

Quad A Unity Conference

Beyond Alcohol and Addiction:

Sobriety, Sanity and Serenity



September 13, 2009

*Quad A is AA for Atheists, Agnostics and anyone else
with a desire to stop drinking.*

Welcome to the first annual Quad A Unity Conference. We come together as secular humanists to celebrate the fellowship and friendship we have found in AA. We also hope to strengthen our sobriety and take another step away from the pain, confusion and insanity of the past.

"How does an atheist or agnostic work the program?" a newcomer asked one Monday night at the Quad A meeting on Barry. Harry G, a regular attendee who rarely spoke after years of drinking and numerous shock treatments which left him nearly mute, looked up and stunned the group by stating, "We do it like everyone else. We don't pick up the first drink and we go to meetings." He smiled, lapsed back into his usual silence and waited for the next comment.

Harry was right, of course. Don't drink and go to meetings is at the foundation of a sober life. But some of us have also found it useful to work the steps, get a sponsor and do twelfth step work. Each of us does it differently, does it our own way, and many of us have managed to put together years of sobriety. That is a testament to the broad vision of Bill Wilson and the open arms of AA. "The only requirement for membership is the desire to stop drinking."

This booklet contains a variety of materials. The first two pieces present the history and background of Quad A in Chicago. The next section presents alternatives to the twelve steps as they appear in the Big Book. They demonstrate the struggles many have had with the original wording of the steps and the different ways of reworking them so they fit into the lives of the people who have a humanist approach to the program.

Finally, there is a piece of program literature (the newsletter for professionals) that takes on the religious issue and forcefully makes the point that AA is a spiritual, not a religious, program. It also demonstrates that "the program" understands us and is accepting of our secular, humanist way of thinking. We may encounter "religious" individuals in the program but it's important for us to remember they speak only for themselves and not AA.

Hope all (or some) of this is useful, informative and enjoyable.

Yours in service,

Chuck Kramer

Quad A Unity Conference Schedule

8:45 AM Registration and Fellowship
(and breakfast downstairs in the lounge)

9:25 AM Welcome and Speaker Meeting:
"Carrying the Message of Quad A,"
Chuck K.

10:55 AM Break and Fellowship

11:05 AM Outreach Committee,
Progress Reports and Proposals
Johanna R, Bill M, Chuck K

12:00 PM LUNCH and Keynote Speaker,
"How A Humanist Works the AA Program,"
Lisa D.

1:30 PM Break and Fellowship

2:00 PM Speaker Meeting:
"How Quad A Saved My Life,"
Kevin B.

Special Thanks to the volunteers who made this happen: Dave A, Kevin B, Chuck C, Mark C, Byron D, Lisa D, Keri K, Bill M, Janice M, Rob M, Steve N, Johanna R, Rebecca R, Joseph S, Fred V and all the groups which made special donations to subsidize the Unity Conference. We also want to thank the Northside Alano Club for hosting.

Don W. started Quad A in Chicago. Here's his story in his own words.



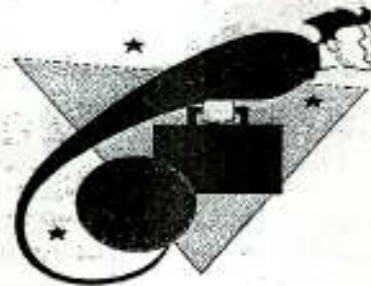
A "Man of Distinction (?)"

by Don W.

Just after the 4th of July in 1970, I had my first-ever personal Independence Day — I walked into a meeting of non-drinking alcoholics who shared their experience of not drinking just for today. I carried from that meeting and into the next meeting the strength and the hope of release from my teen-age-generated and never-since-questioned belief that I was in the groove, a "Man of Distinction," accepted by a bunch of regular drinkers at the tavern into a fellowship of "real" people. Some of them even *liked* me, some just put up with me, but they let me be a part of the group.

This recalled the welcome I was given in my mid-teens by a young-peoples' group, part of the First Unitarian Church of Omaha, Nebraska, my home town. I joined this church free of dogma or creed, and have ever since shared in the music-making and the Sunday services of one or another Unitarian-Universalist congregation.

There was a difference in my response to the group at the tavern. I had always felt like an outsider, different from and unworthy of the acceptance of these Unitarian groups of spiritual



seekers — “If they only knew what I’m really like....”

In the tavern crowd, though, even the most glaring lapses of decorum, of acceptable limits of behavior, could be resolved so long as one brought money and a “hail-fellow-well-met” attitude back to the bar. For all the years that I was drinking, I felt that I belonged here with the other daily drinkers — and I *did* belong.

There’s the love of the knight for his lady in white,
And the love of the child for his mother —
But the ultimate love, that’s all others above
Is of one drunken bum for another.

This was true for me then, and it’s true for me now, when the drunks I know and love, and who know and love me, are no longer drinking. The strength and hope we share is rooted firmly in the selfish desire in the heart of each of us for another day of freedom to choose sobriety, to say “No, thanks — I’ve had my quota.”

In the autumn of 1974, I spoke from the pulpit of Second Unitarian Church of Chicago (2U) as “An Agnostic in A.A. — How It Works for Me.” This message was shared with several other Chicago-area U.U. congregations, and led to the first regularly-scheduled meeting of the group we called AAAA on the first Monday in January, 1975.

This group, now known as Quad-A, multiplied (we are now five weekly meetings at 2U, 656 W. Barry) and spread (Thursday and Sunday at the Unitarian Church of Evanston, 1330 Ridge Ave. and Wednesday and Sunday at Gale House of Unity Temple (U.U.) in Oak Park at 124 N. Kenilworth).

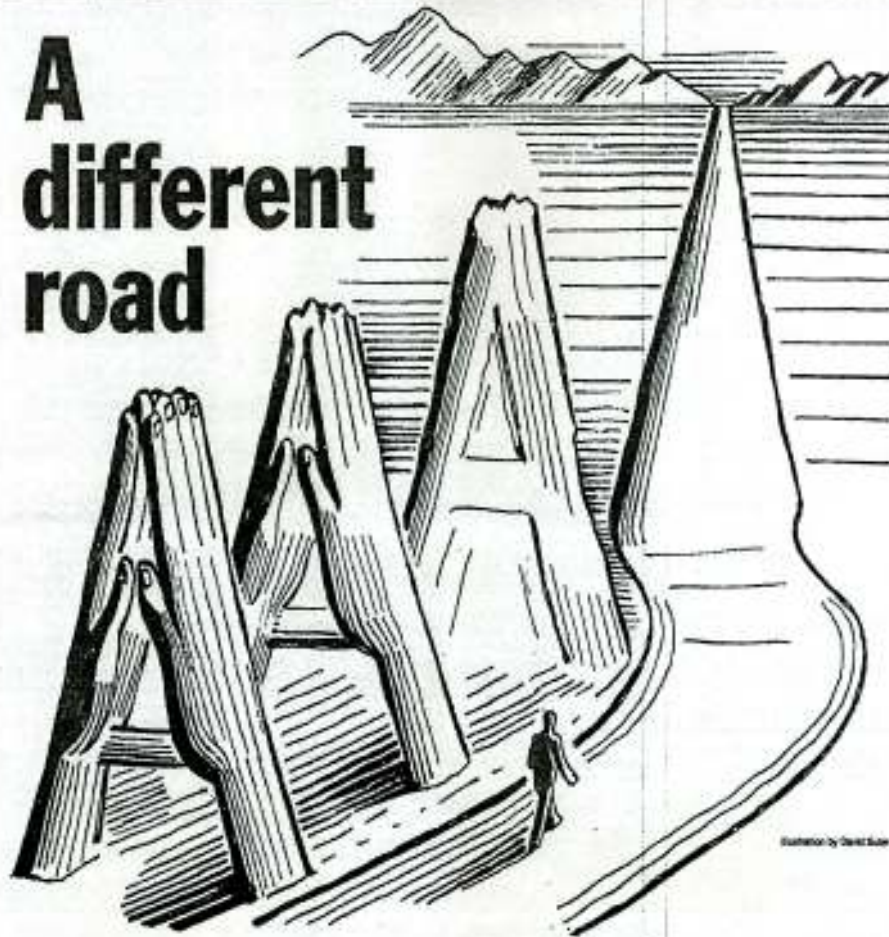
The alkie who make up these meetings, and the many more who have passed through these groups into the wider fellowship of A.A., show me that the 12-step program will work for anyone who wants relief from the compulsion to drink, no matter what the state of one’s belief, or lack of belief, or understanding of the nature of that power greater than ourselves.



Using the 12-step program as a guide on the path of a growing sanity, each of us can, to the extent of our willingness and readiness, find out who we are and how we can live today without drinking. We can live comfortably in the real world we come to know more fully each day we “practice these principles in all our affairs.”

I don’t know what *God* is, but I do know what *grace* is, for I have received the gift of grace in being given a life of meaning and purpose through sharing with other alcoholics “our experience, strength and hope” that helps each of us “solve our common problem and help others to recover....” ♦

A different road



Quad A
offers help
to alcoholics
who don't
buy into
God

By Lawrence Rand
Special to the Tribune

Six o'clock Saturday night and the drunks are having a party.

This is news?

It is when the party is in Chicago's Second Unitarian Church on Barry Street. The drunks are sober, and the party is to commemorate the 20th anniversary of a controversial 12-step recovery group—Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) for Atheists and Agnostics, known in AA circles as Quad A (AAAA).

"Some friends of mine here are shocked that some of us agnostics and atheists have been working a program for 20 years that they think is dependent on God," says the founder of Quad A, Don W., a wisened 67-year-old Unitarian with a cigar in one hand and coffee cup in the other. "Tonight they said to me, 'This isn't AA,' but it actually is. The first two As, for Alcoholics Anonymous, are far more important than the last two in AAAA, because a 12-step program will work for anybody who works it, regardless of religious belief, understanding, or refusal to understand."

"Everybody who works a program works a different program, so it's really not a case of Quad A versus the rest of AA. There is resistance to us—

somebody back in '78 didn't want to insert the explanation of AAAA in the Chicago-based meeting directory, for example—but some of the very first people in AA were agnostics."

The church's sanctuary has been turned into a dining room, and the people seated reflect the North Side and suburban locations of Quad A meetings—mostly, but not completely white, middle class, and middle age (though Quad A's range in age from early twenties to nearly 80), with a significant gay and lesbian contingent, few Hispanics or Asians, and a larger percentage of women than in many AA groups.

That Quad A meets at churches may seem ironic, but it is the result of Don's Unitarian Universalist faith and work. "I had given a talk in the 2nd Unitarian parish, 'An Agnostic in AA: How It Works for Me,' and was invited to give it at several other churches. A Universalist minister on the South Side, Lee Shubell, had some parishioners who were having trouble with the religious language of AA, and he encouraged me to start a meeting for agnostics and atheists, which was held on the seventh of January, 1974."

"For the next four years, if I didn't show up
See QUAD A, Page 5

Quad A

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

there wasn't a meeting, because the group varied so greatly from week to week. It wasn't until the Chicago Area Service Office listed us in the 1979 AA Directory with the explanation that we were for atheists and agnostics that we began to get inquiries and referrals and the Monday night meeting really became a group.

"What happened over the 20 years is that 200 to 300 recovering alcoholics came to our meetings and a door was opened for them. Most of them moved on to the larger AA fellowship once they have worked out their semantic difficulties with the word 'God,' which is always what those difficulties are."

Some say in Quad A, the first speaker Don introduces is a shy German-American woman who explains why: "I was going to traditional AA meetings because I knew I would die from the disease of alcoholism if I didn't, but when they talked about God I gritted my teeth. People told me that if I didn't get on my knees and pray to God, I would go out and drink again, which scared me and made me angry." While she didn't drink before finding Quad A, she dates her "total recovery" from her first AAAA meeting.

While Alcoholics Anonymous was helped in its infancy by the Oxford Group, a Christian organization, and stresses a spirituality based on a belief in "a power greater than ourselves," the group is careful to embrace no specific religion. Jews and non-Jews have held high office in AA service organizations, and a Quad A member was recently elected chairman of the North Side's Midtown district.

A reason for the acceptance that Quad A has gained among more traditional AA groups is its record of perseverant service over the years.

"Groups that are a little out of the mainstream tend towards an increase in district participation," explains John G., an officer of Chicago area AA. "They either don't participate at all, or they pick right in with a lot of energy. Quad A was sending a service representative to district meetings right from its beginning."

Among the Quad A dinner speakers, a humorous tone predominates; a vibrant woman reads a witty Dorothy Parker poem called "Rescue," about avoiding suicide; it concludes, "Guns aren't lawful, snakes give, Gas smells awful, you might as well live." Jan M. explains why she found AAAA attractive: "Quad A is more matriarchal than regular AA; I think traditional AA is part of the patriarchy. Many women feel that their disease of alcoholism was a gift from 'him.' A lot of us had dads who were alcoholics or significant others who were, and got there by copying our fathers or becoming codependent on our lovers and then using the drug ourselves. Because there's less insistence on waiting around for your higher power to take care of you in Quad A, there's more room for a feminist approach to alcoholism."

"In basic AA, you're told a lot

A tale of two drinkers: Quad A members speak out

Don W:

I was exposed to [traditional] AA in 1960 or '61, and after six months I was so put off I knew it wouldn't work for me. I was unable to work it, because of the religious language in which the 12 steps are couched.

"In the middle of '70, I came back to AA, after trying to "control" my drinking, which almost killed me. I came back to AA because it's the only place you can go that has to take you in if you say you belong—the only qualification for membership is a sincere desire to stop drinking.

I needed Quad A because there were things that weren't available to me at traditional meetings.

I'm an agnostic. I think militant atheism is a reaction rather than a response.

Some of us are still militant atheists. For others, atheism or agnosticism is part of the stance that goes in with alcoholism, and once around that they are no longer shocked by traditional AA meetings. Nevertheless, when the Lord's Prayer is said at the end of a traditional meeting, I choose to remain silent. Someone might be looking around, and I need to carry my message to whoever needs it.

I attend an average of two meetings a week; there are times when I only go once a month. I have been relieved of the compulsion to drink after 24 years of sobriety, but what I need and get at meetings is an input of spiritual energy for my own spiritual growth, which boils down to self-understanding and the availability of self-use. I need being reached out to and reaching out.

The experience, strength and hope that Quad A has experienced over 20 years needs to be generally available to other alcoholics, so we're starting a newsletter. Over 20 years I have learned not just to not have a drink, but to have a life, and that's what I want other agnostic and atheist AA's to share.

Whatever the power greater than ourselves is, we all use it. It's not necessarily the traditional God—if that weren't the case, there wouldn't be 4,000 men and priests in AA staying

sober one day at a time. They depend on the God of the cleric, but they come to AA for this power, which isn't available to them in church or elsewhere. I don't know what God is, and I don't know what this greater power is, but I know that it's everything that I'm a part of, and that I belong here.

Jan M:

I had just gone through another lover, and I didn't want to go through it any more; I wanted to be dead. I went down to the Old Town Ale House and had a couple white wines and talked with the bartender, who steered me to a therapist who specializes in women with codependency, addiction and alcohol problems.

This therapist insisted she couldn't treat me alone, that it would be necessary for me to find an AA group and a sponsor. Well, excuse me at that point, I'm paying you big bucks, babe! After a month of arguing about it, I went down to Jan AA meeting on Wells Street, and experienced agoraphobia and claustrophobia at the same time—it was the worst experience of my life. I left before the meeting was half over.

Since AA was unavailable, I told the same bartender that I might as well drink—but she turned me on to Ron L., who was going to the Saturday morning Quad A meeting at Oak time.

What a relief! It was a small group, and they weren't doing ritual monologues chanting; it was a discussion group. We were actually talking about real-life problems that didn't have anything to do about God or Jesus, and working them out as a group, sharing information—more sharing than I had ever experienced. What really sold me was that nobody bugged me; they let me leave unmoistened.

I kept going back; it took me about a year, but they let me get it for myself at my own rate. When I announced that the 12 steps were screwed up, and that I was going to rewrite them, they smiled and let me because they had all done the same thing!

that you have to give up your willfulness and submerge your ego. But that's just the problem for a lot of women alcoholics—they have no will and they submerged their egos for so long that they don't know who they are. When you go into a program completely trained and then are told you're still too willful, it isn't helpful.

"Quad A is more tolerant of a feminist point of view. Some people get mad when I talk like that, because we're not supposed to discriminate by sex, but men and women are raised differently,

have different self-images and self-alcoholism in different ways."

The talk is invariant

Bill R., a 73 year old who has combined playing blues piano and architecture in his colorful career, delights in revealing that he was initially warned off of Quad A by other AA members who complained, "All they ever talk about is God!"

When the new district chairman is asked for a comment, he reveals how he was first elected his group's General Service Representative: "I skipped a meeting, and

they figured I couldn't refuse the job because I wasn't there!"

God or religious-wasn't his reason for staying with Quad A, he explains, "I just like the bad attitude."

Involution is a cornerstone of Quad A, where meetings end with the secretary saying, "We'll close this meeting by not saying the Lord's or anybody else's prayer," and the late co-founder of AA Bill Wilson may kiddingly be called "Mr. BE" but talk at the meetings is centered more on recovery and spirituality than on "God-baiting." AA recommends a Buddhist-like search for serenity, and in Quad A a paucity of spiritual beliefs, from pantheism to Taoism, is as common as a militant rejection of God regardless of religion.

Anyone with a desire to stop drinking is welcome at Quad A. In fact, a woman representing the Oak Park Quad A's announced that she was attending the Unitarian seminary in Hyde Park, and that Quad A had led her to it. After digging into appetizers, salads, soups, an apple chicken and rice dish, and numerous desserts, the Quad A's are treated to music from a guitarist and two friends on bass and drums who romp through an hour of rockabilly and blues.

While a few people stay to dance, many adjourn to the basement smoking area where they can do what Quad A is famous for: talk.

While other AA groups strictly limit their meetings to an hour and begin promptly, Quad A meetings rarely start on time—"The Saturday morning meeting regards punctuality as a disease," Jan M. asserts.

AAAA also allows anybody the chance to comment—often two or three times—which results in meetings that can stretch on for hours. To some it's Quad A's least endearing trait, but it seems to result in dedicated and close-knit groups that foster close, long-term friendships as well as ongoing sobriety.

"These 12 steps are but suggestions," the early AA members wrote in Alcoholics Anonymous, dubbed "The Big Book" in AA circles, but inevitably a churchlike push for orthodoxy began in some quarters. Perhaps it was just as inevitable that a group for atheists, agnostics, humanists, free spirits and "bad attitudes" would be created for those who wanted sobriety without conformity.

*The following pages present the 12 Steps as revised and rewritten by
atheists, agnostics and secular humanists*

Agnostic 12 Steps

For agnostics who would like to work the steps, this version of the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous provides slightly different wording of the six steps that make reference to God or a Higher Power. This version of the Twelve Steps seems to have originated in agnostic A.A. groups in California.

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. Came to believe and to accept that we needed strengths beyond our awareness and resources to restore us to sanity. [Original: Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.]
3. Made a decision to entrust our will and our lives to the care of the collective wisdom and resources of those who have searched before us. [Original: Made a decision to turn our wills and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.]
4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. Admitted to ourselves without reservation, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs. [Original: Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.]
6. Were ready to accept help in letting go of all our defects of character. [Original: Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.]
7. With humility and openness sought to eliminate our shortcomings. [Original: Humbly asked him to remove our shortcomings.]
8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong, promptly admitted it.
11. Sought through meditation to improve our spiritual awareness and our understanding of the AA way of life and to discover the power to carry out that way of life. [Original: Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.]
12. Having had a spiritual awakening as a result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

B.F. Skinner's 12 Steps are another alternative.

*Posted at: AAA-A@wahpogroups.com / June 2003 by
Tommy Morehead tommy.morehead@copper.net*

The Alternative 12 Steps:

A Secular Guide To Recovery

MARTHA CLEVELAND, PH.D.

AND
ARLYS G.



Health Communications, Inc.
Deerfield Beach, Florida

A Nontheistic Translation

1. Admit we are powerless over other people, random events and our own persistent negative behaviors, and that when we forget this, our lives become unmanageable.
Principles: Insight, Honesty
2. Came to believe that spiritual resources can provide power for our restoration and healing.
Principles: Hope, Faith
3. Make a decision to be open to spiritual energy as we take deliberate action for change in our lives.
Principles: Decision, Acceptance, Action

4. Search honestly and deeply within ourselves to know the exact nature of our actions, thoughts and emotions.
Principles: Self-examination, Personal honesty, Self-acceptance
5. Will talk to another person about our exact nature.
Principles: Trust, Personal integrity
6. Be entirely ready to acknowledge our abiding strength and release our personal shortcomings.
Principle: Willingness to change
7. Work honestly, humbly and courageously to develop our assets and to release our personal shortcomings.
Principles: Personal responsibility, Involvement in change, Courage, Humility, Self-discipline
8. List all people we have harmed, including ourselves, and be willing to make amends to them all. Be willing to forgive those who have harmed us.
Principles: Compassion, Personal honesty and Accountability
9. Whenever possible, we will carry out unconditional amends to those we have hurt, including ourselves, except when to do so would cause harm.
Principles: Compassion, Change, Honesty and Responsibility, Forgiveness, Self-discipline
10. Continue to monitor ourselves, to acknowledge our successes and quickly correct our lapses and errors.
Principles: Perseverance, Integrity
11. Increasingly engage spiritual energy and awareness to continue to grow in abiding strength and wisdom and in the enjoyment of life.
Principles: Openness, Connection to life and spiritual resources
12. Practice the principles of these Steps in all our affairs and carry the 12-Step message to others.
Principles: Commitment, Self-discipline, Service to others.

The Twelve Steps are adapted with permission of Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc. Please see page iv for original steps and further information.

the twelve steps of a.a.

1. we admitted we were powerless over alcohol, that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to god as we understand god.
4. made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. admitted to god, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. were entirely ready to have god remove all these defects of character.
7. humbly asked god to remove our shortcomings.
8. made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
11. sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with god as we understand god, praying only for knowledge of god's will for us and the power to carry it out.
12. having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

the humanist alternative

(by b.f. skinner)

1. we accept the fact that all our efforts to stop drinking have failed.
2. we believe that we must turn elsewhere for help.
3. we turn to our fellow men and women, particularly those who have struggled with the same problem.
4. we have made a list of situations in which we are most likely to drink.
5. we ask our friends to help us avoid those situations.
6. we are ready to accept the help they give us.
7. we earnestly hope that they will help.
8. we have made a list of the persons we have harmed and to whom we hope to make amends.
9. we shall do all we can do to make amends, in any way that will not cause further harm.
10. we will continue to make such lists and revise them as needed.
11. we appreciate what our friends have done and are doing for us.
12. we, in turn, are ready to help others who may come to us in the same way.

the nine steps to sobriety

(by "friends of sobriety")

1. alcohol has created problems in my life. stop fighting a losing battle with denial.
2. i have made a decision to change. changing lifelong habits is not easy, but it's worth it.
3. with the help of others, i can achieve sobriety. before we can love others, we must learn to love ourselves.
4. honesty is essential to my recovery and growth. no more hiding behind masks, be loved for what you are.
5. i am responsible for my own behavior. we can take charge of our lives- positively.
6. i can be whatever i choose to be today. we can redefine ourselves as successful human beings.
7. sobriety is an adventure to be enjoyed. the sober world can be frightening- or exciting, wonderful.
8. sobriety is maintained by spiritual and emotional growth. grow into a complete human being.
9. helping others is a way of helping myself. we can make significant contributions to other lives.



...grant me the serenity
to accept the things i cannot change,
courage to change the things i can,
and the wisdom to know the difference.

-compiled by charlie kast; 4/91-

Free Thinker's and Non Drinker's

1. Came to the realization that our lives had become unhealthy and unmanageable.
2. Accepted that alcohol was the root cause of our condition.
3. Made a decision to take back control of our lives.
4. Decided that only we could control our lives and decided that abstinence was our only hope.
5. Having come to these conclusions and realizing this was a daunting task sought help in community from other like minded people for support.
6. Recognized that many of us need the community of group to continue our quest to live sober lives.

Paul G. Shannon - March 15, 2009
Evanston Quad A

Here's How

The 12 Steps to Complete and Total Intoxity

We admitted we were powerless over nothing – we could manage our lives perfectly and we could manage those of anyone else who would allow it.

Came to believe that there was no greater power than ourselves, and that the rest of the world was insane.

Made a decision to have our loved ones and friends turn their wills and their lives over to our care.

Made a searching and fearless inventory of everyone we know.

Admitted to the whole world at large the exact nature of their wrongs.

Were entirely ready to make others straighten up and do right.

Demanded others to "either shape up or ship out."

Made a list of everyone who had ever harmed us and became willing to go to any lengths to get even with them all.

Got direct revenge on such people whenever possible, except when to do so would cost us our own lives or, at the very least, a jail sentence.

Continued to take moral inventory of others, and when they were wrong promptly and repeatedly told them about it.

Sought through nagging to improve our relations with others as we couldn't understand them at all, asking only that they knock under and do things our way.

Having had a complete physical, emotional, and spiritual breakdown as a result of these steps, we tried to blame it on others and to get sympathy and pity in all our affairs.

*From The ACA Compendium, March 1994
Ozark/Central High Area Intergroup*

Here's an official statement on religion and spirituality in the program that's reasoned and reassuring.

A Newsletter for Professionals

Fall 2003

About AA

The A.A. Program — Spiritual But Never 'Religious'

One of the most common misconceptions about Alcoholics Anonymous is that it is a religious organization. New members especially, confronted with A.A.'s emphasis on recovery from alcoholism by spiritual means, often translate "spiritual" as "religious" and shy away from meetings, avoiding what they perceive as a new and frightening set of beliefs. By the time they walk into their first meeting, many alcoholics have lost what faith they might once have possessed; others have tried religion to stop drinking and failed; still others simply want nothing to do with it. Yet with rare exceptions, once A.A. members achieve any length of sobriety, they have found a source of strength outside themselves — a Higher Power, by whatever name — and the stumbling block has disappeared.

A Program of Action

A.A.'s Twelve Steps, which constitute its program of recovery, are in no way a statement of belief; they simply describe what the founding members did to get sober and stay sober. They contain no new ideas: surrender, self-inventory, confession to someone outside ourselves, and some form of prayer and meditation are concepts found in spiritual movements throughout the world for thousands of years. What the Steps do is frame these principles for the suffering alcoholic — sick, frightened, defiant, and grimly determined not to be told what to do or think or believe.

The Steps offer a detailed plan of action: admit that alcohol has you beaten, clean up your own life, admit your faults and do whatever it takes to change them, maintain a relationship with whatever or whoever outside of yourself can help keep you sober, and work with other alcoholics.

'God As We Understood Him'

The basic principles of Alcoholics Anonymous were worked out in the late 1930s and early '40s, during what co-founder Bill W. often referred to as the Fellowship's period of "trial and error." The founding members had been using six steps borrowed from the Oxford Groups, where many of them started out. Bill felt that more specific instructions would be better, and in the course of writing A.A.'s basic text, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, he expanded them to twelve. But he was dealing with a group of newly sober drunks, and not surprisingly his new version met with spirited opposition. Even though the founding members were in many ways a homogeneous bunch (white, middle-class, almost exclusively male, and primarily Christian in background), they represented the full spectrum of opinion and belief. Bill tells us in *Alcoholic Anonymous Comes of Age*, a history of the Fellowship's early years, that "the hot debate about the Twelve Steps and the book's content was dou-

bled and redoubled. There were conservative, liberal, and radical viewpoints." (page 162) Some thought the book ought to be Christian; others could accept the word "God" but were opposed to any other theological proposition. And the atheists and agnostics wanted to delete all references to God and take a psychological approach.

Bill concludes: "We finally began to talk about the possibility of compromise. . . . In Step Two we decided to describe God as a 'Power greater than ourselves.' In Steps Three and Eleven we inserted the words 'God as we understood Him.' From Step Seven we deleted the words 'on our knees.' And, as a lead-in sentence to all the steps we wrote these words: 'Here are the steps we took, which are suggested as a program of recovery.' A.A.'s Twelve Steps were to be suggestions only." (*ibid.*, page 167)

More than sixty years later, those crucial compromises, articulated after weeks of heated controversy, have made it possible for alcoholics of all faiths, or no faith at all, to embrace the A.A. program of recovery and find lasting sobriety.

What About This Spiritual Awakening Thing?

Nevertheless, the phrase "spiritual awakening," found in the Twelfth Step and throughout A.A. literature, remains daunting to many beginners. For some, it conjures up a dramatic "conversion" experience — not an appealing idea to an alcoholic just coming off a drunk. To others, beaten down by years of steady drinking, it seems completely out of reach. But for those who persevere, ongoing sobriety almost invariably brings the realization that — in some wonderful and unexpected way — they have indeed experienced a spiritual change.

Spiritually, A.A. style, is the result of action. Step Twelve begins, "Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these Steps. . ." (italics added), and in the book *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* (page 106), Bill W. describes what happens: "Maybe there are as many definitions of spiritual awakening as there are people who have had them. But certainly each genuine one has something in common with all the others. . . . When a man or woman has a spiritual awakening, the most important meaning of it is that he has now become able to do, feel, and believe that which he could not do before on his unaided strength and resources alone. He has been granted a gift which amounts to a new state of consciousness and being. He has been set on a path which tells him he is really going somewhere, that life is not a dead end, not something to be endured or mastered. In a very real sense he has been transformed, because he has laid hold of a source of strength which, in one way or another, he had hitherto denied himself."

Mail address: Box 458, Grand Central Station, New York, NY 10163 • (212) 870-3400 • www.aa.org

Groups and Their Customs

If the Steps are the program of recovery, the A.A. group is where alcoholics learn to live the program and practice it "in all their affairs." Virtually all group meetings in the U.S. and Canada begin with a reading of the A.A. Preamble, a brief description of what the Fellowship is and is not. Its last two sentences make it clear that A.A.'s purpose has nothing to do with religion: "A.A. is not allied with any sect, denomination, politics, organization or institution; does not wish to engage in any controversy; neither endorses nor opposes any causes. Our primary purpose is to stay sober and help other alcoholics to achieve sobriety."

Group customs that appear to be religious sometimes discourage new people from coming back. Professionals who refer people to A.A. may help by advising them to attend a variety of meetings, especially in the first year of sobriety, and to find a home group where they are comfortable. According to A.A.'s Fourth Tradition, each group is autonomous, which means in practical terms that every group is unique, with a flavor all its own. Thus, even if a shaky alcoholic finds himself one night in a meeting where the members feel at home with traditional religious language, he or she can try again the next night and find a group where even the most doubting or cynical soul will fit right in.

Similarly, A.A. members generally deal with the question of a Higher Power by assuring new members that they are free to find their own. Men and women who shy away from what is known in A.A. vernacular as the "God bit" can still identify a much-needed source of support outside themselves. For some, it is their A.A. group; others eventually choose a traditional idea of God, while still others rely upon an entirely different concept of a higher power. To show the variety of spiritual searches in A.A., the booklet *Come to Believe* was published in 1973. It is a collection of the various spiritual experiences of a wide range of members, from adherents of traditional religion to atheists and agnostics, with all stops in between.

But Don't A.A. Groups Use the Lord's Prayer?

The practice of ending meetings with the Lord's Prayer, once almost universal, is still common in many areas. Where it still exists, the leader normally asks attendees to join in only if they choose to. North American groups today have found a variety of ways to close their meetings. Use of the Lord's Prayer is rare in Spanish groups in the U.S. and groups outside the United States. Many recite the Serenity Prayer or A.A.'s Responsibility Statement; others use some other informal prayer or phrasing, or simply a moment of silence. And whatever the specific wording, the group conscience makes the decision.

Groups that continue to close with the Lord's Prayer are following a custom established in the Fellowship's earliest days, when many of the founding members found their support in meetings of the Oxford Groups. The practice of closing with the Lord's Prayer very likely came directly from these meetings. At the time, there was no A.A. literature, and so the founders leaned heavily on Bible readings for inspiration and guidance. They probably closed with the Lord's Prayer because, as Bill W. explained, "it did not put speakers to the task, embarrassing to many, of composing prayers of their own." Meeting formats became more inclusive once A.A. began to spread throughout North America and then the rest of the

world, and it became obvious that the program of recovery could cross all barriers of creed, race, and religion.

In *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, the Rev. Samuel Shoemaker, one of the nonalcoholic friends who was instrumental in shaping the Fellowship in the very beginning, reflects on the founders' fundamental decision not to define a set of beliefs. He says (pages 263-64): "A.A. has been supremely wise, I think, in emphasizing the reality of the experience, and acknowledging that it came from a higher Power than human, and leaving the interpretation part pretty much at that. . . . If A.A.'s had said more, some people would have wanted them to say a great deal more, and define God in a way acceptable and congenial to themselves. It would have taken only two or three groups like this, dissenting from one another, to wreck the whole business. . . . So they stuck to the inescapable experiences and told people to turn their wills and their lives over to the care of God as they understood Him. That left the theory and the theology. . . . to the churches to which people belong. If they belonged to no church and could hold no consistent theory, then they had to give themselves to the God that they saw in other people. That's not a bad way to set in motion the beginnings of a spiritual experience."

Health Care Workers From Azerbaijan Drop in on A.A.

In June, health care professionals from Azerbaijan were welcomed by members of the A.A. General Service Office staff. Situated just north of Iran, Azerbaijan, has a predominantly Muslim population of about 7.5 million. The ten-member delegation was in the U.S. to find out more about harm reduction in the treatment of AIDS and alcoholism. At the suggestion of the U.S. State Department, they made a stop at G.S.O. after their training in Kansas City, MO, where they also visited a local A.A. office and attended an open meeting.

The visitors asked questions through an interpreter about A.A. in Muslim countries, the role of women in the program, and the principle of self-support. They left with literature in Russian, and said they plan to be in touch about translation of the literature into Azeri, the country's official language.

Nonalcoholic professionals have been the catalysts for helping to get A.A. started in many communities around the world, and A.A. is hopeful that this meeting might provide a vehicle for offering A.A.'s message of hope and recovery to suffering alcoholics in Azerbaijan.

Let Us Hear From You . . .

Are there any specific topics or professions that you would like to see explored in *About A.A.*? Please send us your thoughts, ideas, comments, so we may better communicate with the professional community. You may also e-mail the Cooperation With the Professional Community desk at: cwp@aa.org.

This newsletter may be duplicated for distribution without obtaining permission from A.A. World Services, Inc.

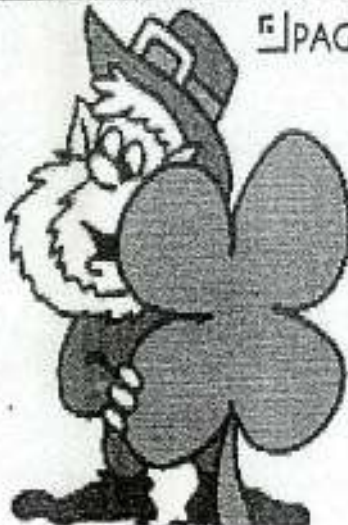
February/March 2004

PAGE 7



AA in Eight Words

- Quit drinking
- Trust AA
- Clean House
- Help Others



Symptoms of Spiritual Recovery

- *A tendency to think and act spontaneously rather than on fears based on past experiences.*
- *An unmistakable ability to enjoy each moment.*
- *A loss of interest in conflict.*
- *A loss of the ability to worry (this is a very serious symptom!)*
- *Frequent, overwhelming episodes of appreciation.*
- *Contented feelings of connectedness with people, places, and things, especially with nature.*
- *Frequent attacks of smiling.*
- *An increasing tendency to let things happen, rather than making them happen.*
- *An increased susceptibility to the love extended by others, as well as the uncontrollable urge to extend it.*

Excerpt from the newsletter of the Community Church of New York, whose editor adapted it from the *Friends of Peace Pilgrim*.

Notes

