

## Our We Agnostics Meeting

Hello everybody, my name is Eric and I'm an alcoholic.

I've stayed sober a day at a time since January 10, 1983. I was 29 years of age when I got sober, and I'll be 61 years-old next week. I'm grateful to have more than 32 years of sobriety in A.A. and I owe it all to this wonderful fellowship of men and women. Thank you for being here tonight.

I live in Lake Leelanau with my wife, Gail, who is here tonight. We met in A.A. She has 24 years of sobriety. We have two beautiful teenage children and we'll celebrate our 21st wedding anniversary later this month. I can tell you that she is one of the main reasons my life in sobriety is as happy, joyous and free as anyone I know in our fellowship.

I got sober and met my wife when I was on active duty in the United States Marine Corps. I served in the Marines for 25 years as a combat correspondent and a public affairs officer. I am a veteran of Vietnam, the Persian Gulf War and Somalia. Since I retired from the Marines, in 1998, I've been working as a newspaper reporter in Leelanau County.

Although I attend a lot of A.A. meetings in Leelanau County, I consider my current home group to be the West End Group here in Traverse City where I'm a regular at the "We Agnostics" meeting every Friday at 7 p.m.

Tonight, this particular meeting began – as almost all A.A. meetings do -- with a prayer and some readings from A.A. literature. The portion of Chapter Five of our Big Book that was read aloud, "How It Works," invoked the name of God no fewer than six times. And this meeting will close with yet another prayer to God.

So, I hope you won't mind if I spend a little time here tonight talking about God in relation to my own experience, strength and hope as an alcoholic with long-term sobriety in A.A.

God and I go way back. I was raised in a loving and stable household where alcohol played no role in our lives, but faith in God played a central role. At my own request, my parents sent me to a religious high school where I took four years of Bible classes and attended chapel at school every day in addition to church every Sunday.

My high school was, and still is, a really excellent school; and I enjoyed my time there immensely. The school was filled with people I loved and respected and still do. We spent a great deal of time there learning about God and studying His word.

But I found that the more I studied our religion the more questions I had. In fact, I came to a point in my high school career where my questions grew so troublesome that I felt I could no longer call myself a Christian.

This put me at odds with my own family and nearly all of my classmates – something I didn't like, something I wanted to rectify. On breaks from school, I would sometimes spend days in prayer and

fasting, often begging God to grant me some insight that would end my doubt and would give me some faith in Him.

But I remained profoundly confused about whether God exists -- and even whether I could trust my own thinking on the subject. I didn't consider myself an atheist or an agnostic -- just a mixed-up teenager who would eventually get it all sorted out.

At the age of 18, I went to Michigan State University when the legal drinking age here in Michigan was 18. Life in the dorm at Michigan State was a revelation. I found I really liked smoking marijuana. And I found I was much better than most people at drinking and holding my liquor.

I completed a reasonably successful freshman year at Michigan State but decided I was more interested in travel and adventure than studying. I spent several months hitchhiking out west, into Mexico, and crisscrossing the United States before I wound up in Florida with not enough money to return to college.

So, in 1973, at the tender age of 19, I enlisted in the Marines. By that time, the war in Southeast Asia was mostly behind us. Nonetheless, I found myself directly involved in the war's final chapter -- the U.S. evacuations of Cambodia and Vietnam. I was literally on the second to the last American helicopter to leave Cambodia just as the communists began turning it into a killing field.

During the evacuation of Saigon I also found myself in harm's way. Even though I experienced some moments of fear, I can report that it never once occurred to me to pray for divine protection.

I had a very successful first enlistment in the Marines and made sergeant in less than two years. I even had some fun, and definitely learned how to drink like a Marine.

At the end of my active duty obligation, I returned to Michigan State University on the G.I. Bill and resumed my studies. As positive as my experience in the military had been overall, I didn't let that get in the way of my playing the part of a whacked-out Vietnam veteran who had some really good excuses for all the hard core boozing and drugging I was doing.

It wasn't long before I and others around me noticed that I could not control my drinking. Increasingly, I could not stay sober long enough even to make it to class, and I was soon flunking out of college. A friend of mine suggested I should consider going to Alcoholics Anonymous, so I did.

I went to my very first A.A. meeting in 1979 at the Alano Club on the west side of Lansing. When I entered the building, there was a guy there who certainly looked to me like he could be an alcoholic -- and he was. He was perched on one of the stools they had at a coffee bar in the club, chain-smoking unfiltered cigarettes. He informed me that if I had a problem with alcohol, I was in the right place, and that the best thing I could do is get down on my knees TODAY and ask God for help.

I told him I really didn't understand much about God and wasn't sure I ever would. But he made it clear that he understood quite a bit the Supreme Being, was in touch with Him daily, and that I needed to get in touch with God, too, if I expected to have any hope of ever getting sober.

I don't remember what that guy's name was, but in the years that followed, it seems like I kept running into him – or at least someone very similar to him – just about every time I showed up at an A.A. meeting. Over the decades he's morphed into a kind of composite A.A. character for me– a guy I think of as "Vern."

I apologize if anyone here tonight is actually named "Vern," but Vern has been a very important figure in my A.A. experience through the years.

The very first A.A. meeting I ever attended, a noon meeting, started a lot like the one here today – with a prayer and a reading of How It Works.

Then, a bunch of guys who were on lunch break from their assembly line jobs at the Oldsmobile plant in Lansing began telling me all about their broken dreams, their broken families, their years in prison – and how I needed to be more like them so I could gain knowledge of God's will for me and the power to carry it out just as they had.

To a man, they insisted that A.A. is not religious. Then, when it came time to end the meeting, they asked me to join hands with them and recite what I recognized instantly to be from the Christian New Testament, the book of Matthew, Chapter 6, verses 9 through 13: The Lord's Prayer.

It became obvious to me by the end of my very first A.A. meeting that Alcoholics Anonymous was, in fact, a religious cult that was in denial about being religious. As a result of that experience it would be years before I ever returned to A.A. – a period during which I could easily have died as a result of my alcoholism, and almost did on several occasions.

In fact, things were going so badly for me at Michigan State that a Veterans Administration physician diagnosed me as an acute, chronic alcoholic and admitted me to the V.A. Hospital in Battle Creek for treatment. I found that many of those undergoing treatment at that facility were far worse off than even those losers at the Alano club in Lansing. After I was off booze long enough to feel better, I checked myself out of the V.A. Hospital weeks before completing their alcohol rehab program.

It was then that I figured out what I really needed to do to. At that time, I still had a Reserve obligation as a Marine. So, I decided that I would re-enlist for another two years of active duty in the Marines.

What followed was a series of attempted "geographic cures" for my alcoholism that took me to Camp Lejeune, North Carolina and through numerous deployments all over the world. And it almost worked.

Around 1982, however, the Marine Corps started making everyone undergo urinalysis tests for illegal drugs including my favorite, marijuana. We called the testing program "Operation Golden Flow."

So, I stopped smoking pot. But my alcoholism took off like a skyrocket. I was even pulled over by the Military Police for drunk driving on base and, as a result, was ordered to go to some A.A. meetings.

But A.A. hadn't changed. In the meantime, I had also read the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous very carefully, and it became clear that I would never be able to make it in A.A. unless I believed in a God of my own understanding.

And sure enough, when I showed up at an A.A. meeting outside the main gate at Camp Lejeune, who should be there but my old buddy Vern – or someone very much like him. Vern reminded me once again, that while I could certainly be a member of A.A. without believing in God, I would never have what A.A. has to offer, and would probably never stay sober for long, unless I got God.

By that time I was getting so desperate, that I just went ahead, got down on my knees one more time and asked God for help. In addition to praying for knowledge of God's will for me and the power to carry it out, I also prayed that He would grant me some faith – some reason to believe that God even exists.

Vern told me that the A.A. program demands rigorous honesty. But if I had trouble believing in God, Vern told me, I would just need to fake it until I make it.

So, I prayed and prayed, but nothing happened. I remained just as ignorant and confused about God as I'd been for the past 15 years, and stopped going to meetings.

But I did get another set of orders – to Marine Headquarters in Washington, D.C. Yet another geographic cure seemed to work yet again – at least for a little while. But in less than a year, I found myself hospitalized, for the second time, with a physician's diagnosis of acute, chronic alcoholism.

Part of the treatment for alcoholism at the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, Maryland involved going to A.A. meetings in the Washington, D.C. area. My main counselor at Bethesda was a Marine Master Gunnery Sergeant with more than 10 years of sobriety in A.A. who told me his higher power was the Commandant of the Marine Corps.

By that time, I had fully conceded to my innermost self that I was an alcoholic. This is the first step in recovery, according to Chapter 3 of our Big Book, "More about Alcoholism."

Through the process of going to A.A. meetings, I came to believe that people really were getting sober and staying sober in A.A. – and that, probably, A.A. could restore me to sanity as well. In trying to work Step 2, it seemed to me that people in A.A. were helping each other stay sober, and that the fellowship of A.A. was clearly far more powerful than I could ever hope to be on my own.

Working step two did not involve any leap of faith for me. I could plainly see with my own eyes how much people can and do rely on each other to get through hard times. I knew this as a Marine.

I had learned in boot camp at Parris Island, South Carolina, and through many deployments overseas, that we Marines have something called "Esprit de Corps." Esprit is a French word meaning "spirit," and Corps, spelled C-O-R-P-S, means the body, or group, of Marines.

I learned that Marines can overcome seemingly insurmountable and life-threatening odds by relying on the spiritual bond they develop with each other through shared hardship and adversity. And I, like most Marines, was “Gung Ho” about that. Gung Go is a Chinese battle cry that means “Working Together.”

The spiritual power I saw in A.A. seemed to be a lot like the powerful human spirit I’d experienced as a Marine -- esprit de corps. I also observed that members of A.A., like many Marines, were committed to helping each other, to working together – to being “gung ho.”

And even though I had no understanding of any kind of supernatural power that anyone might call God, I felt I had a sufficient enough grasp of Step Two to take Step Three, and make a decision.

I made a decision while I was still in rehab that I would stop trying to rely on my own will to stay sober, and try it with A.A.’s help. I decided that even after I got out of rehab, I would continue to go to A.A. meetings, and to the very best of my ability do all of the things that A.A. suggested I should do to stay sober.

One of those suggestions involved getting a sponsor. At one of the A.A. meetings I’d been to a few times, there was a guy I noticed who seemed a little different. When they closed meetings with the Lord’s Prayer, his lips weren’t moving.

After one meeting, I asked him what was up with that, and he said he was an atheist. His name was Robert, and he had 10 years of sobriety. He became my very first sponsor in A.A., although I’ve had many more since then. These days, Robert has 42 years of sobriety in A.A. and lives in South Carolina, and I’m still in touch with him. He’s still an atheist, and his still one of my sponsors.

When I first met Robert, I had never professed to be an atheist or an agnostic – just a “blithering idiot” who didn’t really get any of this God stuff in A.A. I found that identifying myself as a “blithering idiot” at A.A. meetings went over far better than identifying myself as an atheist or agnostic.

After all, A.A.’s co-founder, Dr. Bob, wrote on Page 181 of our Big Book that he felt sorry for atheists and agnostics whose intellectual pride prevented them believing in the God he believed in.

I’d also read the book “Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions,” written by A.A.’s other co-founder; Bill W. On Page 28 of that book, Bill made it clear that he thought atheists and agnostics were “indifferent” and “prejudiced” and “defiant” – assertions I knew to be untrue.

In Chapter Four of the Big Book, titled “We Agnostics,” Bill declared flatly that God “has come to all who have honestly sought him.”

Of course, I knew through personal experience that Bill W. was simply wrong on that point. I had been seeking God as honestly, open-mindedly and willingly as I could for many years, and God still hadn’t come to me.

I shared with my first sponsor, Robert, how troubled I was by much of what I was hearing around the tables and reading in the A.A. literature about God. I told him I thought a lot of A.A. seemed like religious nonsense -- but obviously I'd have to get over that if I expected to stay sober in A.A.

My sponsor told me there was a simple reason I felt there was a lot of religious nonsense in A.A. It's because there really is a lot of religious nonsense in A.A. The good news, my sponsor told me, is that A.A. works anyway. You really can take what you need and leave the rest.

My sponsor agreed that I should do as he did and try working the 12 suggested steps of A.A. to the best of my ability and understanding. Like him, I would probably need to interpret the steps so that they would make sense to me. It would also be a good idea, he said, to not drink and go to lots of A.A. meetings.

In my first year of sobriety, some really good things began happening to me, and my career as a Marine began taking off. I was ordered to go to Syracuse University where I completed my bachelor's degree. While in Syracuse, I found a new sponsor who helped me do a Fourth and Fifth Step.

I then got orders to California where I went through the same drill I'd gone through at my two previous duty stations -- go to 90 A.A. meetings in 90 days, and find a new sponsor. And guess who stepped up to be my next sponsor out in California. Let's call him Vern.

I'd already made a decision to turn my will and my life over to a power greater than myself and I assured Vern that I would do exactly as he said. Vern, of course, wanted me to pray every morning and every evening. So, with all the earnestness at my command, I prayed twice daily for God to help me stay sober another day, thanked him each night, and asked for knowledge of His will for me and the power to carry that out.

I also prayed, earnestly, to develop some faith in God because Vern and a lot of other people in A.A. were telling me I wouldn't make it past my second year in A.A. unless I started relying on a God of my own understanding.

Around that time, I began to notice that the Sixth Step had started working me. I became entirely ready to have my defects of character removed --but only when those defects of character began hurting me.

After about a year and a half of sobriety my conscience and my empathy for others were slowly growing back. I found that whenever I acted like a self-centered jerk and said hurtful things to people, I actually felt like a self-centered jerk -- and it made me feel bad.

Following guidance from my sponsor, I then worked the seventh step and humbly asked God to remove my shortcomings.

Nothing happened. What I found was that I had to take responsibility for my own defects of character and, on a day-at-a-time basis, simply stop acting like a self-centered jerk.

It occurred to me that there was nothing particularly earth-shattering or even very original about A.A.'s 12 suggested steps. For the most part, the steps seemed like the kinds of things that all relatively normal, well-adjusted grownups probably did naturally if they were nice people. This included things like making amends to people they had harmed, so I did that.

Continuing to take personal inventory and promptly admitting when you're wrong, Step 10, also seemed like some pretty common sense advice that I found it easy to follow.

As for the 11<sup>th</sup> Step, I have found that taking some time for quiet reflection is a good exercise. In fact, science has shown that some significant mental and physical health benefits can be derived from certain types of meditation.

As for prayer, I spent most of my second year in sobriety getting on my knees twice a day and praying, just as my sponsor at the time had instructed me. And good things continue to happen to me. I got a new set of orders to the officers Basic School in Quantico, Virginia, and the next thing I knew, people were saluting me another and calling me sir. Then, I got orders to Hawaii.

In the process of putting my old sponsor, Vern, behind me, I got out of the habit of praying as Vern had instructed. But I did keep going to A.A. meetings on a regular and frequent basis, and not drinking. I stayed sober and my life continued to get better.

What I discovered through this transition is that A.A. works perfectly well when you pray. But I also found that A.A. works just as well if you don't pray.

In fact, A.A. works a little better when you're being honest about your own, authentic experience, strength and hope in sobriety – and not pretending to engage in telepathic conversations with an invisible supernatural being.

In fact, it's been almost three decades now since I prayed the way the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous says I should pray – and I've managed not only to stay sober, but my life has also continued to get better in sobriety.

When I was stationed in Hawaii my home group was a Step Study Group for which I was the Group Service Representative. I also sponsored several men. I went to a lot of A.A. meetings throughout the Pacific basin, Korea, Japan, the Philippines, and on U.S. Navy ships at sea.

After a few years, I received orders back to the mainland, to the East Coast. At the time, America was heading for its next war, and I soon found myself heading there as well.

During Operation Desert Storm in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, I earned my second Combat Action Ribbon – the Marines' equivalent of the Army's combat infantryman's badge.

Just for the record, ladies and gentlemen, there are atheists in foxholes. And if anyone tells you differently, they are either ignorant or they are liars.

It's been my experience that the atheists in foxholes are the ones most likely to be doing something productive – like digging deeper foxholes.

As for A.A., my unit was usually either moving so fast or dug in so deep that I didn't make to very many A.A. meetings during the Persian Gulf War. I did attend a couple of A.A. meetings in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia at the Marine Expeditionary Force headquarters, but mostly relied on letters from my many A.A. friends back in the U.S.

After the Gulf War, the Marines sent me to the University of Oklahoma where I earned a master's degree. Pretty soon after that I found myself heading for Africa to participate in Operation Restore Hope in Somalia.

**In A.A.**, our Second Tradition talks about a “loving God” who does things like “express Himself in our Group conscience” -- among many other miracles He supposedly performs for those of us lucky enough to be in A.A.

But the Somali people weren't having much luck. In fact, there wasn't much sign of a loving God at all when I was working in Africa. The Somalis were in the midst of a civil war in which thousands of innocent men, women and children were being systematically brutalized and butchered on a daily basis. Horrendous human suffering and famine were occurring on a Biblical scale.

It was in this environment that I and a few other U.S. military service members started an A.A. meeting in beautiful downtown Mogadishu. We met on the sprawling U.S. embassy compound where the military's joint task force headquarters was located, surrounded by a number of high rise buildings.

Our meeting was attended by myself and usually four or five other active duty personnel. It was so hot in Somalia that we decided to meet outdoors under a tree.

That turned out to be a mistake. At our very first meeting, our little gathering of drunks was targeted by a Somali sniper from one of the nearby high rises. Fortunately, the sniper was a bad shot.

The next time we met, a few days later, we selected a different location on the opposite side of the compound – but sure enough, we took fire again. After that, we made a point of meeting under cover indoors, despite the heat.

It was our little A.A. group's inside joke that we closed our meeting in the usual manner by shouting “Incoming!” So, yes, I have actually had a couple of A.A. meetings shot out from under me.

About a year after I returned from Somalia I married my wife, Gail. We and our two tiny children were stationed in California in 1998 when I retired from the Marines and we moved to Leelanau County.

For about a decade, up in Suttons Bay, Gail was the treasurer and I was the coffeemaker at the Sunday night Big Book Study Group meeting in the basement of Saint Michael's Church.

On the occasion of my 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary in A.A. I was asked to be the speaker at a monthly open talk in Leland where, in front of much of our local A.A. community in Leelanau County, I confessed that I had



not been as honest and open about my authentic experience, strength and hope in A.A. as I really ought to have been and intended to be going forward.

At that meeting I formally “came out” as someone who explicitly does not believe in God. I was no longer willing to call myself a “blithering idiot” any more. Call me an atheist, an agnostic, a freethinker, a secular humanist – whatever -- I don’t claim to know that God does not exist. I simply don’t have the knowledge or faith that any God does exist.

And I certainly don’t believe in the God that is clearly preferred by authors of the Big Book.

I am grateful, however, that back in the 1930’s there was another atheist in A.A., named Jimmy B., who convinced his fellow alcoholics to insert the italicized words “as we understood him,” after at least two of the four direct references to God in the 12 steps.

Jimmy kicked the door of A.A. open just wide enough for people like me to squeeze in. He died in 1974 with over 36 years of sobriety – still not believing in any kind of God.

But most of our A.A. literature clearly advocates for a belief in God – and not a God of just any old understanding.

The God that is read about aloud at almost every A.A. meeting around here is clearly a God who intervenes in individual human lives – a God who can restore you to sanity, a God to whom you can turn over your will and your life. A God who will perform miracles for you, such as removing your defects of character, as long as you humbly ask Him to do so.

The God of Chapter Five, “How It Works,” is not an acronym such as “Good Orderly Direction” or “Group of Drunks” that happens to spell out the word God in the English language.

This God is not generic. This is a supernatural, monotheistic God – the kind you can talk to, and who talks back. A God who, if you pray to him, will give you knowledge of His will for you and the power to carry it out. And He’s probably male.

And while it’s true that nowhere in our literature does it say that you must believe in a God of any understanding in order to be a member of our fellowship, at nearly every meeting we let newcomers know that “there is One who has all power – that One is God. May you find Him now. Half measures availed us nothing.”

Then we close nearly every A.A. meeting around here with a ritual recitation of Christian Holy Scripture, words which any student of the Bible can tell you are believed to be those of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ Himself, the Lord’s Prayer.

But we’re not religious.

I have observed over the years that when newcomers come to A.A. they are invariably hurting, confused and desperate. But they are not all stupid.

Increasingly, newcomers are showing up at A.A.'s doors, but then, at the earliest opportunity, they are turning right around and never coming back.

A.A.'s own official survey data support this conclusion. Periodically, our A.A. General Service Office in New York commissions a scientific study to estimate the size and composition of our membership. The fact is that in the mid 1990's, A.A. membership in North America plateaued at about 2 million members and hasn't grown since.

Since the mid 1990's however, the overall U.S. population has continued to grow. That means that in proportion to the overall population, a shrinking number of people per capita are joining A.A. and staying with it.

Meanwhile, other survey data have revealed that one of the fastest growing demographics in the U.S. is the percentage of people who identify their religion as "none."

Just a couple of decades ago, that percentage was in the single digits. Today, roughly one in four Americans claims no religious affiliation. For those under the age of 30, the figure is one in three.

It's not unreasonable to conclude that A.A. is not growing in part because fewer and fewer people are willing to buy in to A.A.'s religiosity. And the new generation of alcoholics in our society aren't the only ones who have a problem with A.A.'s religious nature.

A growing number of judges in state and federal courts across the U.S. have ruled that A.A. is, in fact, religious. Just this past October, for example, a man in California was awarded nearly \$2 million after he was thrown back in prison for respectfully declining to participate in a 12-step treatment program that required him to pray.

There is a growing body of case law that is already starting to inhibit the ability of judges in some states to sentence people to attend A.A. meetings. Many courts have ruled that forcing non-religious people to attend A.A. is a clear violation of religious freedom rights under the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

Now might be a good time to bring up Step 12. My decision to be more honest with my fellows in A.A. about the fact that I don't believe in God represents a form of spiritual growth for me, a continued spiritual awakening.

I decided on the occasion of my 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary in A.A. to start doing a better job of carrying A.A.'s message of hope to everyone and anyone who has a desire to stop drinking – whether or not they're willing to believe in any kind of God.

I've found that at many A.A. meetings, people who express any doubts or disbeliefs about A.A.'s supernatural program of recovery are frequently subjected to instant rebuttal, correction, and sometimes downright hostility. This is especially so for newcomers.

It even happens to old-timers like me. At a meeting I attended recently, where I mentioned that I don't believe in God, a guy with less than a year of sobriety in A.A. felt comfortable enough to look down his nose at me and say, "Well, keep comin' back!"

In fact, you can read a story in this month's A.A. Grapevine by an atheist with 27 years of sobriety who says she's routinely treated poorly at A.A. meetings in her town just for being an out-of-the-closet atheist.

I am aware of only one A.A. meeting anywhere within a three hour drive of Traverse City that deliberately strives to be a secular A.A. meeting rather than a religious A.A. meeting. That's our We Agnostics meeting every Friday at 7 p.m. at the West End Group.

Although membership in A.A. has not grown since the mid-1990's, according to A.A.'s own statistics, there is at least one segment of A.A. that is growing. The number of We Agnostics meetings and similar A.A. meetings has quadrupled in the U.S. and Canada in just the past few years.

Just four months ago, in November, I had the honor of attending the first ever We Agnostics, Atheists and Freethinkers International A.A Convention in Santa Monica, California. In addition to the 300 or so "non-believers" in attendance were some of official A.A.'s most trusted servants.

These included the current manager of A.A.'s General Service Office, who flew in from New York, as well as a longtime member and Chairman Emeritus of A.A.'s General Service Board.

Their participation in this convention underscored the fact that A.A.'s We Agnostics movement has strong backing within A.A. as a whole.

If you're interested, you can read the December 2014 edition of our official A.A. District newsletter here in Traverse City, the Camel Courier, which contains a comprehensive report on the convention. The Camel Courier is available online through the Traverse City Central Office website.

While you're at it, you could also check out [AAAgnostica.org](http://AAAgnostica.org) online as well as We Agnostics, Atheists and Freethinkers – [WAAFT.org](http://WAAFT.org) – also online. I've left a stack of flyers with more information on the literature table.

One of the things that's been most important to me in my own sobriety has been the realization that Alcoholics Anonymous is much more than a book that was written 75 years ago by a small group of middle-aged Christian white guys – most of whom had been sober only a few years at the time.

And Alcoholics Anonymous is far more than just a 12 Step program, although do have 12 steps which are suggested as a program of recovery.

A.A. itself is not actually a program at all. In fact, 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 to recover from alcoholism." WE are A.A.

I know very well that at practically every A.A. meeting around here we hear that “Probably no human power could have relieved our Alcoholism,” and that “God could and would if He were sought.”

My experience has been that in A.A. we help each other stay sober. Every time I walk into an A.A. meeting, I can see a mountain of evidence that it probably is human power that helps us stay sober. That’s because, I have observed that every person I’ve ever seen at an A.A. meeting is a human being.

For me, the program of 12 suggested steps represents a common language we use in our fellowship, a common set of principles for living good lives, for understanding each other’s progress in sobriety, and for sharing our individual experience, strength and hope.

I can and do recommend the 12 steps to anyone; I’ve worked them myself to the best of my ability and suggest you do too if you’re an alcoholic who wants to stay sober. But the 12 suggested steps are not sacred. They’re not a magic formula that must be followed exactly in order to work.

The magic, if you will -- the true therapeutic value in A.A. -- comes from one alcoholic talking to another. Something amazing happens when we start spending a little time with other people who don’t want to drink, who want to help us stay sober, and hope we’ll help them stay sober too. If we hang out with those people on a regular and frequent basis, our chances of actually staying sober are far better than they might otherwise be.

Even if we’re just hanging out with those people a couple of times a week in a church basement, sipping crummy decaffeinated coffee and talking about how to live a sober life – being a part of this fellowship, and remaining close to it, is the single most effective thing we can do to stay sober in addition to not picking up the first drink.

Believe me, I understand why people would get tired of going to A.A. meetings where a majority of those in attendance seem to believe that their invisible supernatural friend is helping them stay sober – not their real, human friends all around them in our fellowship.

I also understand why someone who doesn’t believe in God – or who doesn’t believe in the God of the Big Book or the Christian religion – isn’t too happy about joining hands with strangers and reciting verses from the Christian Holy Scripture at the end of every meeting.

For the record, the A.A. General Service Conference-approved pamphlet “The A.A. Group” notes that all A.A. groups are autonomous and are free to close their meetings any way they want. You could, for example, close in the usual manner by sacrificing a goat to the Old Testament god Yahweh – and you wouldn’t be breaking any A.A. rules.

But there’s only one recitation that the A.A. General Service Conference has specifically endorsed by name to close an A.A. meeting. That’s the A.A Responsibility Declaration, and it goes like this:

“I am responsible. When anyone, anywhere reaches out for help, I want the hand of A.A. always to be there. And for that, I am responsible.”

That's how we end our We Agnostics meeting every week. By the way, the only readings we do as part of the meeting format come directly from the Big Book or are A.A. General Service Conference-approved. Instead of reading from Chapter Five of the Big Book, we read from Chapter Three which is entirely secular. Anyone with a desire to stop drinking is welcome to attend the We Agnostics meeting.

I am acutely aware that a recitation of the Responsibility Declaration is not how this particular A.A. meeting is likely to end tonight.

But when we do all join hands, and most of us start reciting the Lord's Prayer, I'll be keeping my eyes open, looking for the people whose lips aren't moving. And maybe we'll see them at the We Agnostics meeting next Friday night.

Thank you for your attention. (I see that we do have a little time left. I'd be more than happy to answer any questions from the floor at this time. If not, please feel free to approach me after the meeting.)