

A Letter Concerning Toleration

To: New Life AA of Wichita Falls, Texas, Group Members

From: Mark C., Sobriety date 12/10/2009

March 26, 2013

Bill Wilson evolved over the years, eventually publically confessing in writing that his early religious attitudes, his religious prejudices, his aggression and intolerance toward nonbelievers in AA was unacceptable and damaging to the fellowship and work of AA.

The following is found in *As Bill Sees It* published in 1967, page 146. and was originally published in the AA Grapevine in 1961 titled "The Dilemma of No Faith." Bill Wilson makes a startling admission:

Certainly none are more sensitive to spiritual cocksureness, pride, and aggression than they (non-believers) are. I'm sure this is something we often forget.

In AA's first years I all but ruined the whole undertaking with this sort of unconscious arrogance. God as I understood Him had to be for everybody. Sometimes my aggression was subtle and sometimes it was crude. But either way it was damaging - perhaps fatally so - to numbers of non-believers.

Today at New Life AA of Wichita Falls, Texas, a small number of our more conservative Christian believers, a few Big Book Literalists, a couple of "Wheelhead"s and a few others have Bill Wilson's initial problem. Some of those more ultraorthodox, far right, atheist-hating, Christian members promote, endorse, trivialize, and even applaud physical violence against non-believers as a class, and me in particular.

Their view seems to be unless one "believes" as they do, and agrees with them on all things, accepts their authority on near any matter, uses the same words and phrases as they do to describe their sobriety, then the non-believer's honestly stated "experience, strength, and hope" of living sober in New Life is somehow a direct threat, worth nothing, is meaningless, and therefore, must be eliminated by any means possible up to and including physical violence. Those attitudes serve to promote, create and enforce an atmosphere of intolerance, bigotry, and hatred towards those who may disagree with "their 'orthodox' opinions, and prejudices."

Any AA group which "allows" that kind of situation to exist, and takes no action to "protect ALL" of its members is in fact giving permission for, and approval of such tactics of control, intimidation, and violence. Inaction regarding violence to ANY member of the Group creates and enables an "unsafe" environment to exist, and ensures that it will become common and public knowledge, and has and will continue to damage the reputation and effectiveness of New Life as a place where a person, or persons, can find help with sobriety in safety. After 33 years, this state of affairs certainly endangers New Life continuing to exist at all.

How unfortunate and perhaps deadly this is for the newcomer to see and to experience can only be imagined. Certainly this attitude contributes to AA's success rates being somewhere near 5%. According to AA's own Triennial Surveys of U.S. membership, nearly half who come for the first time simply walk away after their first meeting. Most probably walk away into further alcoholic oblivion with its continued personal suffering and costs to society. The AA of Australia's Triennial Survey of Australian membership arrives at the same 5%. In many cases these people who come looking for help are those

who have already been to a treatment center and have already been told that statistically speaking only 2% will probably “make it.”

When I staggered into New Life AA seeking help I knew it was probably my only hope, and for sure AA was the only available option in Wichita Falls. I had gone to three other meetings (my first three AA meetings ever) at Group One AA, of Wichita Falls, Texas. There simply are no other venues available in our small city. At the end of my first meeting at Group One, I asked a gentleman who seemed to have a lot of sober time and who seemed to be a leader, how an atheist can work the steps and was met with a very hostile, borderline violent verbal attack from he and one of his friends. At the third meeting this man’s friend physically assaulted me. It was a minor assault (a forceful finger stabbing on my chest), and I just blew it off, did not retaliate and I responded with “thanks for the help fellas.”

When I came to New Life I knew a few things for certain. I knew I was finally done with alcohol. I knew that I must quit or die. I knew AA to be the only place where I might find mutual support in my desire to Live Sober. I also knew I had to be done with hiding, lying, and deceiving myself and others. I was going to have to be ruthlessly honest with myself, and to let the chips fall where they would. I was and am determined to take personal responsibility and work for my recovery from addiction to alcohol. I knew rationally and maybe more importantly, that at a deep emotional level that I had indeed become powerless of alcohol. I knew I had become a slave to something that had systematically destroyed most of what I valued in life and that over time the problem had become progressively worse despite all my best efforts to control, or moderate, or quit for good. I had “surrendered” my fight with addiction to alcohol. I threw in the towel, stopped fighting and denying that I could somehow do this by myself and that I needed, and finally took steps to “reach out for help.”

I did not know anything of the giant subculture of addiction and recovery. I had no idea of the amount of suffering and destruction and death that seems to run like rivers through the lives of and extended families of people who have lived addiction and then struggled with attempting to rebuild their lives. I was oblivious to the vast amounts of continued suffering experienced by those kicking their addictions to alcohol, and other substances in our “dually-addicted” world. I had no idea of the industry devoted to help people overcome these kinds of personal and societal problems. I had no idea of the pervasiveness and the intractable nature of these kinds of problems. I had no idea how many die as a result of these addictions, and I had no idea the immense amount of suffering involved. I had no idea that during most years somewhere near one million people have gone to seek help in recovery centers alone. I had absolutely no idea that so few people are able to find sobriety. I had no idea that most of the treatment centers are staffed by folks who themselves have suffered from various chemical addictions and who simply genuinely desire to see others get and stay sober, or get and stay clean. I had no idea those folks go to work every day, deal with people who find themselves in the worst possible physical, emotional, and mental shape, and in spite of grim statistical fact that only 2% will make it, they willingly, honestly and tirelessly continue to do their best efforts to reach each one.

My eyes have been opened during the three years and four months of my sobriety and recovery in AA. I believe that I could not be sober today without the help and encouragement of my friends, and others in the Fellowship of New Life. For me, and I think for most others at New Life, we live on our shared experiences, our common sufferings, our laughter at ourselves, at times our conflicts with each other, and all of this, every bit of this, is ALL part of what it means to live in a fellowship of people who would not ordinarily associate with each other.

Each person in New Life has somehow contributed to my recovery; even those who have shown by their words, attitudes, and actions nothing but hatred, bigotry, and contempt of me as a human being simply because I do not believe as they do.

But let's consider the range of belief and spiritual practice within New Life itself. Regarding personal beliefs we are all over the map in New Life. Most people who hold their present views were once of different views. They evolved over time in their beliefs and practices.

1. New Age mystics
2. Pagans
3. Wiccans
4. A Jungian mystic
5. A person who deeply believes in Jewish mysticism (the Kabbalah)
6. Lapsed Roman Catholics
7. Pentecostal Christians
8. Southern Baptists
9. A far right wing Roman Catholic
10. Other types of general Christian theists (even one who is ordained)
11. A Pantheist (those who believe Nature and the Cosmos is God)
12. A couple of Agnostics
13. A couple of Atheists (I am the only one who admits to nonbelief, and I was a deeply devout Reformed Christian from August 17, 1978 until my early 40's when I became aware that my belief in God had slowly, over time, evolved toward a general belief in a Creator.)
14. People who have no idea what they believe or what is meant by the word "God," or "Higher Power," but do tend to think there is 'something out there'
15. People who use the Group as "God," or "Higher Power"
16. People who simply do not give a hoot or holler what people believe as long as it works for them. (I'm included in this group as well. What one believes or disbelieves is no concern of mine. If it works for YOU I'm ALL FOR IT!)
17. People who are involved in Native American approaches to "God" and spirituality
18. A Deist (One who believes in a God, but that God does not intervene in human affairs. Many of the Founders of our country were in fact Deists)
19. Others who follow forms of Judaism
20. The list can go on...

I developed this list to illustrate a fact. What tiny segment, what tiny minority of this list gets singled out? What tiny part of this list must endure things all the others do not?

A faction of "Big Book literalists," a couple of Jungian mystics, and some other ultra-conservative, ultra-rightwing, atheist-hating-Christians exhibit attitudes and behaviors that are certainly in violation of the basic organizational principles of AA groups. Those folks seem to have forgotten Tradition 12, which states "Principles Before Personalities." It is they who have attempted to kill any tolerance for views other than their own narrow range of religious and spiritual prejudices, and who at this moment are responsible for creating, fostering and attempting to grow this malignant and entirely destructive attitude in New Life as a whole. And they seem to make no bones about it, even writing on our Service Structure Announcement board, "One Atheist Down." Who is next? There are several members now who refuse to attend New Life due to the issue of their personal safety, and due to the environment of hostility, hatred and religious/spiritual bigotry promoted by this cluster of people who have, ultimately, no tolerance for views other than their own.

These folks even boast, and laugh about violent assaults and hatred of another member who does not believe as they do. Who will be next? What category of belief and practice shown above will be chosen

next by this group of intolerant, hate filled, religious thugs who seem to think "It Is Their Way or the Highway?"

The Steering Committee and the Program Chairman positions are those who have the responsibility, and have the 'legal duty' to ensure a safe environment and they have not done so. This does constitute civil negligence and may well entail criminal negligence. To be directly involved in committing hate crimes under state and federal statutes is one thing. To tolerate, and ignore, laugh at and encourage such crimes against persons in the group is another.

Such a situation effectively closes the door to ALL who may suffer and seek a way out of alcoholism, and who do not have faith, or belief in a traditional God as interpreted by our Big Book literalists, ultra-religious, ultraconservative, atheist-hating, Christian segment of our overall membership. This kind of religious bigotry, intolerance, and demand for conformity to their belief is absolutely opposite of the principles, and language contained in our literature. It also constitutes a criminal offense under state and federal law.

At New Life AA of Wichita Falls, Texas, today, it is apparently "open season" on any atheist who is honest enough, or dumb enough to be honest in front of the more fanatically religious, indoctrinated "pious" membership. At the same time, it is claimed that HONESTY is fundamental to recovery from addiction. Honesty for whom? This is a double-standard. This double-standard is a particular form of exclusionary, religious bigotry applied to one nonbeliever in this case and to nonbelievers as a class. Ultimately, this attitude is then transferred to all those who may have unorthodox Christian beliefs, or other forms of non-Christian spirituality. Where does it stop? Who will be next?

The following list is meant to relate some basic facts which describe the "unsafe environment." Many of you have observed these things even many times. Most of you have not taken part in this behavior, nor would endorse this kind of behavior. Many of you are tolerant and loving Christians, and you are good examples of some of the best of the Christian religion. Others of you have other sorts of Higher Power, and are tolerant of others who do not hold your views. I consider you to be friends and fellow travelers in sobriety in every sense of the word. So, please, do not think I am speaking of you here, for I am not.

But there are others whose aim it seems to be to make New Life Group as exclusive as possible in order to conform to their "perfect vision" and "their perfect interpretation" of "the program." Some do the following things outwardly, while some simply give the nod, and aid and abet those who do the actions. Those who aid and abet are as guilty as those who do the deeds.

My sobriety date is 12/10/2009. In the three years and three months I have attended AA meetings (most of them at New Life) I have experienced the following from a small cluster of the more ultra-orthodox Christian believers, and/or Big Book Literalist types.

1. Two physical assaults, (one minor, the other, the last one, was much more severe and much more violent), one verbal threat of violence from a Big Book literalist and hardcore ultra-Christian about a week before the most recent assault, and a death threat. The last act of violence, the most severe thus far, occurred inside New Life on Saturday March 15, 2013 at 7:30 pm and was accompanied by a verbal death threat. No, it was not a "scuffle," or "disagreement," but a wholesale, violent attack that went from one end of the room to the other and then angled across the room toward the restrooms. This occurred in front of very few member witnesses. (The individual who initiated this last act of violence also injured Staci T. in the process of trying to get to me. I had to keep Staci from falling and sustaining a worse injury while evading the aggressor. This same aggressor verbally assaulted another female member

about a week prior to this attack, and made her feel physically threatened. That member no longer feels safe in the room, resigned her service position, and refuses to attend New Life as it exists now.)

2. Near constant negative harassment regarding my nonbelief, (constantly referring to my "atheism" and making an "issue" out of it), and attempts to belittle me in front of the group because of my nonbelief.)
3. Catcalls, and interruptions from the floor while I am sharing my "experience, and strength" in recovery, and sharing the many benefits, and encouragements I've experienced among my sober friends in NewLife, and in AA. Yet this occurs while I consistently say that I am absolutely "for" whatever and however another gets and stays sober, I simply seek the same right and courtesy.
4. Numerous personal verbal insults either from the audience, or face to face later, in attempts to bait me into some sort of argument or conflict, or into some kind of debate. (I am not here to debate the existence or nonexistence of one person's god, or any god. I am among my sober alcoholics to encourage, and to be encouraged to "live sober.")
5. Several instances of strong believers coming to me personally, after the meetings to challenge me with aggressive posturing and argumentation in an attempt to either convert me, or scare me off, or convince me to "Get God or Die," and then they relapse. Some of those folks have since become my friends, and there is now a mutual and growing respect.
6. I've heard numerous disparaging, and denigrating remarks from the podium by this type of true believer regarding atheists, agnostics, and other sorts of non believers in the traditional concept of "God."

Imagine if you personally had to try to get sober while having certain religious types in the room go after you personally, verbally, who threaten you with physical violence, and then a couple who in fact violently and physically attack you. Imagine what it would feel like to be constantly "singled out" simply for "what you did not believe" as if that has anything to do with being sober and learning to live sober.

Could you get sober in that kind of environment? The question might be would you even want to get sober if that was the only option?

Each of us has our own road to travel. No one else can experience your recovery. Each recovery must, by necessity, be on our own individual path. No one can walk my path for me. I cannot walk the path for the other person. Another cannot live my recovery, nor can I live theirs. We have a slogan for this kind of thing and it states: "Live And Let Live." Apparently this only applies to those who conform to another man's literalist interpretation of Big Book.

Put simply, the basic issue can be stated as follows:

Will you be one who seeks, and creates tolerance, compassion, respect, and diversity in OUR group for the goal to reach as many as we can possibly help?

OR

Will you be one of those who desire, perform, condone, perpetuate, trivialize, laugh at, and applaud threats of violence, and acts of violence on those who do not think like you, or who do not "interpret" the Big Book just as you do? (If you are in this category, then you may wonder what would keep you from being the next target of our own home grown New LIFE AA Taliban.)

In the interests of New Life as a whole, to provide for the continuation of New Life as a viable option for ANY and ALL who may seek our help in recovery, I propose our Bylaws be amended to include a Zero Tolerance Policy regarding member threats of physical violence to other members, and to those members who commit acts of physical violence on other members.

At present our Bylaws contain no provision stating a Zero Tolerance policy on acts of violence, or threats of violence committed by members against other members inside the room. The absence of such language in our Bylaws allows a blatant double-standard to exist when violence is done to a member or members who may be of a minority opinion, or who hold different beliefs than a majority.

The absence of a Zero Tolerance Policy on Threats of Physical Violence, and Committing Physically Violent Acts leaves those who serve on the board, and who do nothing in these circumstances to protect the group, open to civil law suits arising out of a "breach of duty" to ensure a "safe environment" for all the members. The absence of such a policy endangers New Life's long term existence as an entity committed to recovery from alcoholism.

Regardless of whatever legal angle, (and there are many more than listed in above two paragraphs), one uses to look at this current state of affairs promoted by a few of our more ultra-orthodox Christians, and Big Book "literalists," this state of affairs does not have to continue.

Some people in our group seem to be under the mistaken impression that whatever happens in, and whatever is said in the rooms of AA is not subject to civil lawsuits and are immune from criminal laws. The facts are the opposite. Many groups have been and are being sued for violations of civil and criminal laws, as are many people who claim to speak as AA 'gurus', and 'experts,' and who use their positions to hide their criminal activities.

I believe an accepting, tolerant, open, generous, compassionate, loving New Life Fellowship where ALL are Welcome is worth fighting for. Bill Wilson wanted the gates to be as open and as wide as possible so that as many as possible may enter and find relief and recovery from the misery of alcoholism.

While I do fully understand that people, oftentimes the particularly devout religious people (remember, I used to be devoutly religious) have a very difficult time understanding how a person could 'not believe as they do' or can 'work the program.' Just as it often takes one alcoholic to reach another alcoholic in most cases, it is also certainly true that it takes an alcoholic like me to reach some of those who fall into the category of nonbelief.

Seems to me that it takes all of us working together in tolerance and understanding to reach as many as can be helped in the rooms of AA.

May we all speak and act so that we may reach and help as many as possible, and to live up to our Responsibility Pledge which states, "I am responsible. When anyone, anywhere, reaches out for help, I want the hand of AA always to be there. And for that I am responsible."

In closing, in a letter dated 1943, found on page 312 of *As Bill Sees It*, Wilson writes; "Honesty with ourselves and others gets us sober, but it is tolerance that keeps us that way."