view, any further inquiry on recovery methodology is, by and large, considered to be pointless. You may think this an exaggeration, but think again. How open is your group to any 'sharing' which places an emphasis upon new modes of recovery, new ideas outside those in the *Big Book* or AA tradition, scientific findings or atheist re-interpreting? At best such 'sharings' are genially tolerated. But the pressure to conform is very strong indeed. We should strive to create an environment which is more inclusive and diverse, which is more encouraging of the social and psychological curiosity and inquiry which will serve to improve understanding of the recovery process.

If it ain't broke, don't fix it, we like to say. What if this is less a wise aphorism than an expression of our fear of change? Let us not forget that the vast majority of alcoholics and addicts do not live clean and sober, but suffer and die at the hands of our disease. I fully understand the fear and the resistance to change. Facing death as a black and empty abyss of nothingness sucks emotionally. I'd rather go to heaven too. Sometimes I feel lonely and afraid, and I wish I could believe as the devout do. But for atheists like me, the truth trumps the comforting beliefs. In the end, perhaps ironically, I genuinely believe that we should have more faith. We should have faith that this thing can withstand some change, can grow and develop with our understanding. In this sense, atheism requires a greater faith than belief in god. Faith that we are OK, will be OK, as we are, without big daddy in the sky looking over us. We need to have faith that this thing we have can withstand change and still work.

Atheism takes a very strong kind of faith, a faith that allows us to face life exactly as it is.

Faith and belief are not the sole possession of the theistically inclined. Upon my return to recovery in AA, coupled with my newfound acceptance of myself as an atheist, I found no consolation whatsoever in religious or spiritual claims. In fact they just served to confuse or irritate me. I did, however, find considerable emotional consolation in some decidedly cold, hard facts. For example, readings in neuro-science, to which I referred in earlier pages, greatly consoled me when urges to use drugs or alcohol would wash over me. 'This too shall pass' and 'Fake it till you make it' helped me. But with the force of some real hard science behind them, these mere colloquial expressions acquired the force of some very real, absolutely reliable facts about being human and learning new habits. These described physiological processes which were taking place within me each day I chose to live sober, each day building upon the past in a manner which promised improvement and eventual relief from the need to use. As an atheist, I find such genuine scientific findings more than just interesting or informative, but also consoling, encouraging, and uplifting.

If this is true, then I have faith, too. For example, I believe in the fellowship, in the power and wisdom of the group, in the radical transformation that takes place within us when we practice these principles in all our affairs. This new lifestyle promises, if I keep close to it, to carry me towards better days, towards wellness, away from dis-ease. I believe in this process, and with good reason. This is not a blind faith. I believe in it because I see it work in you and in others, and ultimately I see its effect in my own life. But this belief gives me hope and the promise of better things to come which helps to sustain me emotionally on a daily basis.

All of this serves to prove my point, which is, if belief and faith are essential subjective states regardless of whether it's god or a doorknob or the ocean or the fellowship or the EAR that we have faith in, the bottom line is that god, religion and spirituality are not necessary. We need to have that belief in a higher power, but, once again, our HP need never be god, religion or spirit. It is the state of mind within us, whether we call it belief or faith, which is the key determinative factor. In other words, god does nothing, yet belief and faith themselves are all important. It is they that are doing the real work of recovery, the real heavy lifting.

We should beware not to cling blindly to what has worked in the past. If it points us in a new direction, we must have the courage to walk that path. We should be wary that religion and tradition might blind us to the potential for positive growth and change. We can stride forward with hearts full of faith and certainty that, armed with the excellent tools of sobriety, we can incorporate into recovery methodology the many new insights and discoveries of psychology, social psychology, psychiatry, therapy, and the brain and behavioral sciences. Just as Bill chose to synthesize the best of the Oxford principles with the insights of the medicine and psychology of his day, we can similarly incorporate the best of the past with our growing understanding of the recovery process. Doing so might enable us to carry the message of recovery with greater effectiveness.

These are the kind of thoughts that concern me at times. But there are times when I take a much more conciliatory view. At those times I am confident that we can walk side by side, theist and atheist alike, comfortable to live and let live. Different tools work for different people at different times in their lives. I am all for an all inclusive approach to recovery. I have known the multiple hells of addiction, and would wish them on no one. Anything that works to get us free is fine by me.

It is not my intent to needlessly disparage religions role in recovery. Mostly, I simply wish to pave the way for myself and others to fully embrace recovery without the hesitation or doubt associated with being agnostic or atheist. I want to be able to come out of the closet as a non-believer in AA, and I want other members, especially newcomers, to know that belief in god, religion or spirit are not as fundamental to sustained recovery as many AA members suggest they are. Contrary to AA doctrine, being atheist or agnostic is not a malady which we must eventually overcome in order to achieve lasting, contented sobriety.

When all is said and done, I need to let go of all these strongly held opinions and ideas, and get on with the business of sober living. I need to go to meetings, where I will hear talk of god and spirituality. I need to be OK with the fact that no one will ever read these musings. I will never share about them at group level. They will be my little secret. I will pray, because it calms and comforts me, and sometimes I need that. I will go to meetings and strive with all the effort I can muster to keep an open mind to whatever is said. Interestingly, since coming to accept the fact that I am an atheist, I have felt LESS frustrated and alienated by the religious language used in AA meetings. Every time someone uses religious language, without fail, I find myself able to calmly interpret what they say and understand their sharing in my own secular

manner. I am no longer doing battle, with them or within myself. I have finally achieved a measure of peace as regards this integral subject. Now I can get on with life. This project is over now.

AA Agnostica

AA Agnostica is a website (aaagnostica.org).

AA Agnostica is a publisher.

AA Agnostica is a space for AA agnostics, atheists and freethinkers worldwide.

In all of those roles, AA Agnostica attempts to be a helping hand for the alcoholic who reaches out to Alcoholics Anonymous for help and finds that she or he is disturbed by the religious content of many AA meetings.

AA Agnostica is not affiliated with any group in AA or any other organization. Contributors to the AA Agnostica website - or to our books - are all members of Alcoholics Anonymous, unless otherwise indicated. The views they express are neither their groups' nor those of AA, but solely their own.

There is an increasing number of groups within AA that are not religious in their thinking or practice. These groups don't recite prayers at the beginning or ending of their meetings, nor do they suggest that a belief in God is required to get sober or to maintain sobriety. If the readings at their meetings include AA's suggested program of recovery, then a secular or humanist version of the 12 Steps is shared.

If you asked members of AA who belong to these nonreligious groups about their vision of the fellowship, they would probably describe it this way:

Alcoholics Anonymous is a fellowship of men and women who share their experience, strength and hope with each other that they may solve their common problem and help others recover from alcoholism. The only requirement for AA membership is a desire to stop drinking. There are no dues or fees for membership: we are self-supporting through our own contributions. AA is not allied with any sect, denomination, politics, organization or institution: neither endorses nor opposes any causes. Our primary purpose is to stay sober and help other alcoholics to achieve sobriety.

AA Agnostica does not endorse or oppose any form of religion or atheism. Our only wish is to ensure suffering alcoholics that they can find sobriety in AA without having to accept anyone else's beliefs or having to deny their own.

The word “Agnostica” is derived from Chapter Four, “We Agnostics,” of *Alcoholics Anonymous*, otherwise known as the “Big Book”. When we use the word “agnostic” in relation to AA – or words like “atheist” or “freethinker” – we are simply referring to the specific wisdom of groups and individuals within the fellowship who understand that a belief in “God” is not necessary for recovery from alcoholism.

The experience, strength and hope of these women and men form the basis for the pages and posts on the AA Agnostica website and its published works and are often a comfort and an inspiration for others in AA. If you have something similar that you would like to share, your contributions will be warmly welcomed.

We can be reached by email at aaagnostica@gmail.com.