

life-j

My Collected Published Articles in the AA Secular, Agnostic, Atheist & Freethinkers Online Community



AA Beyond Belief
A space for agnostics, atheists and freethinkers in AA



AA Agnostica

<http://aaagnostica.org/>

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As of this printing, oct 2017, of what I have had published so far, the doctors have given me one to two years to live. I'm taking it one day at a time. I'm taking a lot of time to write, while I can. A couple of other articles are in the pipeline already, and as things are published I will add them to the back of the book.

My Path in AA

Posted on [June 30, 2013](#) AA Agnostica



By life-j.

The path was not easy for this agnostic in AA.

I was an atheist when I got sober, as arrogant as most people with staunchly held beliefs. Sober, I have still never felt the presence of a god, but I have come to be open-minded to accept that if other people think there is one, that's fine and none of my business, so long as they don't try to make me believe there is. But for a long time well meaning old-timers did, and of course I tried to believe them. I wanted to work this program right. Took more than ten years before they quit pestering me, and another ten before I could speak my mind freely about it.

The chapter "We Agnostics" in the big book at least acknowledged that there were people like me, but then it forged right ahead with arguing for the existence of god, and the assumption that surely sooner or later I would find god too. It was only a matter of staying sober a little longer and coming to my senses.

And I read the Big Book and even Came to Believe, but I never did.

I found a humanist meeting which I attended, and later I found another meeting where there was no "Lord's Prayer" at the end. It always offended me to have this piece of Christianity imposed upon me. The closing prayer was the one time during an AA meeting where I would feel truly alone, unless I spotted someone else in the circle with their lips sealed. Then we'd smile at each other and not feel so alone any more.

* * *

So I'm going to write about how I stayed sober without a higher power, and developed a spirituality which helped.

When a person comes into AA with even some inclination toward accepting a Christian-like god, there is already a well laid out program for them. Most of our literature is focused on this god, even with the caveat "as we understood him," but when the God concept remains completely foreign to us, we have to develop a spirituality all on our own. The kind of help that I could accept was scant and far between in the beginning. Finding a sponsor who wouldn't harass me about finding a higher power was real difficult.

One of the reasons that I don't like the higher power concept, and that the religious people are so insistent on it, is that it creates a continuum intended to sneak god in the back door. I can let the group be my higher power they say, but the idea is they aren't really content with that. Sooner or later they expect me to find the real god who isn't just any higher power, but the boss of all higher powers.

I could have the group as my higher power, but why? True, I depend on the group to help me stay sober and grow, and with the help of the group I can do things I likely could not do on my own, but why does that have to make it a higher power?

We all accept the saying that two heads think better than one. So does that mean that the two heads together now become a higher power to the individual heads? Why is it not just two heads thinking together?

Or, like an AA friend of mine says, try lifting a heavy sack alone. It can be tough. Now try two of you together, it gets easier, now try four, of course it gets still easier, and the four of us together can lift something much heavier than one person can all alone. Where exactly does the higher power concept become needed to explain this? This is all the group does, lifts a burden together. We are doing together what we could never do alone. I simply see it as a level field, and no higher power needed to explain how this program works.

The group is not my higher power, nothing is my higher power, and just because I don't have a higher power, does not mean that I am playing god, and just because I figure that there is no god in charge, does not mean that I am, or think I am, or that I am trying to be god.

Maybe this "playing god" was a problem for the high powered Type A professionals and businessmen who started this program, but my problem was fear, not a big ego. If it sometimes looked that way, maybe it was because of fear of losing territory, fear of losing respect, or love or money or whatever, sometimes fear of not getting what I wanted. I had two ways of dealing with it: Try to control the situation, or drink my feeling of failure away when it was obvious I couldn't control it.

So now sober, I couldn't stop trying to play god like they told me to because I never had to begin with. I had only done whatever it would take in the moment to not feel

whatever I was about to feel, usually fear, and a poor choice which would take that bad feeling away right now was better than a good choice which would have solved the problem in five minutes.

Of course when I was drinking I was arrogant, self-centered, and self-serving, and it caused me all sorts of trouble. But is it not possible to find a way out of self-centeredness and self will without putting it in relation to the will of a god? Either it is my will, or god's will, they say, but where does god really fit into this? Can I not simply stop imposing my selfishness on the world with the help of other recovering alcoholics? With careful consideration of what sort of results self-centeredness got me, and compared to what sort of results a courteous, considerate, helpful manner of living gets me? Why is a god needed to explain that one works well, and the other doesn't? Isn't simple, common sense enough?

* * *

So finally I came to a place of some humility. And here we need to talk about surrender.

This can be a hard concept to swallow at first, because we suspect that probably it again means surrender to a "higher power," or even a god. But is not surrender possible even without it being "to" anything? All it means is to say, "OK, I give up being selfish, self centered and self serving. I become teachable, service minded, and as generous and kind as I am able to be without opening myself to being deliberately taken advantage of by anybody." Isn't that enough? Why do I have to offer myself to a "thee"? I am offering myself to my fellow alcoholic, and my fellow man at large. AA is about one alcoholic talking with another, not about talking with god.

Surrender requires acceptance. And acceptance is not required because "nothing absolutely nothing happens in god's world by mistake," but rather because without first accepting myself as I am, I have no honest self appraisal on which I can base change. I wasn't playing god, I was just hard-headed. God or no god, acceptance is just to gain peace, to have a starting point from which to move forward.

* * *

I have learned that I don't need to have answers to all the world's big questions, nor let anyone else impose them on me. That I can't explain how the world came to be, or don't think a god made it does not mean that since I can't explain it, someone who can explain it with that god did it is more right than me. As far as I'm concerned, saying god did it is no better explanation than that nothing did it. All that religious conviction just seems arrogant. But maybe there is a god who did it, I don't know, and I don't need to know, and I don't care, in the end.

If I were an astrophysicist I might be pondering where the universe came from, but as a lay person and as an alcoholic it is sufficient for me to know that it is there. I don't need to make it any more complicated than that. The universe is there. And all the

things in it are in it. And regardless of how much it is a wonder that the sun rises and bumblebees can fly, it is simply not my business to know whether it came to be this way because god made it so, or because of inherent laws in the universe, or by some infinitesimal chance it came to be so out of complete chaos. The bottom line still is I'm not in charge, and have every bit as much reason to be humble either way! Can I change the natural laws? Can I control chaos? I wasn't playing god. I just thought I had to do it all alone, and now I know I need help, and it's ok to ask my fellow recovering alcoholics for it.

But I have had to rewrite the whole program for myself, mostly by myself, and it has not been easy. I think it is finally coming together. God or no god, this is a spiritual program but let's keep it simple. It just consists of honesty, open-mindedness, willingness, humility, service, and living by the golden rule. It means doing the right thing, and if I work my program diligently, I will know what the right thing is, whether I pray for the knowledge for God's will for me or not, and if I do the right thing I will have no reason to drink, because I will be ok with me.

I have had to rewrite the steps for myself. I have to have faith that somehow this program will work for me, but that is all the justification for steps 2 and 3 that I have found. Some sort of personal inventory, and sharing it with another person is necessary, steps 4 and 5. The three elements of early AA, confession, restitution, and service, together with self examination are really the only essential elements in my program. And though they are rather Christian of origin, they work for me too, because and I am part of that Christian culture whether I believe in its god or not. Thinking along Christian lines comes easy to me since I grew up with it.

Self reflection does not come easy, though it is a prerequisite for growth. To actually come to think about what makes me tick, and if everything I think and do is right and just and for a good purpose in the greater scheme of things. Not just for my own selfish ends, but whether it makes the world at large a better place. It starts out a bit like the big question in the movie American History X: Has anything you have done made your life better?

Sure the AA fellowship has saved this alcoholic's life, though not because it is a higher power, but simply because of the love and help of the people in it, because together we can do what we could never do alone, like they say in another program's Unity "Prayer."

Sure I have seen a lot of people with a God who have had a much swifter recovery than me. Picking up the "ready made" toolkit has many advantages. However, having walked my own paths in this program I have had to turn every stone in my search for a spiritual life. And being forced to grope around on my own, spiritually – and that has largely been the case for many years – looking back at it I think I have probably grown more, and in ways I otherwise never would have, if I had just taken on some sort of ready made Christian god concept and gone with it. All the answers and concepts a Christian can take for granted in this program, I have had to ponder deeply, and that, like any spiritual exercise, has given me much good growth. So I'm

quite content with the course of my own recovery. I'm very grateful for all I have learned within or from AA these last 25 years.

* * *

The last few years have been real different.

First thing that happened was that the girlfriend left. She later came back, and the time I had on my hands to ponder what made for a good relationship has helped. She has since joined one of the programs, and it's good to have a common spiritual framework.

Feeling sorry for myself while I sat alone out here in a mountain village, I discovered AA online.

It was way better than nothing at all, but people were just hanging out, flirting, or talking about guns, sports, TV, and hating socialists, or being obnoxious in some other manner. Hey, I guess there has to be an online place for all that, too. But when they took time for newcomers it was usually by throwing the Big Book and god at them – go read the doctor's opinion and pray. And it was all done with AA scripture lingo: If you aren't ready to go to any length, just go back out and try some controlled drinking. But rarely did the newcomers get more than two minutes of attention from half the room. I started to not like old-timers anymore.

Luckily I got to hook up with several people along the way who felt like me – that these online chat rooms should be about helping the newcomers – and eventually we found a place to set up a room we call the [Living Sober Room](#), a place where we drop everything when newcomers show up, and help them all we can.

Another thing that happened over the last year was an initiative at the Conference level to develop AA literature acknowledging that alcoholics and agnostics can stay sober in AA. We know how that ended: [The General Service Conference Stumbles](#). The backlash against non-believers in AA that I have observed in recent years, including the White Paper, has made me realize the extent to which AA has become fossilized.

We as a fellowship need to take inventory, and when we are wrong promptly admit it. Instead the Big Book has become scripture, and the god people resist any change. For most of my time in AA I lived by a [Don't Tell](#) policy, but I have had to come out of the closet, as it were, and say out loud I'm an agnostic, and I'm now working on putting together a freethinkers meeting here in my area. I'm meeting more closed-mindedness and unwillingness every step of the way.

The bright spot in all of it is that I have once again, like when I first got sober, found others like myself – this time at the AA Agnostica website, and books and other support material to go along with it. I once again no longer have to feel alone. It is giving me the courage to pick up the responsibility I have toward all the alcoholic

non-believers that come into AA to let them know they can stay sober in spite of the god stuff, if they just keep showing up.

My first sponsor, incidentally a devout catholic, told me two things, that I heard, anyway: One was don't ever stop going to meetings, and the other that service work will keep you sober when nothing else will. Sometimes my program is reduced to that, but it's nice and uncluttered, and it worked up to now.

life-j got sober in Oakland in 1988. He moved to a Northern California coastal mountain village in 2002 and helped wake up the sleepy AA fellowship there. He's been involved in service work of every kind all along, but now thinks the most important work is to help atheists and agnostics feel safe and welcome in AA. He's spent parts of his life as a building contractor, part as a technical translator, and has dabbled a bit in art work and writing. life-j is now semi-retired on a five acre homestead together with his sweetie, and his dog, chickens, garden, and apple trees (one of the trees is the featured image for this post).

Our new chatroom!

Posted on [February 2, 2014](#) AA Agnostica

Please note: the chat room is no longer operational



By life-j.

We are starting a chat room here on AA Agnostica! And launching it officially today!

All are welcome to participate, of course. We want to be there “whenever anyone, anywhere reaches out for help.” But we hope to be of assistance in particular to the newcomer who has a problem with the religiosity of some AA meeting rooms, both in church basements and online.

Let me tell you a bit about my own experience.

I started going to online live chat rooms about four years ago. At the time, my girlfriend went off to China on a teaching assignment, and I was left in the middle of nowhere, with long lonely evenings, feeling really, really sorry for myself, even with many years of sobriety.

I have participated in a number of chat rooms since, including AAOnline, stepchat, LifeRing, and a few others, and they were a great help to me in many ways.

Several kinds of recovery related activities happen in these online meeting areas. There are formal AA meeting rooms where shares (typed and with no “cross-talk”) often tend to be not much more than AA slogans. Then there are more open chat rooms where people talk about everything: TV, football, guns, food, etc. That’s fine, since there has to be a place where sober alcoholics can just hang out together. But when newcomers wander in they are lucky if they get two minutes of attention and this often consists of having the Big Book thrown at them by a hardline oldtimer, and being told that “if they aren’t ready to go to any length,” they can go back out and drink until they are ready. I found this approach hard to take.

It is even more difficult, however, when newcomers come in who are non-believers. They often are immediately jumped on by AA fundamentalists, and ridden hard until they leave. I’m not used to seeing a whole lot of this in live meetings (referred to as

F2F – “Face to Face” – online) since I live in a fairly liberal area, but I began butting heads with some people in these online rooms. I imagine these fundies come from areas where AA is a lot more conservative, and although there were other easy going people in the rooms, their more relaxed approach often didn’t prevail.

So while these open online rooms were a great help to me, they are also where I began getting radicalized about being an agnostic.

More than I really wanted, really. I just wanted to live my recovery and help newcomers as best as I could, but now I am getting even deeper into taking action to accommodate these new and non-deist suffering alcoholics.

After witnessing and tolerating this for a while I found a place where we could at least have a “Living Sober Room,” a place where we could focus on the newcomers at length and – just like in our *Living Sober* book – leave the god stuff alone, and help them believe in the idea of not drinking.

You know, sit them down for a cup of cybercoffee, and help them make sense of recovery long enough to get them convinced, more or less, that going it alone is rarely good enough, and that going to live (F2F) meetings would help. Often we’d go online to help them find a meeting, if they dared tell us where they lived. Online you will meet newcomers who are way too scared to ever go to a live meeting. It’s safe because the exit is only a mouse click away, not all the way on the far side of a room full of staring people.

The Living Sober Room (LSR) worked really well for a couple of years, until the two of us who had worked the room regularly had changes happen to our lives that made it hard to keep up with it. My girlfriend came back; my LSR partner got a job.

Meanwhile I would get ever more bristly when god people badgered newcomers in the other chat rooms. But, you guessed it – mostly I bit my tongue.

AA Agnostica has really helped put things in motion. It is helping new agnostic and freethinkers meetings spring up all over. I started one here in my little Northern California mountain village. A few people come to support it from 50 miles away.

But we need a place where we agnostics can all meet each other easily, little by little, network, and share our recovery.

Thus an AA Agnostica chat room.

In many rural places the Wi-Fi speed is too slow for video to work, and that’s where the typing involved in a chat room is real good. In fact, in a group the typing is actually preferable, since everyone can type at once if they want to without it being a real problem, and moderation can be kept to a minimum.

For starters here at AA Agnostica, we are available in the chat room every single day of the week beginning at 5:30 PM Pacific time (8:30 Eastern). This is an open forum – not a formal meeting – with a moderator present to answer questions and, well, just chat. We will be there for at least 1/2 hour, and longer as needed.

We also have a formal AA meeting every Sunday at 9 AM (Pacific Time) (Noon, Eastern). This is a weekly meeting, one hour in length, and it starts today!

To mark this monumental day, and for this day only, the chat-room will be open all day, until 10 PM (Pacific Time) (1 AM Monday, Eastern). For now, all chatting will take place in the Lobby (except for the formal meeting mentioned above, which will be in a separate room).

You can see the schedule on the chat room page. Outside of the meeting and open forum times, when there is a moderator present, the rooms will be closed. If you happen by at those times, check out the schedule, and by all means, plan your return!

You will need to register and choose a user name. A password is sent to your email address (you can change it later). I'm life-j. May as well make it easy for people to remember your name instead of choosing wbratfunk2020 or something odd like that. How am I going to remember your name is Bob? My name is Life. But it's up to you.

We currently have three “moderators:” myself, Jaye and Annalia. As traffic in the chat room grows we will look to expand our available chat times and the number of meetings. We anticipate the need for more moderators to accommodate this increase and will approach people we get to know “in the rooms,” as they say, with the opportunity to join us in that capacity. Time will tell.

There are several nice features about the AA Agnostica chat room, such as different platforms like Flash and Java. I like Java: you can “float” the chat window independently of your browser, and place it anywhere on your screen, and minimize your browser window, and multitask. You can also open a one-on-one Private Chat – a “pc” with someone – or with several people at once while sitting in the main room, too. And, as needed, we can have different “rooms.” So, for example, if we want to have women's meetings, they can be set up in a separate room, accessed through the chat room lobby.

If you have any questions or suggestions, or run into any technical problems, you are welcome to contact me at chatroom@aaagnostica.org.

I look forward to seeing you in our chat room!

And thanks to AA Agnostica for providing yet another opportunity for we agnostics in AA.

In late 2014 we decided to take a sabbatical from the chat room – perhaps a permanent one. If you are looking for other online forums, please check with [Worldwide Agnostic Meetings \(Online\)](#).

Yet Another Intergroup Fight

Posted on [March 2, 2014](#) AA Agnostica



By life-j.

Laytonville, where I live, is a small coastal mountain valley village of about 2000 on Northern California's Highway 101, about 3 hours north of the Bay Area. This is a sparsely populated area. The next, smaller village is 25 miles north, the next, bigger one 25 miles south. Our local metropolis of 20,000 people, the seat of our local Intergroup, is 50 miles away. Laytonville is where I decided to start a Freethinkers meeting. There is good reason to think that this Freethinkers meeting could have gone practically un-noticed by the world, and AA, forever.

I had been thinking about doing it for a while, but when a newcomer came to our regular Laytonville Fellowship hall meeting, and introduced herself as an agnostic, it felt like it was time to act.

On the first Sunday in April of 2013 I approached Mendocino County Inland Intergroup with the idea of starting a freethinkers meeting. As I wrote to the chairman beforehand:

I'm toying with the idea of making a freethinkers meeting here in Laytonville. I presume you have heard of the group in Toronto that got excommunicated from intergroup for taking god out of the steps for the purposes of their freethinkers group, but otherwise kept the steps to be worked as always. Just want to explore whether we will get excommunicated too, or whether we're sufficiently freethinking here in Mendocino County to have a meeting without god. Or should I just quietly put it on the schedule, and not stir up any shit?

This was an Intergroup which up to this point had functioned quite well. I was going into my second year as a representative for my local fellowship, had served a term as co-chair, and had worked on a couple of things, including updating the bylaws.

So I got to introduce the issue, not as any old recovering alcoholic showing up at the meeting to petition, but as an actual voting member of Intergroup. My fellowship had supported my idea of making such a meeting, though they were reserved about my idea of changing the steps, and therefore eventually I decided to make it a separate group.

Some people had done service in intergroup for many years, pretty much the folks that cared about making it function, while many groups and individuals until now hadn't considered it worth the effort and had no representative.

Well, it didn't go so easy. After discussion in April, it was brought up for vote in May. It was tied, 4-4, with one person who claimed to be in favor abstaining, and the chairperson abstaining from breaking the tie, though she was in favor too, but a little concerned about causing trouble for herself. Back to more discussion.

What happened next was that the god focused faction went and rallied their forces. They denied this of course, but it is odd that they managed to line up representatives from all the hitherto un-represented groups, that all were on their side.

We were now busy getting polarized, focusing on "uniformity" instead of "unity".

I heard it said in the AA Agnostica chat room the other night: "Any argument that begins with "What if" is a fear based argument." And plenty of fears were voiced about how this group would be the doom of AA.

I guess I had really been quite innocent about the whole thing. I thought it would simply have been treated as a business item. On the back of our schedules it said:

Meetings included in the schedule are listed at their own request. A schedule listing does not constitute or imply approval or endorsement of any group's practice of the traditional program of Alcoholics Anonymous.

That the schedule says so must mean something, right? There must be some kind of meeting which is not endorsed, but is still listed – but doesn't look like it is ours.

A couple of times we approached a re-vote. But by now some of us were concerned that the god faction had gathered enough force to defeat listing the meeting, so we dragged our feet a bit. One of the more level-headed members suggested that we amend the bylaws to include:

This Intergroup shall have no control over the internal affairs, the management or conduct of any member group; complete independence of each group must be preserved.

AA Group defined: Any two or three alcoholics gathered together for sobriety may call themselves an A.A. group, provided that, as a group, they have no other affiliation. (Tradition Three, Long Form)

But it was drowned out in discussion. One member of the god faction even countered with a motion that in order for a meeting to be listed it had to use the original 12 steps, and only use AA approved literature. At this point even the moderates got scared that AA would move to something more rigid than what we had started with. It may yet. That motion is still floating around, but has not been voted on.

I finally countered with another motion. I confess it was real crafty, bordering on the devious, but all it really did was to say things as they are, that Intergroup now wants to control things:

Up to this point Intergroup has been a service organization with no actual authority, and has listed groups on its schedule at their own request based on AAs philosophy that our leaders are but trusted servants, they do not govern, and that of group autonomy. We propose that Intergroup must take it upon itself from simply being trusted servants to become a governing body which evaluates the worthiness of individual groups, and decide which groups should be listed in the schedule, and which ones can't be. If this motion fails we will keep doing things the way we always have, list meetings at their own request.

This being an important policy issue, it should pass with substantial unanimity, that is 2/3 majority.

Let's make a long story short: This first Sunday of February 2014 we finally voted on my motion. The chairperson, supposedly otherwise supporting my position spoke out vehemently against the motion and its deviousness, but a motion is a motion, it was made and seconded, and voted on. One in favor, two against, about 10 abstaining. So it failed, which means the meeting now gets listed, right?

Not at all. The chairperson decided that it needs to be discussed at the next meeting.

At this point I resigned from Intergroup. After one vote in the beginning where we had a solid majority, but wasted the opportunity, (apparently also out of some people's fear) and another vote which is simply being discounted, what else could I do? I don't know what they are going to do now.

I got to be the bad guy, especially with this motion. If the meeting had been listed after a carrying vote in the beginning, maybe the god people would still have rallied their forces and tried to rescind the vote 6 months later, but at least then they would have been the bad guys, not me.

Looks like all I can do at this point is to move on, focus my energy on making our Freethinkers meeting work, go around to meetings in the area and announce it, put my energy into the AA Agnostica chat room, and other measures to help the agnostic newcomer. For the time being it looks like our local Intergroup is a lost cause.

I hold it as an axiom of the expression of thought that, except in cases where a person may have lost their faculties at a later stage – when a person expresses

thoughts, and then later expresses other thoughts that to some degree contradict the earlier thoughts, and provided we can assume that these thoughts are expressed after reasonably careful consideration – that the later, contradicting thoughts bear witness to that the person expressing them has evolved in some manner, and has modified their point of view, and that the latter expressions therefore carry more weight than their previous, earlier thoughts, in some cases considerably more.

Bill Wilson wrote the Big Book with what, five years of sobriety? When therefore he kept writing all through his later years we ought to pay special attention to that. He never really rescinds his position that having a god is essential to recovery, and that sooner or later we will all “get it,” but he does attain a certain humility about it, most famously in the piece [The Dilemma of no Faith](#) from the April 1961 Grapevine which I won’t quote here, but I highly recommend reading it, and he increasingly speaks out in favor of inclusivity, against rigidity and dogmatism.

About Tradition 3 he writes:

In fact, our Tradition carries the principle of independence for the individual to such an apparently fantastic length that, so long as there is the slightest interest in sobriety, the most unmoral, the most anti-social, the most critical alcoholic may gather about him a few kindred spirits and announce to us that a new Alcoholics Anonymous Group has been formed. Anti-God, anti-medicine, anti-our Recovery Program, even anti-each other – these rampant individuals are still an AA Group if *they think so!* (July 1946 Grapevine)

About Tradition 4 he writes:

With respect to its own affairs, the group may make any decisions, adopt any attitudes that it likes. No overall or intergroup authority should challenge this primary privilege. We feel this ought to be so, even though the group might sometimes act with complete indifference to our Tradition.

One argument we hear is that the formation of a group with altered steps influences AA as a whole. Bill Wilson does clarify what sort of thing he considers will “injure AA as a whole”:

For instance, no group or inter group could feel free to initiate, without consultation, any publicity that might affect AA as a whole. Nor could it assume to represent the whole of Alcoholics Anonymous by printing and distributing anything purporting to be AA standard literature. (March 1948)

So where does this all leave us? With a dogmatic AA that increasingly subscribes to ideas like those expressed by the “White Paper.” With, it appears, a backlash of more christianity. Even in my home fellowship. We abolished the Lord’s Prayer a number of years ago, and stuck with the serenity prayer. Here recently someone asked that we started using it again. Didn’t go over so well with me, of course, and they eventually modified it to that the secretary could ask a member to close with the prayer of their

choice. That sounded real good, and practically everyone bought it. You know what that means, though: OK, not the LP ending every meeting, the SP still used a bunch, and a whole lot more of the 3rd, 7th, and 11th step prayers. All in all, more god focus.

Eventually we might have to accept that AA is becoming a dogmatic religious movement irrelevant to recovery in the 21st century, and strike out in our own direction. A sad thing to see, because there is so much good recovery in AA, too. That's why I have now stuck with it for 26 years as of February 20. But I am grateful to have the AA Agnostica and WAFT movements. Means I won't drift away from the recovery support I need just yet.

* * *

As I was finishing this tale of my woes with Intergroup I heard that the WAFT conference slated for Santa Monica in November was going to ban non-conference-approved literature at the convention. Initially the FAQ on their website said: "Because we are a part of AA... the steering committee (SC) has decided not to allow any non-conference-approved literature at the convention." They went back and forth on it, first saying no non-conference-approved literature, then saying the question was under consideration, then no again, and, after more objections, they replaced the "no" with a dash after the question "Will there be non-conference-approved literature at the convention?" Presumably the dash meant either "we're thinking about it" or "we're avoiding dealing with it." Finally, after a couple of weeks of hemming and hawing the FAQ now says that the steering committee will "make this literature available in a separate, clearly defined location."

Why the debate at all? Why all the reluctance to include literature that hasn't been published by the GSO?

And why emphasize that the non-conference-approved literature will be kept in a "separate" and a "clearly distinct location"? Is literature that is often helpful to us to be relegated to some sort of closet even at our very own convention?

Look at the trail of this debate. In the first FAQ on this subject, the steering committee said "Because we are a part of AA..." and then went on to "not allow" non-conference-approved AA at the convention. The committee is succumbing – knowingly or unknowingly – to the fundamentalists' vision of AA. Their reason for keeping the non-conference-approved literature "separate and clearly distinct" is so that it will not be confused with the "true" AA, the definition of which is found, according to the fundamentalists, in *selected* conference-approved literature (God, powerlessness, surrender, etc., as in the Big Book), and which some Intergroups are increasingly insisting upon, and this certainly not in service but in an attempt at governance. [1]

Let's look at a quote from the recent New York Times article, [Alcoholics Anonymous, Without the Religion](#):

“A.A. starts at its core with honesty,” said Dorothy, 39, who heads the steering committee for the We Agnostics and Freethinkers International A.A. Convention. “And how can you be honest in recovery if you’re not honest in your own beliefs? If you don’t believe in the God they’re praying to, that’s not honest practice.”

Couldn’t have said it better myself.

How can you honor your own beliefs if even at an agnostic convention you are still only allowed to use the same old books filled with god? The convention needs to especially be the place to share alternative literature to supplement the conference-approved AA literature we already know. If we can’t even be honest at “our very own convention” where can we? Are we going to have to not only fight the intergroups, but now even our own people?

All this fear of the god people seems to know no end. Come what may, we need to stand up for what we (don’t) believe in. For almost seventy-five years now we have tried to placate the people bent on the “God bit,” as Jim Burwell put it, and what is the result? Things have gotten worse instead of better over the last decade. We agnostics and atheists need honest practice, now, at every level.

If this convention is to mean anything it must be a place where we can honestly share with each other what is working for us – not just as individuals, quietly in the convention corridors when we hope no AA police are listening – but openly, as a group, from the podiums, around the tables, in all the meetings and workshops, from the books we use to the alternative versions of the steps that we are trying on for size in meetings all over the continent.

* * *

I did start the Laytonville Freethinkers meeting on August 22nd at the local Grange, and I have registered it with World Service. People come in from 50 miles away to support it. And here we are, a half dozen people at this little meeting out in the middle of nowhere, aware of the grave threat we pose to AA’s future, but somehow we manage to remain calm and composed about it.

[1] The document that comes closest to an official definition of AA is the AA Preamble, which is also conference-approved literature. It makes no mention whatsoever of God or a Higher Power or even the 12 Steps and is ignored by those obsessed with the “God bit” and the Intergroups that succumb to their persuasion. Here it is:

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. The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking. There are no dues or fees for AA membership; we are self-supporting through our own contributions. AA 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.

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A full background on this document, prepared by the General Service Office, is available here, [The AA Preamble: Background Information](#). The Preamble appears at the very beginning of the [AA Service Manual](#), before the Table of Contents.

A Grapevine Book for Atheists and Agnostics in AA

Posted on [September 7, 2014](#) AA Agnostica



By life-j.

The Grapevine is turning 70. And it is actually a good little magazine. It publishes a broader variety of recovery stories than what may commonly be considered AA fare these days.

Ever since AA's beginnings, and increasingly since about 1979, agnostics, atheists, freethinkers, humanists and whatever else we unbelievers call ourselves, have been trying to gain recognition for the fact that we can and do stay sober in AA with no god or higher power.

It's not for the sake of recognition so much. We're only trying to end the "Don't Tell" policy in AA so that newcomers who can't buy the god stuff don't have to walk away in disgust, but can see we nonbelievers are here, and know there is help from like-minded people at hand.

We have been trying to get AA to publish something to the fact that we non-believers can stay sober in AA. Finally it looked like it was going to happen, but eventually it got watered down to what in reality became a "Many Paths to a Higher Power" pamphlet which appears to be almost as much of an insult to us as was Chapter 4 of the Big Book. More, in a way, considering that this is rather more deliberate.

Bill Wilson at least wrote Chapter 4 with somewhat innocent good intentions. And while GSO is taking a somewhat openminded stance, or rather a hands-off stance, they are after all just "trusted servants" for those literature committees, conferences, and conventions which produce the "Conference-approved" literature. And they seem to draw an increasingly conservative crowd which is there to make sure no progress

is made when it comes to “widening our gateway”. I was just about to type “opening”, honestly, because the AA gateway seems that closed to some of us.

The Grapevine on the other hand has over the years published quite a few stories from nonbelievers, and we have searched the archives for these stories. We keep finding new ones. Recently I read parts of the GV book *Spiritual Awakenings*, and saw stories in there which we had not found in our own search. That’s all okay. *Spiritual Awakenings* is a much more openminded book than what comes from AA as such, and we do not need to compete with that book.

What we would like to do is share stories not about all the varieties of spiritual experiences – that has been done fairly well by now – but rather we want to see a book published which specifically talks about our own experiences as nonbelievers in AA.

So recently a crew of us here at AA Agnostica asked The Grapevine if we could publish at our own expense a book with the non-believer stories we had found and give any profit to the Grapevine. We’d be every bit as happy if the Grapevine published it itself, but we feel strongly about not winding up with another “Came to believe”, a “Many Paths to Spirituality”, or even a *Spiritual Awakenings Two*.

This is because now we really, really want to see some AA stories from nonbelievers, something a newcomer can read and feel confirmed that they are not wrong for not believing in whatever the god people want them to worship, usually some anthropomorphic interventionist male God. Also it would be especially nice to see some stories which have already been published through regular AA channels. This may lend a bit more credibility to it for regular AA folks so that in the long run they might lend us support, rather than if we just made something entirely of our own, such as is the case with the excellent little book “Don’t Tell” published by AA Agnostica.

So I sent off a request to the Grapevine a few months ago, which went unanswered.

One of the other guys in our crew then sent them an e-mail, and got an answer back telling us, and apparently this is the truth, that they can’t just give us permission to publish all those stories, it has to go through a deliberation and review process similar to the tortuous and lengthy process other AA literature goes through. It could take a couple of years to do it the proper way rather than to simply pirate it which, I confess, seems alluring on some days.

Hopefully this book will turn out better in the end than the last attempt which resulted in the “Many Paths to Spirituality” pamphlet, which is the opposite of what nonbelievers in AA want, or need.

In our list we have included a couple of stories by open-minded believers as well, and a couple from people who maybe figured they wouldn’t rock the boat, and so they wrote a story with no mention of a god one way or the other.

In the Grapevine's early years, a large part of its purpose was to allow Bill Wilson to communicate to AA members on a regular basis. So Bill wrote a lot in there.

We're hopeful to at some point follow up with a book of "As Bill ALSO Sees it", so we haven't included any of his stories here.

He never let go of the idea of a need for a higher power, but he was, after all a believer who worked real hard at keeping an open mind. Most of all he believed that AA should be there for every alcoholic that needed it, and in the story "Anarchy Melts" he describes just how liberally we need to interpret that. Here's just one quote from the story:

Nor ought AA membership ever depend on money or conformity. Any two or three alcoholics gathered together for sobriety may call themselves an AA Group". This clearly implies that an alcoholic is a member if he says so; that we can't deny him his membership; that we can't demand from him a cent; that we can't force our beliefs or practices upon him; that he may flout everything we stand for and still be a member. In fact, our Tradition carries the principle of independence for the individual to such an apparently fantastic length that, so long as there is the slightest interest in sobriety, the most unmoral, the most anti-social, the most critical alcoholic may gather about him a few kindred spirits and announce to us that a new Alcoholics Anonymous Group has been formed. Anti-God, anti-medicine, anti-our Recovery Program, even anti-each other – these rampant individuals are still an AA Group if they think so!

So here are the stories we would like to see put together in a book, in the order in which they were originally published:

(You can read them at the AA Grapevine. The ones that are CAPITALIZED are direct links: you can read them here on AA Agnostica.)

* * *

SLIPS AND HUMAN NATURE – Dr. Silkworth – January 1947

AN ATHEIST SPEAKS OUT – E.L. from Vermont – May 1962

A Question of Faith – Anonymous from Manhattan – September 1963

Can an Atheist Find a Place in AA? – Anonymous – June 1965

Unbeliever in AA – L.W. from Manhattan – July 1966

Sober for Thirty Years – J.B. from San Diego – May 1968

Seeking Through Meditation – Anonymous from New York City – April 1969

Is 'Agnostic' a Nasty Word? – J.B. from Casper, WY – September 1969

PO Box 1980 – Equal time for atheists – J. McG. from Forest Hills, NY – September 1976

Closet Atheist – C.C. from Sacramento, CA – April 1978

The Power of Good – Anonymous from Pasadena, CA – April 1978

ATHEIST – J.L. from Oakland – January 1980

All of Us Are Special – B.L. from Clinton, TN – March 1983

IS THERE ROOM ENOUGH IN AA? AA J.L. from Oakland – October 1987

Your Move – Responses to “Is There Room Enough in AA?” – April 1988

LET ME THINK FOR MYSELF! – Harold B. from Punta Gorda, FL – December 1989

Mysterious Alchemy – Bill M. from Creston, CA – December 1990

Listening for the Reality – June L. from El Granada, CA – April 1991

Field of Love – Alfred W. – May 1993

PO Box 1980 – A larger welcome – Naomi D. from New York City – November 1996

WE TREAD INNUMERABLE PATHS – June L. from El Granada, CA – November 1996

The Orderly Advance of Recovery – June L. from El Granada, CA – July 1999

PO Box 1980 – No Pushing, Please – Coyote from Vero Beach, FL – February 2003

How an Atheist Works the Steps – June L. from El Granada, CA – March 2003

An Agnostic Alternative – Mike F. from Owen Sound, ON – March 2003

A Curmudgeoness Looks Back – June L. from El Granada, CA – April 2003

IS AA JUST FOR CHRISTIANS? – Barb C. – October 2003

The Only Faith You Need – Michael B. from Atlanta, GA

Still an Agnostic After All these Years – Ann M. from Phoenix, AZ – April 2009

This was it – Kelly A. from San Mateo, CA – April 2009

Too Smart for AA – Gary S. from Primghar, IA – April 2009

WITHOUT A HIGHER POWER – Greg H. from San Diego, CA – January 2010

Tolerance: A two-way street – Dave C. from Springfield, MO – January 2010

Continental Shift – Bert W. from Prescott, AZ – April 2010

Spirituality and “God-Talk” – Rev. Ward Ewing – April 2010

FINDING OUR WAY – Jerry S. from Austin, TX – September 2013

Open-Minded – B.C. from New Market, MD – December 2013

Three Strikes, You’re In! – Jack B. from Oakland, NJ – March 2014

What Are the Requirements? – Bob L. from Gilbertsville, PA – April 2014

Big Book Parrots and Ornery Critters – Anonymous – June 2014

* * *

Now, wouldn’t this collection make a wonderful book?

As you can see, there is even an essay by Doctor Silkworth which doesn’t directly address our issue. It’s about relapse – something many non-believers have done over and over as they tried yet one more time to go to AA and couldn’t stomach the god talk. And with each relapse they felt more judged in AA when they returned. Generally we don’t judge each other much in AA, but when it comes to people who relapse “because” they “won’t” believe in a god, no amount of judgment seems to suffice to some.

Hey – I’m happy for anyone that has found that a god or higher power is helpful in their own recovery.

Only what is happening now is that it is increasingly being canonized as the only way to sobriety. I know many believers don’t necessarily want it that way, but there are others that insist on it all the more, and it is tearing AA apart. They try to make it look like it is us tearing AA apart, but we just know what is good for ourselves, and we need to insist on having it.

And now all we are asking for is a book of already published Grapevine articles by agnostics, atheists and freethinkers in AA.

The article *A Grapevine Book for Atheists and Agnostics in AA* was followed up over the following weeks by a form where readers could respond and tell why they felt that such a book would be helpful. Most of the responses follow below. A letter with all these responses was sent to The Grapevine, and cc'd to the GSO staff.

A Grapevine Book for Atheists and Agnostics in AA

First name * Last name initial *

Email *

Town or City * State or province or county *

Please use one word to describe yourself Length of sobriety

A word such as "atheist" or "agnostic"

Comment Section

Tell us why this book would be helpful

Submit

This is the form that readers could complete at the end of one of three articles posted on AA Agnostica between September and December 2014: *A Grapevine Book for Atheists and Agnostics in AA*, *Sober & Out* or *From Believer to Non-Believer*. When “submit” was clicked, the form was automatically forwarded to the Executive Editor and Publisher of the Grapevine.

Here are the responses – from “more than one hundred men and women”:

- quoted from <http://aaagnostica.org/2015/02/18/no-grapevine-book-for-atheists-in-aa/>

I would like to feel more included. My quest for sobriety is as valid is a person who believes in God. A Grapevine book without constant reminders that I must have a higher power or believe in God would be very helpful.

Patrick W. (Atheist, 2 months)

It is imperative for the still suffering nonbelieving alcoholic yet to come in, and the newly sober nonbelievers to be fully assured they are in fact welcome, and that AA is a place that truly desires to be of service to every alcoholic who wants help. All too many of us are the objects of scorn, ridicule, and harassment simply for what we do not believe. This can be corrected easily

with a handy publication that lists stories of experience, strength and hope from nonbelievers who remained nonbelievers, and who found profound assistance and change within the Fellowship of AA.

Mark C. (Atheist, 4 years and 9 months)

It would help to balance the overwhelming god talk with practical experience without it and help AA as a whole be more like the spiritually inclusive fellowship it claims to be and not the religious fellowship it appears to be.

Christopher G. (Possibillian, 12 years)

This would be a very useful book for non believing newcomers and would encourage them to stay around and receive the love that the fellowship has to offer.

Ed S. (Atheist, 27 years)

I have struggled with this "God of the Bible" concept for a long time. A few weeks ago, I finally admitted to myself and the groups in my town of my decision. Boy, did the "merde" (pardon my French) hit the fan. I began standing outside the group circle when they said the "Lord's Prayer." One evening a few weeks ago, the chairman of the group decided that we would recite the AA Responsibility Statement instead of the LP. Then one of the devout Christian members said, in effect, "You mean you are going to let one idiot (looking straight at me) decide that we are not going to say the Lord's Prayer?" He then, followed by one other member, stepped out of the circle as the rest of us recited the AA Responsibility Statement. I have not been back to a meeting since then. I participate in Agnostic/Atheist chat meetings online, since there are no such meetings within 200 miles of my town.

I live in southern Illinois in a small, very conservative Christian community. I have no choice but to attend these very "Christian oriented" AA meetings, or choose other outlets available to me online. Please consider making the Agnostic/Atheist members of AA more a part of AA. The higher power talked about in the Big Book of AA does not have to be the "God of the Bible!" There are other choices. I have heard many AA members say how they felt at their first meeting to hear about the "God" idea in our literature and in our meetings. If those people had access to a book such as the one being suggested, the newcomers might feel more comfortable about attending meetings. Thank you for considering the needs of us "outsiders."

Donald J. (Agnostic, 1.5 years)

It would provide many stories of how one got and stayed sober without the religious entity, God, and without an assumed external/nebulous force, a Higher Power.

Dianne P. (Atheist, 6 years)

I have stopped going to AA meetings because of the constant emphasis on god in my area and then if I express myself openly, someone invariably tries to talk to me after a meeting to convince me that I am wrong. This is simply not right. I would love to be able to attend meetings freely, be myself and be able to give back. I know I could help the newcomer.

Susan B. (Agnostic, 22 years)

This is my fourth experience with AA, the last being over twenty years ago. Had there been more literature welcoming a non-theistic viewpoint, rather than insulting it, I might not have had such a struggle. I have known two people who died of their addiction rather than finding sobriety because of their exclusion from the AA way. They were open atheists and were shunned by the available groups of the era. It's time to take a closer look at the Third Tradition and the Responsibility Pledge.

Andy L. (Buddhist, 3 months)

The book will enable, empower individuals who believe in Socratic methodology, critical thinking and inductive and deductive reasoning to feel that they have their own ability to decide what is right and wrong for them.

Frank P. (Atheist, 2 years)

My sobriety is still young, and vulnerable to any hint of false hopes. As with a lot of us, this path of recovery is the only road I can take to go forward and I cannot afford to allow myself to be misled. The absolute, harsh reality of my situation and life itself must be faced straight-on for me to find the strength to stand-down this hideous disease.

I was extremely lucky to figure out for myself early on that the god concept is a gimmick to help us "let go" of some of the overwhelming burden we have accumulated over the years to clear the slate a bit for the serious positive changes we must make. By understanding the truth that I really don't carry the weight of the world, whether there is a superhero to lift that burden from me or not, was a defining moment in my sobriety. I do not think I could have come this far if my only choice was to blindly trust in a concept that just doesn't make much logical sense to me.

I live and attend my meetings in the Bible belt, and I know that my struggle could have been eased and my strengths made more obvious to me sooner had I been dealing with rock-solid realities from the very beginning rather than having to block out large portions of the program out of a sheer survival instinct.

Ted M. (Agnostic, 10 months)

To reach out to agnostics/atheists who are alienated from AA by all the god-talk.

Hilary J. (Agnostic, 3 years)

I love AA. As an atheist with over 26 years of continuous sobriety, I don't have any trouble taking what I like and leaving the rest, but I have met a number of people who get the message from AA that they have to believe in God to be a member. I want them to be able to view of AA through the eyes of people like them and to know that it is possible to get and stay sober without having to violate their own sense of integrity.

John G. (Atheist, 25 years)

We have recently started a secular meeting in Swanley (England). There is, I believe, a real need for believers and non-believers alike to realise that A.A. can work for and accommodate everyone. This is particularly the case for the countless newcomers who are put off by some members overly religious posturing. Please publish a book that helps recovering alcoholics.

Lee C. (Atheist, 8 months)

There is no AA-approved literature that truly represents the agnostic or atheist in AA. Since there have been articles about this in the Grapevine, a compilation of those would easily meet this need.

Nita S. (Agnostic, 23 years)

Please publish a book of the stories of atheist and agnostics in AA. It is much needed.

Jo-Anne K. (Atheist, 27 years)

Most of the people that I associate with have lost faith in a Christian God, and prefer to be known as agnostic. They tell me they can live “not knowing”, rather than believing in something that might not be true.

Edward C. (Agnostic, 27 years)

AA folks who describe themselves as “agnostic” (of any level including “atheist”) are generally supportive of the original concepts which Bill Wilson articulated in founding AA... except, an agnostic AA-person chooses to live without a belief in God or Higher Power, and therefore rejects those portions of the AA-12-Steps in gaining (keeping) sobriety. The GRAPEVINE articles... many already published dealing with agnostic open-mindedness, would be great as a collection encompassed in a book exclusively dealing with agnostic views regarding that subject. As a Foreword, it would be wise to make the point that “agnostic AA-folks” are NOT ridiculing God-believers... they are simply saying that the need for a Deist orientation is NOT necessary for themselves. Education and fairness would be the only objective. I believe that the GRAPEVINE is well justified in being a publisher of such a book.

Les C. (Agnostic, 10 years)

To help all those members in AA that are atheist, agnostic, humanists etc feel accepted within the fellowship as legitimate.

Steve K. (Humanist, 9 years)

This would be a great addition to AA. I hope they allow the publication.

Camille L. (Atheist, 25 years)

This will offer hope that many do indeed stay sober without an interventionist higher power, and will help reflect AA in a 21st century light. We can't keep telling people that have found a different, or no, path to spirituality that they are doomed. It is NOT true.

Ian B. (Freethinker, 6 months)

I tried to get sober in 1994. I was told I had to believe or I couldn't get sober. I was told to fake it til I make it. In other words, lie or die. I did. But I didn't come to believe. After 3 months at a party I had a beer. I didn't feel safe to tell anyone, and eventually left. Took me 10 years to come back. I lost everything. But this time, because of my past experience, I knew what to

expect. You don't have to lie or die. You can be who you are and get sober. I follow the steps. I sponsor women and men, atheist, theist, agnostic and unidentified. It doesn't matter. And as a result of my experience, I understand that all roads lead to Rome. I would like others for whom interventionist deities are not part of their belief system or not sure, know that you don't have to believe in a god to get sober. You can be honest and thrive, not lie or die.

Jim B. (Atheist, 19 years)

There is a significant population of AA members who are not believers in the "God" or "Higher Power" described in AA's most prominent texts ("Alcoholics Anonymous" and "12 Steps and 12 Traditions") and referred to in the "12 Steps" and "12 Traditions" posters displayed in most meeting rooms. We are minority but a substantial one. We have achieved and sustained sobriety as active and devoted members of AA. A collection of Grapevine stories written by people from this minority and published by AA Grapevine would be a meaningful statement of inclusiveness. We have yearly editions of the AA Grapevine devoted to alcoholics in prison. Why not a collection of stories written by people who hold alternative belief systems? I hope the Grapevine editorial staff gives this idea full consideration.

Russ H. (Atheist, 19 years)

It would include all who suffer.

Dan V. (Agnostic, 30 years)

We need to make the door to AA as wide as possible – this book will widen that door.

Ernie K. (Seeker, 4 years)

I came into AA an agnostic who was fearful and angry. I felt comfortable in AA because I was with my fellow alcoholics. I did not feel comfortable with the emphasis on god or a higher power because my politics and experience did not justify such a belief. However I was fearful and tried to adapt. As time went on and I began to gain confidence, due primarily to the fellowship and service, I accepted that I was not all powerful (as I insanely believed) but that the State or two people were more powerful than me. Eventually I accepted and understood that time was the arbitrator on all human and material existence and so I gained peace of mind. I was raised in a religious family but rejected god from an early age. The emphasis on a "Higher Power" or a "God" was only important to me in that it encouraged me to investigate and understand the subject. However I do believe that many folks will either not go to AA because of its emphasis on the need for a supreme being or be chased away due to members' hostility.

Charles M. (Atheist, 32 years)

Experience has shown us that a humble surrender to the truth and willingness to live life on life's terms (not mine) lies at the root of the healing spiritual experience. This is just as possible for the hard atheist as it is for the agnostic, pantheist or born again believer. Good sources of truth and healthy direction come from many places and many systems, a fair number of which are not theistic and do not employ the God idea in ANY sense at all. This is a fact, and we do know it if our eyes are open. Let us always be willing to surrender to humble truths such as this on a fellowship level, the same as each of us must do individually with all the facts of life.

Frank M. (Non-theist, 5 years)

I'm sick and tired of hearing the word miracle, as if the gift of sobriety is God's work (a "miracle") then bad things are an "un"miracle? I've yet to hear a member who relapsed say I had an "un"miracle. I want to read stories of agnostic/atheist members who take responsibility for their actions and the results. The AA Chapter to the Agnostic did not reassure me that it was ok to be agnostic in AA. It assumed that eventually I would see the light and have God as my Higher Power. To be truthful being an agnostic in Florida AA I often feel like a leper in AA. The nearest agnostic AA meeting to me requires a 100+ mile round trip. I'm planning to start making this trip once a month. Yes, yes, to a Grapevine Book of atheist and agnostic member stories.

Marnin M. (Agnostic, 43 years)

As a Buddhist, I do not believe in God. The insistence from AA members that I had to find a "higher power", meaning God, kept me bouncing in and out of the rooms for 5 years. I was finally fortunate to find a sponsor who told me it didn't matter what I believed in. What mattered was what I did to stay sober. 25 years later I am still sober and not for one day of it have I believed in God. And 25 years later, I still feel like outsider because of the standard belief that sobriety without God is impossible. The only reason I still attend meetings anymore is to be there for the person questioning the God issue, as proof that no supernatural higher power is required for full, meaningful sobriety. Publishing a book of such stories would go a long way to eliminating an obstacle many are facing in their recovery.

David M. (Buddhist, 25 years)

It would provide a resource for all AA's to improve the 'opening of their minds' in relation to a proposed concept of a HP, whether believer or non-believer. Such a book would allow a further resource to be available to the general public, the same as Beyond Belief is, and show by personal experiences that 'sobriety' is continuously achieved and sustained by members of AA who hold no belief, or differing non-religious beliefs related to a concept of a HP. A reasonable proposition as I see it.

Harry C. (Atheist, 27 years)

I keep wondering about AAs future – some time in the future it will be irrelevant unless we evolve.

Con J. (Sober agnostic, 32 years)

Being an atheist or believing in god doesn't get you sober. Taking a set of actions does. Keeping company with fellow travelers helps. People who cannot or will not believe in god can achieve long term sobriety. I know quite a few examples personally. Those who have difficulty with the religious nature of AA need examples of how other alcoholics have stayed sober by taking action and that they are not alone in AA.

Garry U. (Agnostic, 25 years)

It will help retain persons who otherwise would leave AA because of its religiosity.

Daniel H. (Atheist, 25 years)

Many years ago, in 1976 to be exact, an AA trustee and member of the Literature Committee, wrote that an AA pamphlet was needed “to assure non-believers that they are not merely deviants, but full, participating members in the AA Fellowship without qualification”. That pamphlet has never been approved or published by the General Service Conference. Agnostics and atheists in AA often do not feel comfortable in the rooms of AA. They do feel welcome.

A book by the Grapevine for agnostics and atheists in AA would go a long way towards making us feel as though we have a right to be a part of the fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous. Many of the articles by agnostics and atheists that have been published by the Grapevine over the years are encouraging and inspiring for we un-believers. Please consider putting together and publishing such a book. It would well reflect the Responsibility Declaration adopted by AA in 1965 and its International Convention in Toronto, Canada: “I am responsible. When anyone anywhere reaches out for help, I want the hand of AA to always be there. And for that I am responsible.”

Roger C. (Agnostic, 5 years)

I NEED to hear stories of other nonbelievers that have been successful in living a happy sober life. I need understanding of how to approach the steps from an atheistic point of view. And I need to know that there are other people with the same AA struggles I am having.

Nichole K. (Atheist, 5 months)

One third of young people in the U.S. now identify their religious affiliation as “none,” according to scientific surveys. U.S. courts, in deciding that the non-religious cannot be ordered to attend A.A. meetings, have ruled that A.A. is, in fact, religious. We need to make it clearer that our doors are wide open to the increasing number of non-believers in today’s society. None of our current literature, including the new pamphlet “Many Paths to Spirituality” makes this clear enough. I heartily endorse the suggestion that Grapevine publish a new book of previously published articles written by nonbelievers.

Eric C. (Atheist, 31 years)

I spent many years in AA on the “fake it till you make it” plan. There were many AA’s that said if you don’t believe in God or you don’t pray, you’ll drink. I now know that is not the truth. I think getting the message to the others who do not believe in a deity, that they too can get sober and stay sober is the fair and humane thing to do. A book such as this would be most helpful in doing so.

George S. (Atheist, 30 years)

Over the years I have sponsored many women who struggled with the GOD word and with the religiosity of some meetings. I have been able to help them with some AA literature (Living Sober) and also most of the pamphlets are now gender neutral so women feel included. To have a collection of Grapevine stories from over the years from non believers would be VERY helpful to be able to hand to new comers and non believers alike. I have stayed sober without a belief in GOD and enjoy a wonderful, happy life full of AA friends and service work.

Sandra T. (Free thinker, 27 years)

I have long appreciated the Grapevine's breadth of coverage of the world of alcoholics. No one could read an issue without recognizing what a varied lot we are. It would be well within the spirit of AA, and another credit to The Grapevine, if you were to agree to allow publication of selected articles related to nonbelievers as a means to bring still-suffering nonreligious alkie into our fold. They deserve a chance to live.

As the recent Pew study shows, almost 20% of Americans are non-religious, as am I. I have heard many newcomers in We Agnostics meetings express their relief at finding a nonreligious setting in which to get well. That's what AA is for, Let those who prefer or are indifferent to more traditional God-talk continue to have the bulk of AA meetings and literature, but let's make sure we encourage those who can't stand religious references. Keep up the good work!

Pat N. (Atheist, 34 years)

It would be nice to read about others belief in the power of themselves or their higher self to keep them sober.

Mary Ann H. (Humanist, 2 years)

Widen the gate.

Jennie K. (Freethinker, 1.5 years)

Since I'm the one who wrote the article about it, I have already argued at length for it. Seeing the responses we have gotten I guess I would just like to stress that this needs to be a book by us nonbelievers, and for us, and about us.

We have seen plenty of attempts to write a book with stories about and for and by everybody, such as Spiritual Awakenings, which I really think is a good book – at any rate I found quite a few stories of “our kind” in there, and read those, and even some of the others. I do appreciate that we got some representation in that book. But representation is not enough, we need our very own book, and with the stories selected we can have it.

Again I think this is important because it does help foster unity if this is done within a mainstream AA framework, and the grapevine can help us with that. We can easily write books with our own stories, and already have. But we need to feel welcome in AA, we need a gesture to the effect that AA does not want to keep sending non-believers out to drink some more “until they are ready”, but wants to include us, the way we are.

life-j (Agnostic, 26 years)

“Our atheists and agnostics widened our gateway so that all who suffer may pass through regardless of belief or un-belief.” (Bill W., AA Comes of Age) Perhaps many AAers are not aware of statements like this from Bill W. The word must get out!!!!

John M. (Freethinker, 7 years)

I came to AA in 2002 because I was unable to control my alcoholic drinking. I struggled for nearly two years trying to understand and accept the Twelve Steps and the writings of The Big Book into my life. I failed miserably. I finally arrived at a treatment centre, Homewood in Guelph, in July 2004. I finally realized I had to take responsibility for my own life and change accordingly. This I did and continue to do.

When I talk to new fellow alcoholics I find that accepting a higher power external to themselves the greatest stumbling block to their recovery. I try to relay my own experiences and it would help greatly if there was AA literature (i.e. The Grapevine) which also expressed an alternate view.

Bob H. (Agnostic, 10 years)

After almost 17 years of sobriety, I admitted I never felt "connected to H.P." So, I threw in the towel when my shoelaces broke, never having "gotten" steps 2 & 3 with this "God" business. After all that time sober in AA, I convinced myself that I wasn't an alcoholic. But, quit the fellowship? I figured if I really tried harder to sabotage everything, and sank even lower, "God" would answer my prayers once I really qualified as an alcoholic. THEN I would believe. Been there. Done that. Several times. Still don't have the T-shirt. Coming up empty-handed again.

Laura M. (Agnostic, 6 months)

I feel so alienated by the literature in general, there is nothing in the official cannon from AA that makes me feel welcome or identified with. Guess you guys would rather have me die than find a way out that doesn't include your concept of a higher power. Thanks for that.

Suzana V. (Non-drinking, nil)

I continue to see people driven away from the help they need by the religious language and practices in most AA meetings, e.g. beginning and ending with prayer, any kind of prayer to an unseen being. They need to at least read that there are non-religious members who find and grow in sobriety through support of the Fellowship and/or practice of the 12 Steps without the "god idea."

Jeb B. (Monist, 36 years)

Since I got sober, there has only been one other man who was openly agnostic/atheist. He got fed up with being told he had to find a God & pray in order to stay sober. He left AA. Fear keeps me quiet about my NON-belief. I am in the closet in sobriety, which is pretty sad. I am so grateful to a man named Wally from CA, who was sober 30 years & visited our group one day. He spoke openly about being agnostic & gave me so much HOPE! Sound familiar? What are you guys so afraid of?

Joy R. (Agnostic, 9 years)

I'm not going to be polite about this. AA service structure as a whole, its unwillingness to acknowledge the secular nature of a vast contingency of its members through official literature publication, in a respectful and collaborative manner, is a slap in the face. For AA to continue to remain relevant and actually help newcomers recover in an inclusive non-theist manner, it is absolutely necessary to address these individuals in an open and direct manner through

literature channels. Publishing of such a collection of alternative non-higher power related recovery experiences would be a step in the right direction.

P.S. The recent publication of "Many Paths to Spirituality" as a means to address more atheist members in AA was downright vile. I piss on that pamphlet.

Neev G. (Freethinker)

Newcomers, especially millennials, younger people born between 1980 and 2000, many who profess no religious orientation, need stories which demonstrate that one can get and stay sober in AA without belief in God. Since 1962 the GV has published many such stories, relating the reality that long-time and successful recovery does occur for agnostics, atheists, freethinkers and others who don't follow the predominant Christian orthodoxy as depicted in the Big Book and the Twelve and Twelve. Why not collate these stories into a book for non-believers? Our co-founder Bill W. often emphasized that anyone, with belief or without belief, are members of AA if they ascribe to the Third Tradition that the only requirement for membership is the desire to stop drinking.

Thomas B. (Apophatic, 42 years)

So other with beliefs such as mine will feel included.

Peggy H. (Agnostic, 2 years)

There is a countless amount of people like myself who believed that AA was unsafe for unconventional believers or non-believers. I was lucky enough to have a WAFT group in my home town who gave me the love and support to remain sober but more importantly didn't care if I believed in a higher power or god because ALL that mattered to them was not picking up the first drink! I believe a collection of Agnostic/Freethinker/Atheist voices will save people's lives and will fulfill AA's mission of 12th step work!

Dorothy H. (Agnostic Pagan, 3.5 years)

Although I have only been sober 3 years I first attended AA 42 years ago and was a repeat offender but did manage a 10 year sobriety but always got fed up with the divine message and stayed away but then after various periods returned to alcohol. I had to come back or die but feel I am always being judged for my non belief with most telling me that it is my lack of faith that is making me drink. The ironic part is that I am the only member that still attends my local meeting that I first attended 20 years ago after moving to Ireland; all the god fearing members seem to have departed.

Lionel M. (Atheist, 3 years)

AA isn't supposed to be an exclusively Christian organisation, but is not very welcoming to non-Christians.

Sean M. (Atheist, 18.5 years)

I know that as many believers go back drinking as Atheists. Whatever else God may be, He is not the way. Of course people can believe in whatever they want to believe in and for some

their belief may help them, but, getting and staying sober is different. An atheist feels insulted by Chapter 4, and it does them no good at all. All mentions of God, prayer etc. is also an insult to Atheists so that is why I find it hard to swallow. AA should be for everyone.

Duncan Mc. (Atheist, 36 years)

It's been tricky trying to stay honest and true to self when listening to suggestions by believers in a personal god/higher power. This type of literature (adhering to the 12 steps & principles) has been extremely comforting and helpful.

Carolyn O. (Agnostic, 3.5 years)

So many of us don't buy the magical, miracle or the mythical preached as necessary to stay sober in AA. Life is a beautiful gift, full of wonder, awe and mystery, without sobriety I missed it all. Other alcoholics who, like myself, are realists, need to feel welcome in AA without any form of coercion to believe in the bizarre! All we want/need is sobriety.

Andy M. (Skeptic, 32 years)

A.A. today is stuck in binary thinking and this book could shake our fellowship loose from the "Either God is or he is not" ultimatum of "We Agnostics." Deists believe "lights are on – nobody home," or more literally that a supreme being created the universe then left. So while there's a god there's no one to pray to. Humanists believe in the goodness and value of people. They believe in a "higher purpose" more than a power. Do they have to squeeze themselves into some G.O.D. acronym for full membership in AA? The Big Book is not central to every A.A. member's sobriety nor is such adherence obligatory or necessary. Having literature that describes the A.A. experience that doesn't assume an interfering/intervening higher power levels the playing field for those who want A.A. but don't care for the Amish-like devotion to old, quaint practices and tenets.

Give A.A. members a choice and let them vote with the power of the purse. Given more choices, we will engage and grow the membership. Living Sober is a secular A.A. text but written by one person. This Grapevine Book could be a collection of the A.A. way by skeptics, doubters, apathesits, realists, and the rest of a much wider membership than was conceived in 1930s middle-America.

Joe C. (Realist, 38 years)

I am a current subscriber to Grapevine, and appreciate your work. Such a collection in a book would be a great help to me, and many of my friends in AA. I "take" an AA meeting for women into a local rehab facility each week. Having a book like this to share and distribute would be a great thing.

Mary R. (Atheist, 7 years)

This book will make visible to all that the family of AA is open and tolerant to all who have a desire to stay sober, and that they can achieve successful sobriety as non-believers.

Wally K. (Atheist, 42 years)

For me, for the newcomer, for the believers and the non-believers.

Vic L. (Agnostic, 35 years)

AA has many SOBER Agnostics, Atheists, and Free Thinkers who get shouted down by more dogmatic AA's all too often. This book would help to balance the tide waters...

Herb Y. (Sober, 7 years)

I have been sober for 30.5 years and for 30 of those years I have been a nonbeliever. I came in and was hungry and hit the ground running... I loved it all so I never really cared that "normal" AA members thought I should believe in God, I knew the Third Tradition meant what it said (My sponsor was Earle Marsh, the Author of Physician Heal Thyself) but I have seen others struggle mightily and I think we are disenfranchising an awful lot of people with all the higher power stuff and we are stagnant in our growth.

David S. (Nonbeliever, 30 years)

AA's fellowship is both its prime attraction and dynamic for me. I could use more readings that don't rub religion or spirituality in my face, but keep up the welcome I find – and need – in working the program alongside everyone who simply is an alcoholic first & foremost.

Kurt W. (Agnostic, 10 months)

I believe we need as many tools as we can provide to our fellows so that nothing may impede one's progress in recovery. Such a book will be extremely helpful with newcomers who are unsure of their "religious leanings".

Devon D. (Agnostic, 10 years)

I've read many of these titles, but would love to have them all in one place. They would be of good use to Newcomers who aren't Religious and feel outside the group – give them a sense of belonging and help with the loneliness we all feel as alcoholics. It would be nice if they were able to satisfy their deep need to belong. The alcoholic who comes to AA feels quite alienated from society; he/she does not need to feel this from fellow alcoholics. Perhaps it would free them to add their experience to the group and we all might gain thereby.

Glenna R. (Skeptic, 17 years)

It will increase unity in the AA fellowship for nonbelievers and reach out the hand of AA to those who think they have to adopt another's concept of higher power. Bill Wilson wanted all seeking sobriety to find a home in AA. Not just believers in an interventionist god. The only requirement is a desire to stop drinking. Thank you.

Craig C. (Freethinker, 33 years)

This collection would make for very useful and supportive reading in my effort to end my dependence on alcohol.

Jack W. (Atheist)

It would provide examples and ideas for likeminded AAs, and, more particularly, to encourage atheist and agnostic prospects and newcomers.

Gabe S. (Atheist, 2 years and 10 months)

Being a humanist, freethinker, atheist, agnostic, etc. is not a character defect.

Robert B. (Humanist, 1 year)

This book would help those in early sobriety and are reluctant to fully participate in AA due to the sometimes intense emphasis on God to better understand how AA can work for non-believers and non-religious types.

Paul M. (Agnostic, 2 years)

I never found the BB of any major help except for the stories which helped me to identify. Grapevine was a major tool for many years-again due to the stories shared. A book of stories from fellow atheist / agnostic / freethinker / non-theist alcoholics who have found ways to stay sober in AA by finding their own tools or by modifying / adapting those of the "12 steps", I believe would help many who now are lost to sobriety due to the great insistence on the "god factor" by most AAers.

Sarah C. (28 years and 9 months)

I would love to see a grapevine book published which speaks directly to the agnostic or atheist AA. This would surely help to make more newcomers feel welcome and at home in AA.

Ingrid S. (Agnostic, 26 years)

There is not enough literature for freethinkers and such. This book would just be one more small step in the right direction.

Whitney P. (Epistemology, 1 week)

I am an alcoholic and an atheist. AA has saved my life, however I have never felt 100% comfortable in meetings until I came across an Agnostic meeting in London. After that I started two other Atheist / Agnostic groups with the help of like minded AA members. Had there been a pamphlet or book such as the one proposed, which had a bunch of stories from members who are sober without belief in God or a higher power my journey would certainly have been helped.

Andy B. (Atheist, 6 years and 6 months)

This will be so helpful, especially with sponsorship of newcomers who are struggling.

Devon D. (Agnostic, 10 years)

It might make the difference between a non-religious newcomer deciding to come back or keep running. Which is what it is all about isn't it? Our Area does not have any AAA meetings, so this book could be very useful for the newcomers as well as myself and others.

Janet Z. (Agnostic, 19 months)

AA literature that does not emphasize a Judeo-Christian patriarchal philosophy would provide an inviting alternative to many suffering alcoholics who are turned off by by what they experience as a limiting religious focus. It would also provide a welcome relief to those many AA members who accept a higher power, but whose spirituality is not religion based.

Lee O. (Spiritual, 28 years)

So that we can feel connected to other sober atheist and agnostics and know we are not alone.

Holly D. (Atheist, 4 years)

I have been an active and sober member of the Fellowship for 30 years, in constant service, sponsoring etc, but hugely regret the absence of any literature or support for those of us who respectfully do not share a god consciousness as classically described in the Literature. This initiative gives us the opportunity for AA to rectify this, primarily as many potential members who are currently put off by AA because of their personal belief, are missing out on the opportunity for a healthy and sober life which is our primary objective surely.

Cyril C. (Atheist, 30 years)

I am aware of how many people either will not come near AA or whose relatives and/or other professionals will not tell them about AA because it is a "religious" programme. I was with two professionals only recently who both stoutly told me with certainty that "AA is a religious programme" so they "would never recommend it to clients". We have to change this image which seems to be gaining ground. My daughter has a friend to whom she would like to talk about AA, but she has told me clearly that she will not do that "because of all the talk about God". AA has to change with the times – people nowadays are highly suspicious of religion and the religious – however much we may stress that it is a "spiritual programme" we must acknowledge that the word "spiritual", however mistakenly, is now seen as a synonym for "religious", and we have to change our language to reach out to those still suffering the lonely disease of alcoholism. I believe that a book such as is being suggested would be a wonderful tool to convince people that there is room in AA for all sorts of people and beliefs and that sobriety is possible for all, and has been achieved by many with non-religious and non-spiritual beliefs and practices.

Mary-Rose P. (Alcoholic, 37 years)

To retain new members who retreat because of the religious undertones of the program.

Lisa T. (Atheist)

Why would it be helpful to print Grapevine stories by recovering atheists for nonbelievers? Because the third tradition demands it. Period. Whenever ANYONE anywhere reaches out for help, let the hand of AA always be there and for that I am RESPONSIBLE. Everyone is in a different stage of development regarding belief in a higher power. Who are we to judge those behind or ahead of us? Start where the client is. Welcome both nonbelievers and believers. Don't discourage them to quit before the miracle.

Helen L. (Non-hierarchical, 25 years)

I find the traditional AA book to be too religious, sexist and outdated. I tried to read it and it didn't help. I couldn't get through it. I've had more luck finding articles and blogs on-line that I can relate w/that have helped me stay sober. It'd be nice to have these in a condensed book that could be readily available to newbies to AA, like me. 😊

Tab W. (Agnostic, 231 days)

I've been to many thousands of meetings in more than 40 states and love being sober. I've been to all sorts of meetings, obviously, and am convinced AA would better serve its Primary Purpose if it practiced inclusion of people who believe in something other than what our Christian founders did. That includes Freethinkers, Buddhists, Atheists and Agnostics, and non-religious people. My home group is primarily composed of people who see God as an anthropomorphic interventionist masculine deity and it makes it hard on me as well as many, if not most, newcomers. The Big Book is still treated like "The Gospel".

Curt F. (Non-theist, 32 years)

Over frustrated by the god thing in AA!

Tom V. (Agnostic, 8 months)

A book of collected Grapevine stories from atheists, agnostics, freethinkers, non-theists is something needed by both long-term members and by newer members of AA with sincerely held viewpoints involving the non-existence of any sort of higher power or god. I believe that such a book will reduce isolation that is currently experienced by those of us who are not believers. It is also something that I may give to newer members who are committed non-theists.

I have been a long-term member of Alcoholics Anonymous. I am tired of the disrespect and callous indifference that is foisted on anyone who dares to state that he or she does not recognize any sort of intercessory supernatural deities.

Thank you for your consideration in this matter.

Chrissy Q. (Atheist, 34 years)

Very recently I was about to step out of AA. I was so scared and torn. I know I am an alcoholic and I know I need recovery, but I couldn't stand trying to fit a square peg into a round hole anymore. I just couldn't pretend anymore. I'm so glad that I spoke out, as a fellow member led me to aaagnostica.org and all of the wonderful information and resources that have made me feel like I am not alone. I have new hope and enthusiasm for my recovery. I believe that a book of this sors would help SO many people. Not just help people, but actually save lives. I wonder how many people leave the program and die each year because they don't believe in god? Please publish the book!! I know Bill would agree.

Tiffany O. (Atheist, 2.5 years)

Please continue to print agnostic atheist stories that show that members stay sober but don't find God. Too often times the stories are shaming in so far as the storyteller sees the error of their ways and finds God. Recovery is possible without this being the case. I am proof of that.

Nick C. (Atheist, 8 years)

After a good try in my youth and college years, I decided there was nothing to it – religion, that is, and I dumped it. Fairly quickly, I felt like I'd shed a ball and chain, and I've never looked back.

Dave B. (Atheist, 1 year)

I'm still an agnostic, even after trying to believe in God for all of my life. It would be helpful to read a book of AA literature that didn't tell me that I will eventually "get over it."

Denise B. (Agnostic, 27 years)

Literature that tells the story of how "even" athiests like these speakers, managed to get and stay sober within the fellowship of AA would go a long way toward helping potential members scale the god-barbed-wire that keeps so many of us at bay and perhaps doomed to the alcoholic's alternatives to recovery.

Further, for those who do make it into AA, this particular consolidation of ESH could help many athiests stay in AA without using the god-excuse to flee in horror from a fellowship that is meant to be about staying sober and helping others achieve sobriety and not about the g-word religions so many members are peddling in the rooms of AA.

Scott A. (Atheist, 14 years, 1 month, 2 weeks)

Because "the truth" is important. There are many in AA that are telling newcomers that if you do not believe in God/A Higher Power you cannot stay sober. This is simply untrue. Some those who stay sober without God are not "real alcoholics". I think AA needs to be accepting of all who want a sober life. Should I live a life of alcoholic pain and misery because I do not believe in a deity? We need to make everyone feel welcomed in AA. A book such as this would be helpful in doing so.

George S. (Atheist, 30 years)

It is a mystery to me that it isn't already written and available. All minority groups in AA should be catered for. Our Fellowship is open to people of every persuasion who wish to recover. Why should atheists and agnostics be excluded and disregarded?

Ian H. (Freethinker, 28 years)

There are no meetings of nonbelievers in my area and I have yet to meet any non believing members. It would be important to me that AA as a whole recognizes the struggle and success of nonbelievers in the program.

Alan S. (Atheist, 5 months)

We must be an inclusive organization or fall by the wayside in a changing world.

Charles M. (Atheist, 32 years)

It would certainly make it harder for critics to call AA a religious cult.

Ted R. (Non-theist)

From my first meeting in 1981 to May 1, 1988, I never put 90 days together in a row. I heard consistently that it was vital that I believed in God or there was no chance that I could be sober. And I believed it. I had begged to believe in God those 7 years, but I never had any indication there was such a force. Then in November 1987, I went to We Agnostics in Hollywood. I saw a group of people who were sober, studying the steps, and who either did not believe in God or were uncertain. A few more months stewed but thinking of this, I went to the hospital on February 1, 1988 for my 4th detox, and have been sober since.

The suggested book will provide a means for those who do not believe in God, whether they are certain there is none or (like me) have no clue, to understand that they too can stay sober. Isn't that the idea? "When anyone anywhere reaches out for help, I want the hand of AA to always be there. For that, [WE] are responsible."

Sherril Nell W. (Agnostic, 26 years, 8 months, 7 days)

As the world moves in a more secular direction, AA is seen as religious, especially by young people. Although there are sober atheists and agnostics in AA, it is my experience that we do relatively poorly in helping this demographic. The wider our gateway, the better.

Bob K. (Atheist, 23 years)

In a word, recognition. In another word, acceptance. The AA Grapevine might ask the trustees Literature Committee for the stories which atheists and agnostics submitted in connection with the call for stories made as a result of the Advisory Action calling for literature on spirituality. These stories have not been used and with the issuance of the pamphlet "Many Paths to Spirituality" clearly will not be used. Why not benefit from them?

Paul W. (Atheist, 25 years)

This proposed/suggested book would be a wonderful way for the Grapevine to re-enforce the idea that AA is open to and embraces anyone and everyone regardless of their belief or lack of belief; that a belief in god is not necessary to achieve a lifetime of sobriety.

Denis K. (Atheist, 39 years)

Please, PLEASE: it is an embarrassment that such a book has not yet been published. A.A. should be – and in many respects is – a beacon of open-minded tolerance in an overcritical world.

If we can not only put up with but love drunks, how can we draw a line that excludes any who have the misfortune to be like us?

Ernie K. (Unconventional, 5 years)

Congratulations to the Grapevine for taking yet one more open-minded initiative, publishing a book for LGBT people. Gives me ever more hope that the book for and about agnostics and other non-believers is going to happen soon.

life-j. (Straight, 26 years)

So that those new and not so new to the program can learn that you can stay sober without a personal, intervening God.

Gord A. (Post-believer, 37 years)

I so desperately needed to warm welcome of the rooms of AA to start my recovery. But as I learned that my atheism was not a character defect but a valid part of myself, those same rooms became unwelcoming. The insistence that sobriety could not be maintained without turning one's will over to a Higher Power eventually drove me away. A recovering alcoholic needs that support, not the dogma. Any small recognition that for some, the path to sobriety does not include a HP, could be the difference between feeling included or feeling cast out.

Kjerstin G. (Atheist, 23 months)

It would help the still drinking or newcomer non theist alcoholic to feel she or he belonged in AA and could stay sober here.

Alma P. (Atheist, 28 years)

After 17 years of heavy attendance and participation in AA, and in the midst of a real mental breakdown, I drank for one day, and then had 4 more drinks over the next 5 months. When I stopped again last March, realizing I was playing Russian Roulette with a bottle, I started processing the rage and resentments that had been building against AA. I was pissed at AA because I had never found "GOD."

I had tried church shopping, reading spiritual books, praying to a God that I really didn't believe cared about me. I had been raised in a faith-based home, but my religious upbringing coupled with some childhood trauma made me fear the God of my understanding. When AA said, "God as you understand him," I finally admitted I had never understood him (and it DEFINITELY had to do with God's MALE gender as espoused by the Christian religion that permeates AA). Saying the Lord's Prayer at the end of each meeting made me angry. "Heavenly father" and "earthly father" were definitely being confused emotionally, although intellectually I had already "dealt with" my past. I felt like I was such a freak, not having GOD all wrapped up at 17 years sober. After I drank, by the way, several people told me they were glad I drank because they thought I was going to kill myself.

Since my return this March, I finally started the first "We Agnostics" group in Arizona and have been vocal about my disbelief in an interventionist GOD that AA promotes. I wish there had been more in AA literature about those of us that stay sober without GOD. I wish I had seen the website, www.aaAgnostica.org as a resource, a site that connects me to thousands of agnostics and atheist alcoholics who stay sober by staying ACTIVE in AA, not thinking about it (which is what prayer and meditation seem to be for me).

I recently read the Many Paths to Spirituality pamphlet, but found it still condescending to agnostics and atheists, just like the Big Book's chapter called We Agnostics. No wonder people are looking for other solutions outside AA that offer secular recovery. The problem is, it's not AA and after looking at the alternative versions of AA steps offered on the website, I just wish AA would allow the experience of atheists and agnostics to be expressed in "AA Approved Literature."

To me, spirituality is LIVING the principles of the program, not reading spiritual books. I am an action-oriented person, and I'd like to see AA expand itself. Otherwise, more and more people like me will continue to feel like an outsider, and I know that is not AA's purpose, but it sure felt that way since I wasn't "buying in" to the God concept.

Laura M. (Adventurous, 8 months again, after 17 years)

AAs who either don't believe in God or aren't sure if He/She exists deserve to be represented. Whenever God is a big part of someone's story I feel that it is far less helpful to me than a story from someone who is an atheist or agnostic. I benefit from anything program related much more in a huge way when God is not part of the equation.

Mireille W. (Atheist, almost 2 years)

A book for the atheists, agnostics, naturalists, freethinkers, rationalists, humanists, and non-theists in AA is a smart idea. We are a loyal, literate, book-buying bunch who are growing in numbers and have been neglected by the publishers of AA literature. Right now we are buying lots of non-AA books about how we can get and stay sober in AA – simply because AA doesn't publish one.

Your new book, "Sober & Out" is a fine example of the Grapevine's ability to provide what is needed. Please publish a similar book for the secular community in AA. We will buy it.

Skip D. (Atheist, 13 years)

We nonbelievers have been part of AA since the very beginning. We belonged to the Fellowship of recovering alcoholics even before there was an Alcoholics Anonymous. Our sobriety is based on the true heart of AA: the Fellowship and the 24-Hour Plan. The AA Preamble, written by an editor of the Grapevine, expresses eloquently how AA works for us. A pamphlet for us is long overdue.

John L. (Freethinker, 46 years)

A meeting in print where identification takes place in more than one form.

Chris G. (Agnostic, 12 years)

I first got sober in 2002 and stayed sober in AA for 5, but the god thing was always bothering me. Came back last year and contacted our intergroup and got the names of two Atheist/Agnostics in AA. Shortly after that we do have a "We Agnostics" meeting on Tuesday in Jacksonville, Florida.

Luke O. (Atheist, 18 months)

There is very little in our literature to help the agnostic or atheist who truly wants to get and stay sober, but cannot accept a theistic way of life. Many people get and stay sober without a conventional Higher Power. The Grapevine already has quite a collection of stories that share this type of experience, strength, and hope. It would be great to compile those stories for atheists and agnostics the way it has been done for the gay and lesbian community.

Nita S. (Agnostic, 23 years)

It would be helpful for material for newcomers and meetings.

Chris R. (Atheist, 9 years)

We have just started a "We Agnostics" meeting in Palm Springs, CA. There has been a much greater positive response than expected. Seems like it's time for atheists and agnostics to come out of the closet. Reading the stories of others has always been helpful to me and I presume it will be for others.

Faith R. (Agnostic or Freethinker, 36 years)

It is essential that the position of god in the AA program does not stand in the way of people's ability to use AA to get and stay sober. People can get sober no matter what they believe and this position makes AA even stronger. As a side note, people getting sober in, for example, Iran, are not calling their higher power god.

Bob C. (Skeptic, 5+ years)

There is too much emphasis on religion in AA. Many meetings close with the Christian Lord's Prayer. This puts many a person off the program. I had resentment from childhood against my parents and the religion they indoctrinated me with. This was a factor in a 14 year relapse after struggling in AA based sobriety for 6 years.

An Agnostic meeting in Durham NC saved my life. While I now accept other people's beliefs and their need to express them, I still don't think the endless discussions, about god's will vs. self will, do any good. The whole thing is nonsense. All I needed was to understand that I was not-god; and that there was a power greater than myself in the universe that I could tap into. As it says in the chapter to the agnostics, the great reality deep within me.

Eric H. (Agnostic, 3 years, 11 months)

I feel it would be wise for AA to get ahead of the curve on this. The upcoming generations will find it increasingly difficult to relate to the BB as written, and are also increasingly rejecting and/or reformulating traditional religion.

Consider the responsibility pledge. It is our job to reach out and be there. A book of this sort will serve a population that is only going to continue to grow.

Ian B. (Freethinker, 9 months)

I need to hear & share with others who do not believe in god.

Myrna E. (Fabulous)

My husband who has 6 years, has, and is really struggling with the use of the term God mentioned so much in the literature and at the meetings.

I had a hard time at first understanding his problem with this, but now I can see his concern, and having read a bit of atheist AA literature, I see no reason to exclude their viewpoint. AA is not wholly a religious organization, yet it does seem at times we slip into quite a bit of the religious rhetoric. Even I, who have religious beliefs, become uncomfortable with the members who express the program in a strict religious context. We should be tolerant and open to the atheist, this is a program for alcoholics. Many principles of the program came from many different beliefs, as well as good psychological practices. Please consider the good this will accomplish for the better of all.

Debra S. (Agnostic, 25 years)

This book would be helpful because I feel excluded by a lot of AA literature. I hear "How It Works" read at every meeting, basically telling me I have to have a Higher Power or I will die. It says I can define my own, but that's not really true. If you read the steps, it has to be something I can turn my will and my life over to, loving and caring, responds to prayers such as remove my defects, listens to me and provides me with direction, etc. I am tired of being told I don't "get it" and to keep trying. I am a non-believer and I have stayed sober a long time without a higher power, so stop lying to us and telling us it can't be done.

Beth H. (Agnostic, 29 years)

I'm concerned that if I can't find a way to feel that I still fit into AA, my sobriety will be at greater risk.

David W. (Atheist, 32 years)

I love the stories in the back of the Big Book but would appreciate stories I can really relate to. For many years I've tried to get sober in AA but the continuous mention of "God" would justify my going back out, because I "didn't fit in" or the persons who would verbally accost me and my lack of belief.

Elyssa M. (Atheist, 6 months)

I know many atheists/agnostics who are not availing themselves of AA due the perception, rightly or wrongly, that it is a religious organization. I urge the organization to display its openness to accept those troubled by alcoholism regardless of faith or lack thereof.

Christine L. (Atheist, 18 months)

I think it is past time to have a book of stories by atheists, agnostics, free thinkers, etc. There are certainly plenty of us out here who would appreciate one.

Tom H. (Atheist, 23 years)

The agnostic, atheist and freethinker in A.A. needs to know that A.A. and the steps can work for them without their being required to change their worldview or to adopt the beliefs of others.

The Big Book and Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions portray agnostics and atheists as people who have not yet seen the light. Meetings open with a reading from "How it Works" proclaiming, "There is One who has all power. That One is God", and then demands that "We find Him now"!

This creates an atmosphere that makes the agnostic, atheist or freethinker feel that his or her views are unwelcome and that the program cannot be properly worked without belief in a supernatural and all powerful God.

A book of stories written by others in AA who are staying sober without belief in a God will provide support to these people, helping them relate to other alcoholics and assuring they have a place in A.A. The book would also be useful in educating believers that there are indeed many paths of spirituality in A.A., and that even an atheist can practice the underlying principles found in the steps and find sobriety and happiness in the fellowship.

John S. (Atheist, 26 years)

Since I was an atheist before I came to the 12 steps, I came up with an acronym for "GOD" as "Grateful, Optimistic Disorder". Since there is, for me, no "order" in the universe and, further, because being thankful for where I am and optimistic about the future guide me to a better way of life. I adopted that definition of a "higher power".

Mike P. (Atheist, 3 years)

Such a book would help all members of AA understand that it is possible to get sober, remain sober and have good long term sobriety even if a member doesn't believe in a god. This would definitely help the non theistic members to be accepted and feel accepted by everyone in the fellowship. Since being a part of the AA Community is a key and perhaps the critical key to recovery, this book would open the gates for many who reject AA because they do not feel accepted by AA. It's time.

Neil F. (Atheist, 28 years)

It would help others like myself who "go along to get along" about "God" see they could be A PART of AA and stay SOBER without God.

Glen G. (Atheist, 5 ½ years)

I recently started an open meeting for agnostics, atheists and all others not only for myself but for the several alcoholics in our local fellowship who have died by their own hands in recent years, and most importantly for those still alive and suffering. Those that died were atheists, agnostics or terribly ashamed and self-loathing Christians. Identification with mainstream, traditional, God talking AA was difficult for them.

Beliefs are surface identifications just as alcohol is only a symptom, one of many, of alcoholism; but identification is what attracts us to the fellowship and inherent program within it. Atheists and agnostics and attendant beliefs are a special interest group, just as young

peoples, LGBT's, men's and women's groups are. I feel that any book, booklet, or pamphlet in each of these venues would be most appropriate as an identification tool of attraction to the fellowship and suggested program of recovery of Alcoholics Anonymous.

Christopher G. (Atheist, 12 years)

I would love to see an AA book that tells of the experiences of sober AAs who do not believe in a "Higher Power" as it is presented in all the main AA literature. I would love it if newcomers who don't believe could have hope that they, too, could get and stay sober in this wonderful fellowship. Thank you for your consideration.

John G. (Non-believer, 32 years)

There are so many people who come to A.A. but do not stay, and one of the chief reasons I have noticed is the emphasis on God and "God talk." A.A. needs to evolve in order to serve the changing ideas of people who seek recovery. A book or pamphlet provided specifically for this growing "special interest" group would reaffirm our primary purpose.

Patrick N. (Humanist, 5 + years)

There are some that can't stomach a "Higher Power" of any sort. This book would be a life saver for those unfortunates who are stranded in areas where non-believer meetings are verboten. I would include a section on how to gently inform the others that "I don't believe...". I was surprised when I did it, and everyone there was cool with it. Wisely, I picked the right meeting to reveal that info!

James T. (Atheist, 3 years)

It would be a step forward towards the inclusiveness which our founders repeatedly stressed throughout AA literature.

James O'D. (AA member, 7 years)

Had it not been for an Atheist and Agnostic AA Group in a nearby town, I would never have entered the doors of AA. It took me 35 years to get there. Now that I truly understand what AA has to offer, I feel comfortable (most of the time) going to any AA meeting. I have sat at meetings of alternative programs where people have shared the trauma they've experienced via AA because "God" was shoved down their throats. The proposed book would let others know that the only requirement for AA is a desire to stop drinking. Period.

Marianne P. (Atheist, 65 days)

I find myself struggling to feel like an equal partner in recovery. My fellows, who are almost exclusively Christian, are all polite and friendly. However, it's quite clear that they do not understand my lack of belief. Most of them will openly share that a belief in God is absolutely fundamental to recovery. I find myself avoiding several meetings I used to attend regularly because of the constant testimony. At times I feel very uncomfortable and alien.

Ken T. (Atheist, 9 years)

Many of the new-comers I have worked with over the years have found lasting sobriety because I didn't insist they have a "God" to get and stay sober. In the last decade or so, the number of people coming in with alternative views to the judeo-christian path, or even the "God" path, has increased. Who knows how many have been lost because of the propensity for some groups to insist they must have God or even a "higher power" to stay sober. A lot of my Native American brothers and sisters do not respond to the idea of "higher power" but do to other powers. It would be helpful if we had an "AA-approved" publication that would show the varieties of non-believers that stay sober in AA. Especially now, when so many of our groups seem to think that such a belief is a requirement for AA and sobriety, which untold numbers have proven throughout AA history is not true (untold, because no such records are kept). I was fortunate to know several Atheists/Agnostics and non-theists in my early sobriety (1981) who helped me tremendously.

John R. (Non-theist, 33.8 years)

I was religiously abused as a child by a teacher. The god message that I drag with me is not only difficult but counter productive. I can tolerate a wide swath of religious concepts, but dogmatic language causes a near allergic reaction. Thankfully I got sober a while back, in a community that wasn't inclined to proselytizing. It would be great to hear voices that share my experience, strength and hope.

Larry K. (Humanist, 21 years)

Because there are thousands of us out here!

Neil M. (Atheist, 30 years)

Balance.

Steve A. (Atheist, 6 years)

It can be one more tool I can use in my recovery by hearing from like minds.

Peggy H. (Agnostic, 2 years)

People need to know that they can recover with or without a "god". AA needs to move away from 1940's thinking and language.

Ken S. (Freethinker, 27 years)

As time goes on it appears that the Catholic Church and people of Christianity have found one of the last bastions of desperate people to convert or reinforce that which many in the world now find distasteful, harmful and a divisive big business. AA has become less secular as the years go by, when I started AA the Christian "Lord's Prayer" was never uttered at meetings. The old timers, as religious as some were, recognized that it did not belong in meetings.

The world is a much more open and secular place, AA is not although our traditions strictly forbid any affiliation with sect or denomination. Why do most physicians, psychiatrists and medical professionals refuse to recommend AA, because by definition we are becoming cult like.

Suffering alcoholics of all walks need a place to come to to get well not get god unless they choose. The truth needs to be open to all, that to many, any sort of belief system is repulsive, primitive and has absolutely no place in modern AA.

AA literature is rife with miracles and magic. The literature does everything it can to scorn we "savage and belligerent" ones. New comers looking for help need to know that there are thousands who have found happy, contented sobriety and are giving back to AA and society without soliciting the gods help.

Please publish a book about those who have, and continue to find a godless and good life of sobriety. It may upset believers, but is it not our primary purpose not to "stay sober and help others to find sobriety"?

Andy Mc. (Realist, 33 years)

It would add to the (currently very small) armoury of literature that helps people put off by the god stuff in AA. Presumably these people slink away and die. So it would be a lifesaver and expand the number of alcoholics helped by AA.

David K. (Atheist, 16 years)

In Indiana, a large number of people believe that a belief in God is necessary to get sober. There are very few role models for new people who are not believers. A book would help the newcomer find a role model which appealed to him. It would give him hope.

Jan H. (Agnostic, 41 years)

I do think a book of stories about and from atheists / agnostics / freethinkers / scientists would be welcoming to more people than I would have guessed prior to the WAAFT convention in Santa Monica. The halls of AA must have a significant percentage of people who are covering up their true beliefs as was I until recently. I did not want to hurt anyones' feelings and did not want to be ostracized for my beliefs which do not conform to those expressed in the big book. It is even difficult for me to speak of my beliefs here because I've had far more practice acting like I was not so different and finding ways to talk about, for example, the third step, without offending anyone in the room. I have the words to do that but could use stories of how others are able to express themselves honestly without damaging AA. I certainly don't want to damage the most ubiquitous and inexpensive treatment for alcoholism. But I do want it to be available to people like me as well as people who can accept a belief based on nothing more than faith.

Lance B. (Scientist, 28 years)

I have known far too many men and women who were not programmed as children to believe in unseen deities, and therefore couldn't swallow the god idea. One such member in desperation committed suicide 30 years ago. I however stuck with it because it is the process of the steps, minus the make-believe, that produces the desired result in my life and those I sponsor. It is an action program based upon rigorous honesty. Freethinkers meetings are a necessity in the modern world. I am responsible when anyone, anywhere reaches out to AA for help... I am responsible.

Jeb B. (Monist, 36+ years)

There are dozens of AA meetings a week in my area (outside Ann Arbor, MI). NONE of them address the needs of non-believers. A book like this would help me immensely. Thank you.

Jill A. (Agnostic, 2 months)

No alcoholic should have to continue to feel “different” in recovery. By different, I mean the feeling that I still need to withhold sharing my truth. The dishonesty of my reticence about what works for me feels like a barrier to me feeling fully a part of my AA meetings.

Phil O. (Agnostic, 2 years)

Agnostics and atheists need to know that the program can work for them too. Most AA literature does not adequately convey this, leading non-believers to reject the program (or feel rejected by it!).

Hilary J. (Agnostic, 3.5 years)

There are many of us in AA who do not wish to leave the programme, but want to feel no longer alone if we are agnostics, atheists, non-believers or freethinkers. We expect to be accepted into a programme that gives us the right to our own beliefs and doesn't judge us as lesser than, if we do not agree with a religious spirituality or seek to say we are not alcoholic if we have sobriety without religion, Christianity or theism.

Glenna R. (Non-believer, 17 years)

There are many atheists, hidden in the rooms but more importantly, leaving the rooms because it is in the literature we can't do it. I would like to see more of us out in the open to show what can be accomplished with a little work and understanding on/of self.

Dave S. (Atheist, 2.5 years)

I peeked into AA in 1999, again in 2005, in San Antonio. Both times, the meetings ended in the Lord's Prayer after much discussion of a supernatural power keeping everyone sober. I left immediately both times. Bouncing in and out from 2009 to 2012, I finally gave up on the aggravating god-talk and the judgement. Then I experienced some trauma and grief that sent me into the hospital several times in a short period during 2014. I'm back now and there is an agnostic/atheist meeting in San Antonio now and I feel I can work a program. If I had had a book oriented to my worldview, I might have saved myself a lot of time.

Michael K. (Atheist, 7 weeks)

It would be helpful to know how people who are struggling with the concept of a Higher Power are able to function within AA.

Philip M. (Male, 1 year minus 4 days)

When anyone, anywhere reaches out for help I want the hand of AA to always be there..... Does that extend to Atheists?

Doug P. (Atheist, 21 years)

There are many that do not and quite possibly will not believe in a metaphysical higher power. To make it seem like one must believe in one in order to be in AA (which I know isn't the case) keeps some from sticking around the rooms. If not for my most recent foray into speaking with other non-believers in the program I likely would have left A.A. Atheists are a growing segment of the population. The words of Bill W through the years support this population being a part of the program and he stated we must be willing to continue to change as an organization. Please consider more explicitly non-believer friendly literature in the future to help ensure ALL segments of the problem drinking population have the chance at recovery through this program. Thank you for your consideration in this matter!

Benn B. (Atheist, 7+ years)

To NOT assist ANY alcoholics in achieving and maintaining sobriety goes against AA's primary purpose. If it were not for the efforts and influence of pioneers like Jim Burwell and Hank Parkhurst in the early days, working with Bill W., AA would have been another strict version of the Oxford group and I would most likely be dead. It is hypocritical of AA to state its primary purpose, but reject the needs of any body of its members with a lack of literature or genuine support. By definition and various high court rulings, AA is a Christian sect, period. AA's "non-believer" population has been around since day one. The need for appropriate, respectful and helpful literature in this area is decades overdue. Thank You.

Bob F. (Non-believer, 10 years)

Although the program teaches us about spirituality most meetings that I have attended lean very much towards Christianity and it makes me uncomfortable.

Sara B. (Agnostic, 1 year)

I welcome the inspiration such a book would provide, written in a "language" that doesn't require "translation".

Fred K. (Agnostic/freethinker/Buddhist-ish, 2 ½ years)

There is a lot of fear and confusion among non-believers in AA. We feel the pressure to stay silent about our views and then feel as if we are not being honest with other AAs. Please publish these articles as a collection. AA needs to respect and embrace ALL belief systems including those of freethinkers, atheists, agnostics and humanists. Thank you.

Suzanne G. (Atheist, 7 years)

I want to hear the stories of other people like me. I want to develop more courage to be who I really am in the rooms of recovery and I think this book would help.

Jo M. (Freethinker, 5 years)

The response: A letter from the AA Grapevine

First, to explain the process of how such a book for atheists and agnostics would be published by the Grapevine, Ami Brophy wrote the following in an email on January 3 of this year:

AA Grapevine, Inc. has received requests (via AA Agnostica) to publish an anthology about the atheist and/or agnostic AA member's experience, strength and hope in recovery from alcoholism as a book topic for consideration at the upcoming Conference in 2015.

The process provides that the requests go to the GV board first, then to the GV Conference Committee and then to the Conference.

And now the letter from the AA Grapevine:

January 30, 2015

Dear Roger,

Greetings from the Grapevine office in New York.

Thank you for sending the request for "A Grapevine Book for Atheists and Agnostics in AA."

Your request was presented at the AA Grapevine Board of Directors January 29, 2015 quarterly meeting. The Board reviewed the request with great interest, appreciation and lengthy discussion. The Grapevine Board made the decision not to forward this request to this Conference.

We at Grapevine truly appreciate your interest and suggestions. Please do not hesitate to contact us, if you have further suggestions or questions.

Yours in fellowship,

Eugene O'Brien

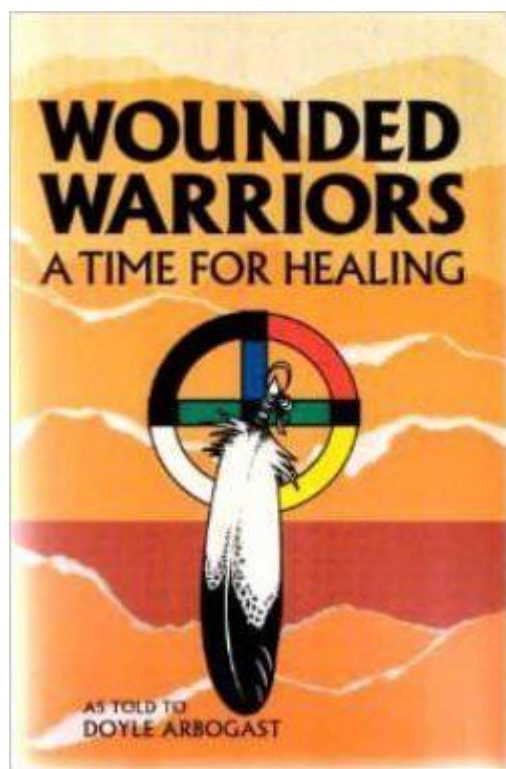
Secretary to the Conference Committee on the Grapevine

cc: Mary Swart Cummings, Conference Coordinator; Andrew Ware, Chairperson, Grapevine Board of Directors; Ami Brophy, Executive Editor/Publisher, AA Grapevine

Since then they have indeed sent it to the conference and it was approved as a possible title to publish. Now we'll see if they ever do make it.

Wounded Warriors

Posted on [August 5, 2015](#) AA Agnostica



Reviewed by life-j

This is maybe the most engaging recovery book I have ever read.

OK, recovery writing does not get much better than the beginning couple of pages of Chapter 3 of the Big Book. Bill Wilson has his brilliant moments. But this is different.

In Ernie Kurtz' book *Not-God* we read about how it was important for early AA to not offend anyone, especially not the Catholic church. They wanted all those drunken Irishmen to join. So the Big Book wound up being quite sanitized.

Not so with this book. They call a spade a spade, and talk straight from the heart. The author, Doyle Arbogast, interviewed a number of Native Americans who were in recovery. Most of them had contact with AA to a greater or lesser degree, but eventually chose Red Road instead. Red Road is a Native American recovery program. I have gone to quite a few Red Road meetings myself though I am unlikely to have any Indian blood in me. I'm from the Germanic Tribe. Born and raised in Denmark.

Simply comparing one recovery program to the other, I think they both have their weak and strong points. I can personally not believe in The Great Spirit any more than I can believe in the Christian interventionist deity, but that much said, Native

American spirituality I find, along with Buddhism and the Tao, to be much more sympathetic than the particular variant of the Middle Eastern deity I had forced down my throat as a child.

Perhaps having been force-fed on religion is part of what makes this book special to me. I relate personally and on a deep level to having had religion forced upon me as a child, as well as experiencing violence and neglect, though my own was nowhere near as bad as these people's.

I was maybe eight years old when I looked up at that crucifix and realized there was no way I would be able to buy all that. Teachers who preached at us, made us sing psalms, and listen to child friendly sanitized stories based on Old Testament atrocities, hit us when we didn't do things their way, and then when it was time for recess they would stand and talk with passersby while ignoring that kids were getting beat up by bullies. I was one of those whom two kids from the grade above would hold down and let a kid from the grade below beat up on. This kind of stuff went on for years. One other kid got so scared of getting beaten up that he ran out of the schoolyard and wouldn't come back in. So the teacher went out, dragged him inside and caned him. "Caning" for those who don't know, is being beaten with a bamboo cane. They don't break.

I think my sense of justice – and injustice – rests in large part on this incident, even today.

Red Road

Red Road makes sense for a Native American. Part of what has led so many Native Americans into alcoholism is that the conquering white society systematically and deliberately did what it could to destroy their culture and identity as a people.

Besides addressing the addiction, and the personal issues associated with the alcoholism in a manner comparable to what we do in AA, Red Road also helps Native American people restore their cultural identity, and while I have no direct experience with such a loss – the Germanic tribes were overrun by Catholic priests almost 1500 years ago – reading these stories I can tell that reconnecting with their culture in a deep, spiritual way whether through Red Road or in some other manner is a very important part of the recovery process.

So in a way I'm unqualified to review the book since I can't personally relate to the importance of re-connecting with Native American culture, but there are other aspects to the book that make it important to me.

The Red Road was started by Rick Thomas and Gene Thin Elk. Rick's is one of the 14 stories in the book. There are a couple of extras too, including a glossary of Indian concepts and words which is helpful for those of us who have not lived in touch with Native American Ways. This book, however, focuses on the individual stories more so

than on the Red Road program per se, though occasionally we get a glimpse of the process.

Here's part of an account from a Red Road workshop:

I made up my mind during the workshop that I wasn't going to talk about being abused. I wasn't prepared to do that. I was just going to sit there and listen and observe. I didn't want to get involved. But... as I sat there and began listening to the others, I began to learn there were others that had been through some very terrible things. I was beginning to understand that I wasn't the only one with all these feelings inside me.

When they wrote words of feelings on the blackboard, I felt every one of them. When it came my turn to share a feeling, I passed. But it finally got to me. I thought that no one knew the shame I felt. So I went up to the board and wrote the word, shame. I tried to be calm and keep my feelings inside. Before I knew it I was telling all the things that happened to me – with my back to the others. All of a sudden it was like a dam broke.

I just broke down, I never cried so hard in my life. When I finally stopped crying, I couldn't turn around. I started crying again.

Finally I was able to turn around. Everybody was crying...

Even Rick had tears running down his face...

The workshop lasted a whole week, and Rick told me that I had to work toward forgiveness...

The story then goes into this process, the woman writing a letter to her dad... a dead man... and much else. Looks like there are many similarities to AA, but it also strikes me how the emphasis often is on forgiveness, rather than on making amends. This is one thing that strikes me because Bill Wilson's bunch may mostly have had to make amends; they were strongwilled and powerful people who had much opportunity to do wrong. Many of the people in these stories, while they of course often had trodden in their tormentors' footsteps, often had more issues with forgiveness. Something I can relate to myself. My 9th step process around my dad was mostly about forgiveness, and I did get to – just in time before he died.

Guantanamo Move Over!

Most of the people in these stories tell what happened to them in great detail. This is what makes the book so hauntingly alive.

Up into the early sixties many children were taken away from their homes, often alcoholic homes, or given up by parents who knew nothing of the hell that was waiting for their children in the Catholic Indian Missions. The passage below, from "George Speaks", is by no means the worst, and far from the only one. It gets worse.

The whole book is full of accounts like these. The vividness of the accounts makes the book hard to read from time to time. By the time you're halfway through "Serene Speaks" it is almost unbearably painful to read. The women tell about the sexual abuse, and you lose a sense of how many times they were raped. Violence in general is a thread through the stories, just like in most alcoholic homes, but here it is told straight from the heart, and in such detail that it makes it more real than any other "what it was like" stories I have ever read or heard. We may note in passing that Bureau of Indian Affairs boarding schools were often as bad as the Catholic schools.

Here is one childhood account:

It was about 5 o'clock in the morning. Right after the alarm went off those damn nuns would come walking down the aisle by each bed to check and see who wet the bed. There were a number of us who wet the bed. Then they would make us take our sheets off our bed. They herded us down to the basement where there were rows of sinks. In front of the sinks there were some bar stools. All the boys who had wet the bed had to sit on the stool in front of their sink and put a urine soaked sheet over their heads. You had no way of knowing whether or not you had your own sheet because they were all mixed up. We had to sit there for an hour with these sheets over our heads. We couldn't talk or anything. And we had to miss breakfast. After an hour, you had to walk to the sink and wash out the sheet and hang it up. After this we could go to class, and we were usually late.

In spite of all the abuse at the missions some of the kids would internalize the Catholicism.

I still feel some resentment for my second sponsor. I think it's because he was so representative, a summary if you will, of everything that had been so repressive in my life. I was attracted to how solid and comfortable he seemed. He had seemed to reach some goals in his life that I wished I could reach. Having grown up in the Catholic faith I had some trust in him because he was also Catholic. His implied behavior and comments were prejudiced, but I think he would have denied it if I would have told him so... I think he feared that he would lose me to the Indian ways and then feel rejected. Indirectly on more than one occasion he was critical of our people. I was always uncomfortable when he did that. I was a nice guy and didn't say anything. I had been taught all my life that the Indian religion and traditional ways were paganistic and wrong. I feared ever becoming close to it. Yet I had this secret curiosity about my people's ways. But I didn't dare get too close to it or else I would go to Hell when I died...

I stopped attending AA meetings on a regular basis around 1986. I was becoming convinced that AA was not "the" answer for me. I still had no relief from the incredible fear that I carried... But most of all what I heard over and over was "If you will just work these twelve steps you will get better"... I think that some of the people in AA were blinded by AA itself as if it were a cure-all. They couldn't see or didn't want to admit, that I needed some help outside of AA. After all, they seemed to believe that my fear of going crazy was a result of my alcoholism.

Not the first time that we in AA have put the cart before the horse. In so many instances the alcohol was not initially the problem but the cure for our underlying problem, so long as it worked, and years later, while arresting the ensuing alcoholism is bound to make much of life less complicated, we know full well it will not fix the underlying problem.

Bill Wilson and his bunch of alcoholics were Type A personalities, well educated white business and professional men who had been in positions of power. This is not the case for many of us. For many of us the struggle is not with strong egos that need to be deflated, but with fears so strong that no ego was left, and if anything, egos needed to be built, not deflated.

Having suffered years of abuse in a Catholic Indian Mission or in severely alcoholic homes or, in some of the cases, downright evil foster homes appears to not have left much ego to deflate for some of these people.

This is one of the reasons this book is so powerful to me. These are bottom of society people whom I identify much more with than Bill Wilson's bunch. Sure, many of those wound up in the gutter, but one often gets the feeling that part of their project was to restore upper middle class losers, as much as it was to restore alcoholics. They were out to help their own kind.

What it was like

One wants to use the adjective "unbelievable" about these stories. But that's just it: No matter how horrendous they get – they aren't. And while we in AA have this idea that people should curb their drunkalog, and while even talking about our bad childhood is discouraged because we are now supposed to take responsibility for our life, so there's no point in talking about what's water under the bridge, this book gets into both, full bore. And I like that. While it is true that we can't change what happened in the past, we can only take responsibility for the present, I think AA nowadays discourages talking about it to such a degree that it often becomes difficult to process it in a meaningful and helpful way.

A newcomer recently said that she was grateful a couple of us had talked about what our drinking was like – made it much easier for her to identify. It can be much more useful than when stuffy old-timers talk about "the solution" – newcomers can't identify with that yet.

It makes me forget "what it was like" when I don't hear anyone talk about it.

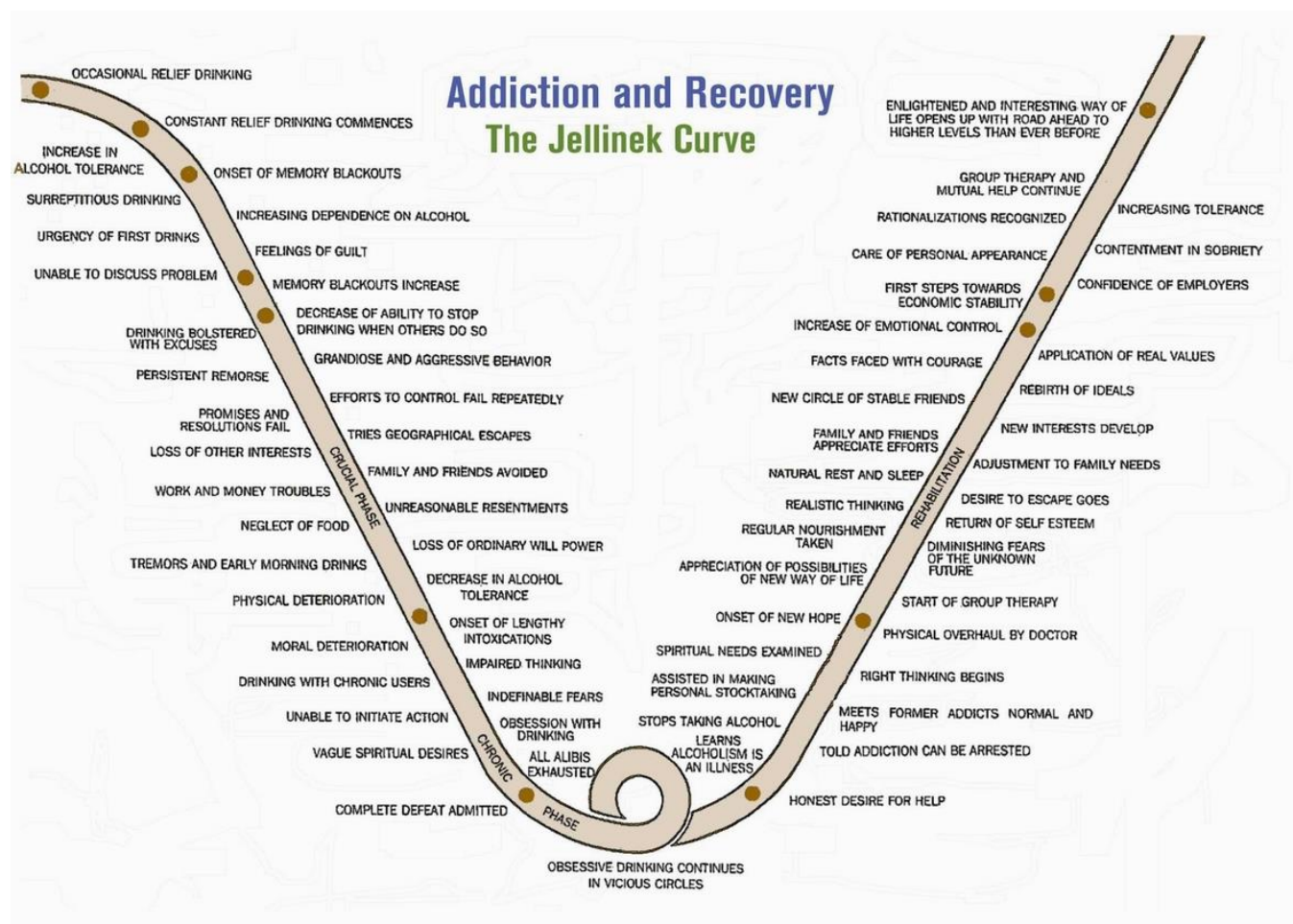
I probably wasn't that bad, just had a couple of years with bad luck...

This book confirms what we have known for a long time: We can't do it alone, and we don't have to try to do it alone. It's once we admit that we're in over our heads, and that we need help, that recovery begins. And that's no different here than in any other recovery program that works.

Wounded Warriors – A Time for Healing, by Doyle Arbogast, was published in 1995. It is available at [Amazon](#).

The Jellinek Curve

Posted on [August 22, 2015](#) AA Agnostica



By life-j.

E. M. Jellinek (“Bunky”) is among other things said to be the father of the “Jellinek Curve” which we saw here at AA Agnostica a while back. He was also one of the foremost researchers on alcoholism in his day. It appears that he was one of the first people in the academic world to give alcoholism the status of a disease.

On Wikipedia his credentials are impressive:

In the 1930s he returned to the U.S.A. and worked at the Worcester State Hospital, Worcester, Massachusetts, from whence he was commissioned to conduct a study for the Research Council on Problems of Alcohol. The eventual outcome of his study was the 1942 book, *Alcohol Addiction and Chronic Alcoholism*.

From 1941 to 1952, he was Associate Professor of Applied Physiology at Yale University. In 1941 he was managing editor of the newly established Quarterly Journal of Studies on Alcohol (now the Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs). In 1952 he was engaged by the World Health Organization in Geneva as a consultant on alcoholism, and made significant contributions to the work of the alcoholism sub-committee of the W.H.O.'s Expert Committee on Mental Health.

His whole life is documented there. However, a bit more research reveals that his life story is far from well documented. Even his identity in earlier parts of his life is questionable. Very well, he lived in several places around the world, and it was not uncommon in the world before electronic records that a person could bullshit their way into rather prestigious positions of employment. Things were hard to verify. I had two successful 20 year careers myself in fields I knew practically nothing about when I started. A Danish friend of mine, equipped with a fake degree from an American university where he never set foot taught English in Japan for a year. History is full of examples like these. And it appears that Jellinek is no exception from this long and glorious tradition.

According to his second wife, or as she is referred to in one biographical paper:

The CAS archives contain letters written from Thelma Pierce Anderson, Jellinek's likely second wife, to Mark Keller at the Center of Alcohol Studies:

"I do remember Bunky coming home and saying, 'How would you like to be married to an alcohol expert?' I said something along the line of, 'But you don't know one damned thing about it'. ...I said I thought he could probably learn enough to bull his way along until he needed to know more. Again, Bunky took to the books, and I swear that within ten days he had developed a number of really good and original ideas on a subject about which he (nor anyone else it turned out) had had not one reasonable notion in 50 years." (Anderson to Keller, 1963)

We in AA would know him from his contact with Marty Mann, one of the first women to sober up within the Fellowship. ("Women Suffer Too") She was from a wealthy family, and supported his research financially – and at least initially – and also provided the material she wanted to have researched. Again, according to Wikipedia:

Jellinek coined the expression "the disease concept of alcoholism", and significantly accelerated the movement towards the medicalization of drunkenness and alcohol habituation.

Jellinek's initial 1946 study was funded by Marty Mann and R. Brinkley Smithers (Falcone, 2003). It was based on a narrow, selective study of a hand-picked group of members of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) who had returned a self-reporting questionnaire. Valverde opines that a biostatistician of Jellinek's eminence would have been only too well aware of the "unscientific status" of the "dubiously scientific data that had been collected by AA members".

By this time he did indeed have a reputation to uphold, and in the resulting paper, [Phases in the Drinking History of Alcoholics](#) (1946), he does indeed in several places cautiously distance himself from his involvement with it. The 36 questions these hand picked alcoholics were asked were much like the “20 Questions” we all know well, though the questions were prefaced by “At What Age Did You First”. We all know the age is not a primary factor. Jellinek points out that such a questionnaire should instead have been prepared by a researcher in order to really do the subject justice, not by someone with a point to prove.

And now the “Jellinek Curve”. (*Editor’s Note: Click here for large PDF version of the [Jellinek Curve](#). If you click on the image at the bottom of this article you will also get the PDF. Feel free to print it, if you wish.*)

According to the paper “Mystery and speculations – An introduction to E.M. Jellinek’s redemption” by William Bejarno:

Perhaps his most enduring contribution to the field is his idea of “phases” of alcohol addiction (Jellinek, 1946, 1952), later modified by Dr. Max Glatt to include a recovery element (Glatt, 1958), but still popularly referred to as the “Jellinek Curve.” This curve has been modified and applied to all sorts of addiction disorders over the years and remains highly cited to this day.

Jellinek eventually distanced himself from it. Max Glatt was sort of the British counterpart to Jellinek, but apparently much more involved in treatment of alcoholics.

Most of the elements along this curve are familiar to an alcoholic in recovery. Most of us have experienced many of them. What I will focus on here, however are those entries which relate to the realm of the spiritual because there’s something funny going on. On the Recovery side of the Curve we find, relatively early on “Spiritual needs examined”. I don’t think this was foremost on my mind when I was newly sober, though going to AA I eventually would wind up doing this exam because that’s part of what you do in AA. Farther up the curve we find things like “Rebirth of Ideals”, “Application of Real Values” and those make better sense, along with most of the others. It is a bit later. The whole recovery list I find to generally be a reasonable representation of the progress of recovery.

But what really jumped out at me was an entry on the Addiction side. Again most of them I could relate to from my own experience, but not the one called “Vague Spiritual Desires”. This supposedly happens right before the end, a while after “Moral Deterioration”, “Impaired Thinking”, “Indefinable Fears”, “Unable to Initiate Action”, “Obsession with Drinking” – all familiar, but then “Vague Spiritual Desires”?

I dabbled in spiritual things along my way toward active alcoholism. In my 20s I would occasionally go so far off on a tangent as to allow Jehovas Witnesses, or Children of God in for a cup of coffee and a discussion, later on I got vaguely interested in Eastern stuff, later on yet, as the years passed, we’d all sit at 2 AM,

drunk on our asses and have deep, deep discussions about god and spirituality, and who created the world, and where he was before he created it and all that, for my own part mostly from an atheist point of view. I did a variety of psychotherapies too, some of which could be said to include spiritual elements. But all that of course fell by the wayside eventually. Later on we were only interested in beer and sex, and later on yet, only beer.

So somehow these “Vague Spiritual Desires” come into the picture at this point. Now I know there are people of a supposedly religious inclination who at this point would start bargaining with their god to see if they couldn’t somehow ease out of the corner they had painted themselves into, but even prayers on such an occasion can hardly be called spiritual desire, rather it’s just a slick attempt to get one over on whatever god there may be.

Personally I had no spiritual desires at that point, vague or otherwise, and I have not known any alcoholic in the twilight before recovery that did. So what is it doing there? I can not see any other explanation than that someone with an agenda put it in there. Time for the white light, folks!

It’s a shame, really. This sort of thing tends to call the whole thing into question about its honesty and reliability when really the rest of the curve is actually quite good. Obvious agendas such as that one do scare honest unbelievers away.

But otherwise: looking over this curve provides a 5 minute overview and reminder of my own alcoholism and recovery, better than most other things I have seen.



The Sinclair Method

November 22nd, 2015, AA Beyond Belief

<http://www.aabeyondbelief.com/2015/11/22/the-sinclair-method/>

By life-j

One of the things we AAs read from the Big Book as if it were an ever-lasting truth, though it was written in 1939:

“Physicians who are familiar with alcoholism agree there is no such thing as making a normal drinker out of an alcoholic. Science may one day accomplish this, but it hasn’t done so yet.”

And it has been a well kept secret that science began to do just that around 1978.

There is still general agreement that it is way preferable for alcoholics to stop drinking altogether, but to the extent this cannot seem to be accomplished, moderated drinking would be preferable to continued out-of-control drinking. However, in this article we will not be talking about “Moderation Management”, the program that claims that people can moderate their drinking by sensible application of willpower, but moderation with medications which have been around for decades called Naltrexone and Nalmefene.

When used according to Dr. Sinclair's method there appears to be some extent of success with 80% of those who take it, such that half of those wind up stopping drinking altogether, and half cut their drinking in half, or better.

Naltrexone and Nalmefene are opioid antagonists.

In our brain chemistry when we take a drink or do something else with which we associate pleasure, endorphins are released. There are neural receptors that fire when endorphins attach to them, or when an opiate does, and this completes the experience of pleasure. Naltrexone is designed such that it will attach to those receptors, but not fit properly, and therefore the receptors will not fire, and no sense of pleasure occurs. Thus, when Naltrexone is taken, say, an hour before drinking or taking a drug, it has time to block all receptors in this manner so that alcohol or drugs will give no pleasurable effect, though they will still both get a person drunk/high, and will result in the usual incapacitating physical effects of alcohol such as impaired coordination when drunk, etc.

Dr. John David Sinclair was an American doctor (died earlier this year) who started studying alcoholic behavior in both laboratory animals, and people in the late 70s. He has mostly worked in Finland where he received support for his research. He has formed the theory that alcoholism is a learned behavior much along the lines of Pavlovian conditioning. Drinking initially causes pleasure, even when, as is the case with many of us, in reality it just takes discomfort, social and otherwise, away, and that is experienced as pleasurable. Then every time this person takes a drink the pleasure principle is reinforced. Later in a person's drinking career, when physical dependency on alcohol is developed, a similar phenomenon asserts itself. The anticipation of pleasure still reigns. Drinking takes away the jitters, and that is experienced as pleasurable, even though there is no genuine pleasure, and we know very well that it only feeds into a vicious circle.

One of the reasons why Naltrexone has not found more use is that, according to Dr. Sinclair, it has been used wrong.

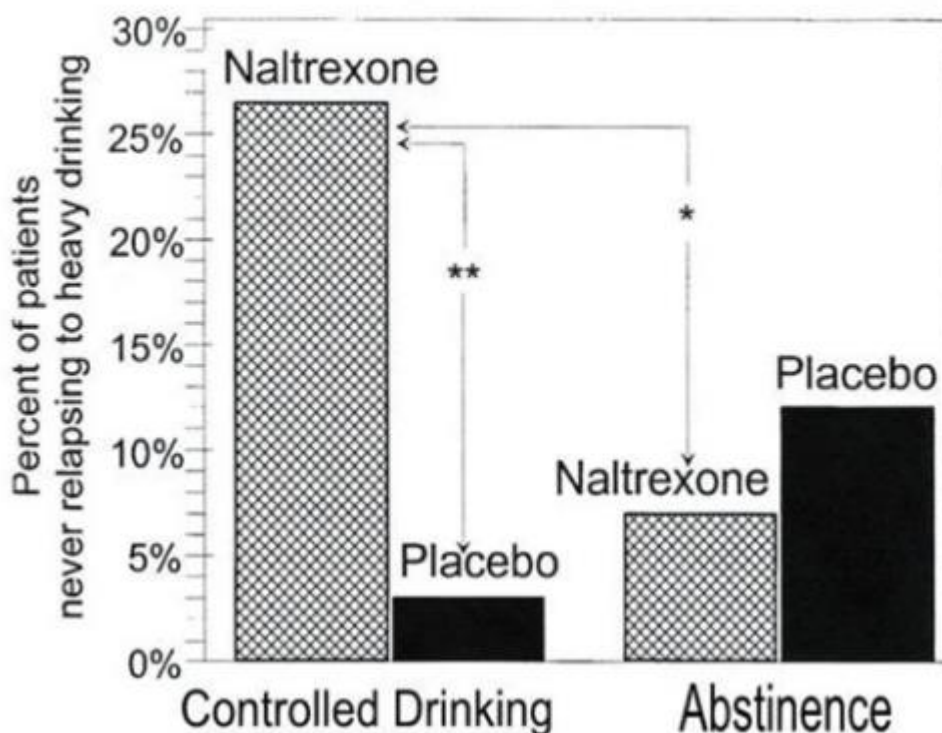
Naltrexone is an odd sort of medication. It appears to modify behavior. Actually any pleasurable behavior which releases endorphins is liable to get modified by it. Thus when taken in the wrong manner, it can lead to loss of pleasure in sex, eating, exercise or any other activity perceived as pleasurable, and thus a decrease in such activities.

Dr. Sinclair's assertion which is slowly gaining acceptance is that Naltrexone must be taken an hour before a person with reasonable certainty expects to drink, and only on days when he expects to drink. It will then, after a few months' use generally result in greatly decreased drinking, or stopping altogether. The medication, when taken according to this recommendation will allow the brain to recondition itself, and the craving for alcohol, and the pleasure from drinking will fade away. This process is called pharmacological extinction.

The officially recommended use since Naltrexone was authorized by the FDA in the mid-90s has been that the alcoholic takes it every day, and abstains from drinking. In clinical trials this had even less success than the placebo control group. However, there were some in the abstaining group who had success with this treatment. Turned out those had been cheating, and drinking anyway. Those who actually abstained were more likely to go drinking with a vengeance after the trial.

Dr. Sinclair reasoned that the medication needed to interact with actual drinking behavior to be successful. In order for the person to experience decreasing pleasure in drinking he had to actually drink. By abstaining all he would do is to increase his craving, and as we know, for some the craving can be horribly persistent. Worse yet, by abstaining from drinking and taking the medication, the medication would instead likely affect the experience of any other pleasurable, endorphine releasing activities, and make the person loose interest in those, rather than in drinking, thus making life seem ever more bland.

The benefits from taking naltrexone with drinking vs. abstinent is shown in the following figure:



This bar graph is from a 32 week study, so the expression “never relapsing” should be taken with a grain of salt. However the comparison is otherwise clear. Inserts with the Naltrexone medication still recommend abstinence, something that would need to be changed if this medication is to ever be used effectively.

There are factors that work against this. First of all, drinking is dangerous for an alcoholic. 10% of those who took the medication showed no positive response at all, and another 10% were not able to follow directions sufficiently to have any benefit from it. Of the 80% that would eventually show significant results, the initial phase of the program still poses significant risks. In the very early phase the medication does not yet have much effect, and the drinking behavior is as risky or even more risky than it would be without the medication. Even once the medication starts having an effect, but while a person's drinking is still rather on the heavy side, it is only the pleasurable effects of alcohol that are lessened. The impairment of motor skills, reaction time, social interaction, and judgment remains as strong as without the medication, so there is still significant risk of problematic outcomes during the first few weeks of treatment. It is small comfort that someone was on his way to sobriety if he manages to cut the hopes short with a fatal car crash or some other unfortunate event during those first couple of weeks.

Thus many doctors will be reluctant to recommend that a patient should "drink himself into sobriety", and insurance companies will be reluctant to accept such a treatment, none the least because during the last half century AA's assertion that only complete abstinence works, has been a major guiding force on alcohol policy.

Of course AA itself will be very reluctant to embrace the Sinclair Method, mostly out of contempt prior to investigation.

And while some sober alcoholics who have not quite embraced their sobriety may fantasize that here is an opportunity to go drink just one more time in order to get sober, psychologist Roy Eskapa cautions that it would be both dangerous and pointless to let an already abstinent person go through the Sinclair Process.

In Roy Eskapa's book [Cure for Alcoholism](#) we read:

David Sinclair reported on the lasting benefits of naltrexone three years after the start of treatment, in which patients continued to take naltrexone an hour before drinking.

The patients did not take the medication on days when they were not drinking. The patients' craving, drinking levels, and liver damage markers were all way down. Indeed, these patients were drinking and craving alcohol less after three years than they had been after the first five months of treatment.

Traditional abstinence-based alcoholism treatments had always found that the results were best at the beginning of treatment, and then gradually, week after week, the patients would relapse and the drinking would increase to the level it had been before treatment. Pharmacological extinction produces exactly the opposite pattern, as shown by this three-year follow-up study. The drinking and craving is highest in the first weeks of treatment, but becomes progressively lower as the weeks on treatment progress because each intervening episode of drinking while on naltrexone

was one more extinction trial. In other words, the more often people drink while on naltrexone, the less they will want to drink.

I contacted Dr. Roy Eskapa, and he informed me that no other studies have yet been performed on the long term results, but that one problem associated with long term treatment is that patients eventually get too lax about taking the medication before drinking. If people ever drink without first taking Naltrexone they will relearn the drinking behavior.

Patients need to keep Naltrexone with them at all times for the rest of their lives to the extent there is likelihood they will drink, so that they can take a pill an hour before drinking, if they should do so. This may seem burdensome, and is one major reason why people who have undergone the Sinclair Method relapse into their old patterns of drinking, but it is not really any more burdensome than going to AA meetings for the rest of our lives, something many alcoholics in AA similarly fail to do, and while this does not automatically make them relapse it does put them at greater risk of doing so.

Nalmefene is not yet entirely approved by the FDA as a treatment for alcoholism, but has been approved by the EU and in use in Great Britain for a couple of years. Though also metabolized by the liver it is not as hard on it. Nalmefene absorbs better when taken orally, has longer duration of antagonist action, and more competitive binding with opioid receptor subtypes that are thought to reinforce drinking. However, it is still under manufacturing patent, and therefore relatively expensive.

Naltrexone patents have expired, so it is now available as a generic. However, there are more side effects from its use than from Nalmefene, though rarely severe, including some nausea, and in large doses it can be hard on the liver, though in the doses prescribes for alcoholism, 25 mg the first two days and 50 thereafter, it is typically not an issue since the benefit of not drinking large amounts of liver damaging alcohol will soon outweigh the slight tendency toward liver damage from naltrexone.

A webpage by National Institute of Health describes a major recent study with Nalmefene, named ESENSE. Here are some of its conclusions:

.... This approach, better adapted to patients who do not wish (or cannot) remain totally abstinent is able to considerably reduce the damage related to alcohol consumption. This objective, which is more accessible and better accepted because it more closely corresponds to the patient's preference, can enable the patient to modify his/her attitude in relation to alcohol dependence. This approach would encourage the patient to seek medical attention and would increase the percentage of patients accessing care....

... Patients are more likely to achieve their objective that they have chosen themselves as opposed to an objective imposed by the physician. Patients who choose abstinence more often achieve abstinence, while patients who choose reduction of

consumption more often achieve this objective. As-needed treatment gives patients a more active role in management of their disease by making them more attentive to the quantity of alcohol consumed and the situations in which they drink. General practitioners, who often feel relatively impotent when the only objective is abstinence, could feel more confident about helping their patients. Reduction of consumption can be either an intermediate objective until the patient understands and accepts the need for abstinence, or, in less severely dependent patients, a realistic long-term objective.

[National Institute of Health](#)

I looked at length for negative reviews of these medications, and did not find much other than where it was associated with treatment in combination with abstinence.

Of course this sort of treatment is quite contrary to AA's central principle that only total abstinence will work for an alcoholic. And for me, personally, anything else is indeed hard to imagine. I know how addictive my personality is. My obsessive need to drink alcohol is long gone, but I just devoured a box of cookies in the same manner I used to drink. The thought of the need to drink simply disappearing from taking a pill is quite foreign. And there is an element of AA's philosophy which is so, eh, what should I call it, "protestant"? – that taking a pill would be cheating. Sobriety must come through suffering, self-flagellation with the 4th step, and making amends, AA is full of the Christian virtues of guilt, shame, remorse, confession, asking for forgiveness and help becoming a better person, not from just taking a pill.

I'm not here to put AA down, only to take a fair look at all the options. After all, our primary purpose is to help the still suffering alcoholic. Personally I have gained a lot from working the 12 steps, and even more from the fellowship of AA. But it is a religion. Every approach which leans more toward a scientific approach is worth investigating.

In other parts of the world good results have been achieved for alcoholics with Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, and I can imagine that if that were paired up with opioid antagonists we'd have a very powerful tool for stopping out of control drinking, but if all we could accomplish in many of the cases would be moderated drinking, that would still be way better than the alternative which is out of control drinking. I know AA says that moderated drinking is not possible except as a strenuous interlude. The results from opioid antagonist use seem to suggest that AA may not have it all right.

However, most of us started drinking for a reason. Low self-esteem, childhood traumas, whatever – those reasons are still there, buried inside. And the pills won't address those underlying reasons. Therapy can work for that. We know that using the 12 steps can work for that. Having a tribe of like-minded people for mutual support can work for that, it's probably the most important of all.

But it all starts with putting the plug in the jug. Keep your hats on. Opioid antagonists probably won't help any alcoholic drink like a gentleman, whether man or woman. But they do indeed seem promising. If they can help him cut way back or even quit entirely, he may get clearheaded enough to have a look at his options. They may help save his life long enough to where he can do more with it, and rebuild an enjoyable life, whether in the long run he will find a reason to come to AA or not.

Postscript, Additional Reading and References

Here is some further information, contacts with the people involved and links to various resources:

If the method of naltrexone's working isn't quite clear, especially the difference between blocking craving - which it **does not** do, and pharmacological extinction, which is what it **does do** - please read further below.

It's been a while since I wrote this article, and have since had further contact with Dr. Roy Eskapa who wrote the book **The Cure for Alcoholism**.

About the title he says:

In retrospect I somewhat regret the term CURE to some extent. Not that it is incorrect but that it turns people off - for obvious reasons. Too good to be true. And in fact just as with any medical treatment we cannot achieve 100 % 'cure' rates. Also one can relearn or 'catch' the 'thing' again.

Also I have had contact with Claudia Christian and Joanna at the **C3 Foundation** <http://www.cthreefoundation.org/> . Claudia (who was also one of the characters actresses in the movie with Michael Keaton "Clean and Sober") made the documentary movie **One Little Pill**, which you can find here: <http://www.onelittlepillmovie.com/>

The two of them (in best AA tradition, but entirely unrelated to AA of course) are helping individual alcoholics one by one - to find access to naltrexone and nalmefeme. The movie is financing their efforts, and neither of them is drawing a salary from it. They're both recovering alcoholics themselves - the TSM way.

Joanne told me that nalmefeme is now approved throughout the European Union for use in pharmacological extinction treatment (in accordance with The Sinclair Method). Naltrexone has been used in Finland for at least a couple of decades. 70,000 people there have done this treatment, though there has not been much scientific long term follow-up. Nalmefeme is still protected by patent, and therefore the pharmaceutical company has a financial interest in promoting it, while no one is

going to make real money on generic naltrexone, and therefore it is not being promoted by any company or through government channels.

She also told me it is her impression that the side effects from nalmefene are frequently worse than from naltrexone, except that it's easier on the liver, and side effects from naltrexone are otherwise generally mild.

So with Naltrexone we're looking at a generally cheap, effective, and well tolerated medication which doctors in the US are reluctant to prescribe correctly because a) The FDA has only given approval to exactly the wrong method of treatment, and b) There is no pharmaceutical company badgering them with advertising to get them to prescribe it.

Further, here is a large community discussion site about TSM:

<http://www.thesinclairmethod.net/community/viewtopic.php?f=5&t=19>

Here is an interview with Claudia Christian, conducted by Shira Goldberg. Personally I find Shira a bit hard to listen to, but she really does get Claudia fired up, so all in all this is really a great interview:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bp5AQGQoMoc>

Also Larry King brought Claudia and a few other folks, including a 12-stepper together for a talk on the Sinclair Method:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sqwgTixmPUU>

The following is by Sinclair et al, and is an excerpt from:

How Opioid Antagonists Reduce the Craving for Alcohol

<http://cthreeeurope.com/2014/10/16/how-opioid-antagonists-reduce-the-craving-for-alcohol-part-two/>

Preclinical studies have shown clearly that the antagonists given during abstinence do not develop the ability to decrease subsequent alcohol drinking. Instead, the treatment tends to increase alcohol drinking relative to that shown by controls, both in the case of nalmefene (39) and naltrexone (40).

When it first was proposed that alcoholism could be treated with naltrexone, several people stated that they thought it would only help with one type of alcoholic. It was assumed that some people drank because they were stressed, had a hangover, or were otherwise unhappy, and they expected alcohol would reduce their pain.

Other alcoholics drank because they were in a party mood and expected alcohol to provide euphoria. The pleasure was assumed to be caused by the release of endorphins but the effects against stress, anxiety, hangover etc, came from other neural systems. Therefore, they predicted that naltrexone would only be effective in the alcoholics who drank to get euphoria.

These would also be the people who had stimuli related to the pleasant effects become conditioned to release endorphins that then could produce craving and drinking. In contrast, the hypothesis that naltrexone worked by extinction predicted that all sorts of stimuli, not just pleasant ones, would have their ability to trigger craving and drinking weakened.

It assumes that any stimulus that is frequently present when alcohol is consumed and endorphins released will have its connections to craving and drinking reinforced by the neuronal actions of the endorphins. Reinforcement is independent of pleasure; it is simply the strengthening of synapses and can even occur unconsciously.

Extinction is also independent of pleasure. Any stimulus – pleasant, unpleasant or neutral – which previously had had its' connections weakened by the mechanism of extinction when the receptors for the endorphins are blocked when alcohol is consumed in response to the stimulus. In order to test the differing predictions of the two theories for the actions of naltrexone, alcoholics coming for treatment at the first Finnish clinic were twice presented with 101 stimuli that might trigger alcohol drinking.

Some of the stimuli were external, others were feelings or thoughts. The patients rated each stimulus on a scale of 1 through 5 for how strongly the stimulus was connected to their own drinking. Complete data were obtained from 24 patients. The test was given at Visit 1 (V1), after about 10 days on naltrexone, and again at Visit 6 (V6), after about 100 days.

The differences between V6 and V1 ratings of a specific stimulus item were calculated for each subject. As shown in Figure 9, nearly all stimuli showed less reported ability to trigger drinking at the later visit, with the mean reduction for all stimuli combined being highly significant: $p=0.0006$.

Both tests were conducted with patients taking naltrexone.

The difference between the two tests was the intervening 90 days of drinking while on naltrexone.

The hypothesis that naltrexone has a direct effect on the ability of stimuli to trigger drinking cannot explain why there was a difference between the two tests. The amount of naltrexone in the body would have been at least as high, if not higher, during V1 – when most patients were using naltrexone daily – than at V6 when most of the subjects were using naltrexone only infrequently.

Instead it appears that extinction had produced a powerful and consistent reduction in the reported ability of the stimuli to trigger drinking. The results also supported the prediction from the extinction hypothesis that the weakening in the ability of stimuli to trigger drinking should occur for all sorts of stimuli.

This is contrary to the common belief that the naltrexone works by blocking the pleasure from alcohol, but it is consistent with the view that extinction weakens the connections from all sorts of stimuli to craving and drinking.

At V6, about a quarter of the patients had stopped drinking completely and this, according to the instructions, they were not taking any naltrexone. The others were only taking naltrexone on days when they expected to drink, and in most cases, they had not been drinking or taking naltrexone on the weekdays when they visited the clinic. The result was still clearer in the 3-year follow up with the first naltrexone patients (48).

The craving reported at this time was down to 1.4 cm on the VAS scale, which is significantly lower than the mean result of 2.2 cm reported back at V6 after about 100 days of treatment (see Figure 1). The patients in the follow up reported drinking (and taking naltrexone) at most only 1.4 times per week on average.

So nearly all of the craving reports made in the follow up study were made by patients without any naltrexone in their systems. These results are important for clinical practice.

If craving were only reduced when naltrexone was blocking opioid receptors, doctors should try to make sure that their alcoholic patients continue taking naltrexone every day for the rest of their lives.

Fortunately, this is not true. The craving remains suppressed, once it has been extinguished, so long as the patient does not drink without first taking naltrexone – and thus relearning the addiction. Consequently, doctors can advise patients that they only need to take naltrexone on the days when they are drinking. Since the patients are seldom drinking, they seldom take naltrexone; most of the time they merely have to carry it with them on the off chance that they might change their minds and decide to drink. This is, of course, both safer and less expensive than taking naltrexone every day.

Implications for treatment

The false belief that naltrexone directly blocks craving for alcohol has, we believe, been detrimental for the efficacious use of the medication. Most clinicians have a strong aversion to allowing their patients to drink while on naltrexone. They have throughout their career been telling alcoholics to abstain, and they want to continue telling alcoholics to abstain. Consequently, there is great resistance to the scientific evidence that naltrexone works through extinction because extinction requires the alcoholic to drink alcohol while naltrexone blocks the reinforcement. Clinicians would like naltrexone to block craving directly.

If it did, then they could detoxify alcoholics, then instruct them to abstain, and still give them naltrexone at the same time to block the craving and help them remain abstinent.

Maintaining the false belief that this is how naltrexone works has allowed clinicians to prescribe the medication in this manner that is of no benefit – and probably even of some detriment – to their patients. As a result of its being prescribed incorrectly ie. along with abstinence, the medication has often not been effective and has gained a poor reputation.

This has contributed to very few alcoholics being prescribed naltrexone. An additional problem is poor compliance.

Patients who are told that naltrexone will block their craving while they remain abstinent soon discover that they are still craving alcohol.

They conclude that naltrexone does not work, since it did not produce the effect they were told to expect. Consequently, they are likely to stop using it without ever having

paired it with drinking and benefitting from extinction. It is difficult to persuade clinicians to adopt a protocol that allows extinction.

The belief that naltrexone blocks craving, without ever having to taste alcohol while on the medication, has provided clinicians with justification for prescribing naltrexone the way they want to: with abstinence. Opioid antagonists are unlikely to be used effectively for so long as clinicians believe that the presence of the medicine in the body is an effective tool for blocking the craving for alcohol – or for Opiates.

The following article was written for AAagnostica some time after the one above here. Shorter, more to the point, I kind of like it better, but not as thorough.

Science may one day accomplish this...

Posted on [May 12, 2016](#)



By life-j.

AA seems to work by a combination of mutual self help and a spiritual practice however you wish to define that. Several million people have gotten sober in AA in this way. And while we in AA have gotten used to the ideas of “once an alcoholic always an alcoholic”, and abstinence being the only way to arrest typical dysfunctional alcoholism, Bill Wilson was aware that one day science might catch up with our way of working recovery:

Physicians who are familiar with alcoholism agree there is no such thing as making a normal drinker out of an alcoholic. Science may one day accomplish this, but it hasn’t done so yet.

It is now almost 80 years since Bill wrote this, and science has indeed made some progress in this area, though AA by no means has become obsolete.

Several physicians, including Gabor Maté and David Sinclair have been working on developing a biological understanding of alcoholism.

There is now pretty good general agreement that the mechanism of alcoholism involves a particular, less than optimal way of our body's processing of endorphines, dopamine, and other "happy-hormones".

Since our primary purpose is to help the suffering alcoholic we ought to consider all options, even those that differ from regular AA philosophy. For what it's worth, I think Bill Wilson would have liked that, he experimented with LSD and other substances that held out promise in helping with alcohol recovery. In this article I will focus on the work of Dr. David Sinclair, an American physician, who spent most of his working life in Finland, because his work was well received there and attained considerable success which is now slowly spreading to the rest of the world.

Dr Sinclair, who recently died, was using an opioid antagonist in treatment of alcoholism. In the brain there are opioid receptors which, when endorphines attach to them, create a pleasurable feeling. Alcoholics seem to be born with a low natural output of endorphines, thus we are likely to look for pleasurable activities which will trigger the release endorphines. Drinking or any other addictive behavior will. So what we're really addicted to is the endorphine release, that's why for many of us our favorite substance was "more". This endorphine release by addictive behavior is a learned phenomenon, much like pavlovian conditioning, and can be unlearned by blocking the process. If the opioid receptors are blocked by an opioid antagonist, they can not receive the endorphines, and there will be no sensation of pleasure associated with taking a drink. The opioid antagonist primarily used is Naltrexone. There is a newer formula called Nalmefene, and there is also a long acting injectable version of Naltrexone called Vivitrol, The latter is very expensive, and does not even appear to work that well.

Naltrexone has been around since the 70s, and Dr Sinclair worked with it for most of that time. The treatment method approved by the FDA in the US with Naltrexone calls for abstinence, and taking it every day. Dr Sinclair has found that this does not work nearly as well as taking it in combination with drinking. When taking it an hour before drinking it blocks all opioid receptors, the drinking will be a bland experience, even though a person can still get every bit as drunk, only there is no pleasure associated with it. Thus the craving will subside in a process called pharmacological extinction.

Most alcoholics when they quit drinking experience a craving for alcohol, and can even have withdrawal symptoms which can be quite severe. With abstinence the craving can remain for a long time, or come back when we least expect it. Taking Antabuse which has been the main pharmacological treatment of alcoholics does nothing to subdue the craving, it just makes it potentially life threatening to drink. That doesn't scare some of us. For many of us it already is.

Naltrexone on the other hand, in combination with drinking not only takes the craving away in a gradual, controlled manner, it also makes it possible to taper off the alcohol in such a manner that it does not cause severe withdrawal symptoms.

The success rate when done according to The Sinclair Method appears to be significant. According to Sinclair's statistics over a few months 40% stop drinking altogether, another 40% cut their drinking in half or better, and the remaining 20% seem to have little or no success with it. Still that's way better than we can generally present in AA. As for the long term success rate they tell me that the main problem is compliance. Just like we in AA often keep going to meetings and work our program for the rest of our lives, and of those that don't many relapse, so in TSM you are supposed to carry a pill with you wherever you go, just in case you drink, and most wind up getting lax about it after a while, and of course if they drink without it, they get sucked right back in just like when an AA'er relapses.

So, there's 40% that stop altogether, their craving apparently gone. This is impressive enough to where it ought to get any recovering alcoholic's attention. As for the other 40%, the first objection we will hear in AA is of course that we can't imagine that anything other than total abstinence will work. With 28 years sober myself, I can indeed not imagine drinking again, but the Sinclair Method is not for me, I am already abstinent, I have my program. And AA works for all those of us that it works for. As for all those that do not thoroughly follow our path, and relapse over and over, well, what do we want to do with them? Write them off as recalcitrants or be glad that they have cut back to the point where they may be on a path to recovery? If they keep following the Sinclair Method they will apparently wind up drinking ever less – so long as they take that one little pill before they drink.

And be dependent on that pill for the rest of your life? Well, yes, or be dependent on the AA program for the rest of your life. I don't think the difference there is all that great. Especially if it works that well.

Now there is of course another aspect to this. There is a social and emotional, and maybe a spiritual component to our drinking, and that part does not get addressed by the medication at all. This is where AA's strength lies. We address those issues. And I can imagine that many of Sinclair's clients are in need of further help in those areas. I guess it is up to us whether we are willing to embrace that science has indeed made progress in this area, and accept that recovery may begin somewhere other than total abstinence for some people, and that we can help them, or we can dismiss them because they aren't following our path the way we're used to doing it.

If we do, then there is of course Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, and a few other recovery programs of a more secular nature. But let's admit it – no-one is forcing those of us who have been sober for a while to start drinking again, just so we can cut back, or even advocating that we do. We're already sober. This is strictly for the alcoholic who still suffers, and can't seem to get sober the regular AA way. When anyone, anywhere reaches out for help, I want there to be a hand to help them, whether they want to do it my way or not, so long as I can tell they indeed have a desire to stop drinking. It's not my way or the highway anymore.

(available as pamphlet from lifej@mcn.org)

Open-minded – as it appears on AAgnostica

This article was published in the October 2016 issue of the AA Grapevine, an issue mostly devoted to agnostics and atheists staying sober in AA

Open-Minded

Posted on [September 22, 2016](#)



by life-j.

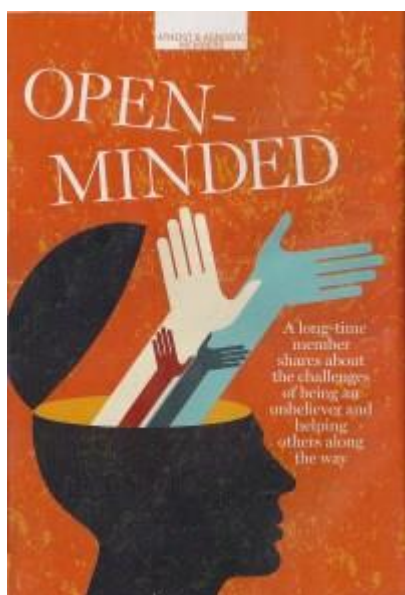
Copyright © AA Grapevine (October, 2016)

I got sober, initially on my own, on February 20, 1988. But I realized after a couple of months that it would only be a matter of time before I would drink again if I didn't get some help, and since I was close to broke, AA was the only option.

I knew only a little about AA, and certainly all the god stuff was a surprise, but I stayed. I think I stayed because at my second or third meeting I got to sit next to this really big guy who talked about being scared of people, and that was something I could relate to. I was scared of people too. This guy probably saved my life, and he will never know it. I felt like I'd come home, in spite of the god stuff, and AA has been my home until just a couple of years ago. I still come several times a week, though it doesn't feel like home the way it used to.

I never made a secret of being an agnostic, or perhaps an atheist; it doesn't much matter to me what we call it. But I also didn't find much reason to talk a whole lot about it.

Then about six or seven years ago, I found myself attending online AA rooms, and there I would often see newcomers getting badgered with a need to find a god, until they left in a cloud of protests and disgust. I did not have it out with the old-timers who did it, but it made me more and more uncomfortable.



This is the original image used in the Grapevine with life-j's article.

I then stumbled upon the group AA Agnostica, and I got quite involved there. One day a newcomer walked into our local fellowship and announced that she was an agnostic. I decided then and there it was time start a meeting for unbelievers. So I started collecting materials, and then went to our local intergroup and announced that I was going to start a freethinkers' AA group. I figured no one would have a problem with it. It was after all liberal Northern California, right? But though there seemed to be a small favorable majority, it was put up for discussion for the following meeting whether this meeting could be listed in the schedule – even though it says on the schedules that meetings are listed at their own request and that it doesn't constitute endorsement. A couple of people were especially against it, and started gathering the votes against it. I held out bravely, but eventually gave up the fight 14 months later.

This whole experience radicalized me way more than I ever wanted to be. I would much rather have been left to just go about my business, focus on my recovery, help the few agnostic newcomers who come my way, along with helping any other newcomer that I can, and have us all be one big happy family. But it feels like the unity has now been lost for the sake of top-down uniformity.

These days, I find myself antagonized by any mention of god, at least to the extent it is presumed to be on my behalf too. And I'm aware that there is considerable support for this uniformity from a number of other intergroups and individual members around the country that have decided to start governing AA. The book *Daily Reflections* is forever a thorn in my side now. It is read at the beginning of many AA meetings, and it seems like no matter what the beginning quote is, it ends up being a talk about god. And as the *Daily Reflections* go on and on about it, so do I. I'm sure there will be old-timers who say that it's just because I have only been sober for 28 years, and more will be revealed.

On the other hand, one agnostic, 43 years sober, finally came out of the closet and I started talking about it. She had been hiding very cautiously all those years. At some point I may settle back down, but it sure doesn't feel like it. I fear that the "more" that will be revealed is how AA is becoming ever more fundamentalist in spite of the fact that people with "none" for a religion are on the rise in the general population, the general population is on the rise, and AA is shrinking. We need to get back to open-mindedness, love and tolerance if AA is to not eventually shrink into becoming a quaint relic from the last century, or just one more obscure religious movement.

There needs to be room for unbelievers in AA, instead of them just sitting on their hands in meetings while members talk endlessly about god. Unbelievers should be fully appreciated members of AA, with everything we have to offer. I've done a lot of service work of every kind in my time in AA, and I now know many other agnostics – with double-digit time in this program – who, like me, have dedicated themselves more to doing service than the average member.

I do want to say that I've been rewarded with a good life. AA saved my life, no doubt about it. However, I just no longer have this fuzzy feeling that I'm part of the tribe, though there are a few open-minded believers who go out of their way to try to make me still feel part of.

Bill W. always stressed inclusivity, and as he got older and his sobriety matured, he got to be ever more open-minded about agnostics in AA. We did start our Freethinkers' Group, in spite of not being listed, and I have to announce it everywhere I go. Intergroup, our new governing body, wants to keep us out, yet our meeting falls way, way inside the following parameters outlined by Bill W. in Grapevine in 1946, when he was 11 years sober:

"Any two or three alcoholics gathered together for sobriety may call themselves an AA Group. This clearly implies that an alcoholic is a member if he says so; that we can't deny him his membership; that we can't demand from him a cent; that we can't force our beliefs or practices upon him; that he may flout everything we stand for and still be a member. In fact, our Tradition carries the principle of independence for the individual to such an apparently fantastic length that, so long as there is the slightest interest in sobriety, the most unmoral, the most anti-social, the most critical alcoholic may gather about him a few kindred spirits and announce to us that a new Alcoholics Anonymous

Group has been formed. Anti-God, anti-medicine, anti-our recovery program, even anti-each other – these rampant individuals are still an AA group if they think so!”

life-j has been urging the Grapevine to publish material by secular members of AA for some time and his is one of the best articles in this year’s October magazine, “Atheist and Agnostic Members”.

On September 7, 2014, AA Agnostica published an article by life-j called [A Grapevine Book for Atheists and Agnostics in AA](#). There is little doubt that this article played an important role in this year’s decision by the Board of the Grapevine (and then the General Service Conference) to publish just such a book in 2017, even though it initially refused to even consider life-j’s proposal: see [No Grapevine Book for Atheists in AA](#). Clearly reaching out to the Grapevine – and persistence – has its rewards. Bravo life-j!

(this article is available as a pamphlet from lifej@mcn.org)

The Secular AA 2016 Austin Convention

Posted on [November 17, 2016](#)



by life-j

I missed out on the Santa Monica Convention, and I almost didn't make this one either, but the tooth fairy came through at the last moment.

And now I'm really stoked.

I had met a few of the people at a regional conference in Olympia, Washington, back at the beginning of the new year so I didn't feel entirely lost when I got to Austin. Even many years sober, occasions like this can be scary. Was I going to "fake it till you make it" and power through, or was I going to be a wall flower?

I started out with the former, as I was walking off to the Ethiopian restaurant down the freeway from the Crowne Plaza with a group of people I had just met, but I did manage to settle down after a fellow alcoholic asked me about it. Maybe it was too conspicuous. But after all, I was with my own kind here. In the end I came away with many good conversations with so many people that I'm having a hard time remembering who's who. You have to forgive me, I have brain damage.

But I will remember their faces two years from now in Toronto. I've never felt at home in a big crowd of people like I did here. And big it was, over 400 people registered for the convention, including people from several other countries, even as far away as Australia.

I'm not a suit and tie kind of guy, and I have felt out of place in hotels like this in the past, but even the hotel staff was pleasant and helpful and not judgmental. Maybe they had been warned by all the good people that put this together, that this might be an unusual bunch. Or am I just getting to be and act and feel normal, and haven't figured it out myself yet? Wouldn't be the first time I'm the last to see when I've changed.

I owe all of it to this program. God or no god, AA is where I learned how to live.

But on to the convention.

I'm amazed at how well it all came off. Thank you out-going board! There were many AA meetings, and I didn't manage to go to a single one – there were just too many interesting topic panels and workshops to go to, often more than one at a time: ranging all the way from hardcore atheist rants to the spiritual, talks on AA history, on the future of AA, on all the odd aspects of AA mythology, and inconsistencies in our literature, on legal matters, including the Ontario Human Rights Tribunal suit, and on our relations to medical and psychiatric problems, GLBTQ and other subgroups.

We had a banquet Friday night, and I sat down at a table with people I didn't know without feeling self conscious for even a minute. It probably didn't directly do much for my sobriety, but let me tell you, I have been to too many AA get-togethers with gross spaghetti dinners. This was absolutely fabulous. With the banquet we also had 3 speakers, and they were all good. It was especially good to hear the talk delivered by Deirdre S, from New York City.

Ami from the Grapevine was there, giving us feedback about how we can help the Grapevine help us. We are after all only one of the subgroups they have to look after, but with the October issue, "Atheist and Agnostic Members", it really feels like they do try to help us. We're finally seeing real signs of the service structure supporting us as real members of AA.

One topic I heard brought up several times was why we're not simply making our own program entirely. But we're all aware that AA got us sober, AA is where we belong, and it's where we have an obligation to the newcomer unbeliever so they will not have to feel as alone as we often did before we found each other. AA is just too big an entity to abandon to the fundies.

I got to go to a local regular Austin AA meeting with a couple of other attendees, and of course there I heard several people say the same thing I've heard so many times: I'm really having trouble finding my higher power.

We're still needed out there to help them know that they do not need to!

As a convention we also looked forward to the next one in 2018. It was decided to hold it in Toronto, at the downtown Marriott hotel from August 24 to 26, and we also

voted in a new board. There were a few tense moments, but I think we eventually wound up with a group of very talented and dedicated people. I was especially pleased to see at least one young person on the new board.

We also chose a new name for the next convention. WAAFT IAAC would still have served us, especially if we had just added a couple of more letters to the acronym, but eventually we arrived at the name, International Convention of Secular AA (ICSAA) instead. I like it. One thing which carried it was the thought that since a secular alternative to AA is being called for from several corners, we might as well begin calling ourselves secular.

Specific panels? It's kind of a blur, still. I got something good out of every one I went to. One that stands out to me was the Mental Health Issues and Recovery, where we had a couple of psychiatrists, both in the program, talk with us. Though Bill Wilson himself knew mental problems all too well to claim that AA could fix it, we have heard way too much about that from many recent members. It was good to have these two doctors here to talk with. I have a friend with severe mental issues who is very dear to my heart, and we need much more involvement with the professionals among us, rather than more step work, so we can help them instead of making them more desperate for supposedly not working that program right which, which we are so often falsely told, fixes absolutely everything if only it is done right.

Sunday night I went to dinner with a couple of other people. One of them I knew pretty well, one I had never really met before, and then there was Roger. I know you're a humble person, and would be inclined to strike this from the article, since I'm publishing this on your site. But you can't do that. As I'm sitting here in the airport on my way home writing this, this is so big, I'm sitting here and I'm beginning to cry. It's not something I do often. But I'm aware that none of all this would probably have happened if it wasn't for you. Granted, our secular movement has gotten me into a lot of trouble with local AA, but it has also given me a new life, a new group of people with whom I can relate with honesty.

And that new life was reinforced dramatically at the convention in Austin.

All too much to handle with a straight face. Tears are actually rolling now, I better stop here. Probably everyone sitting here around me thinks I'm flying away from bad romance behind me or something. On the contrary, I have a wonderful woman waiting for me at home, another gift of the program, since I don't have to be an asshole anymore. Life is good. Thank you. Thank you everyone.

I look forward to seeing you in Toronto in 2018.



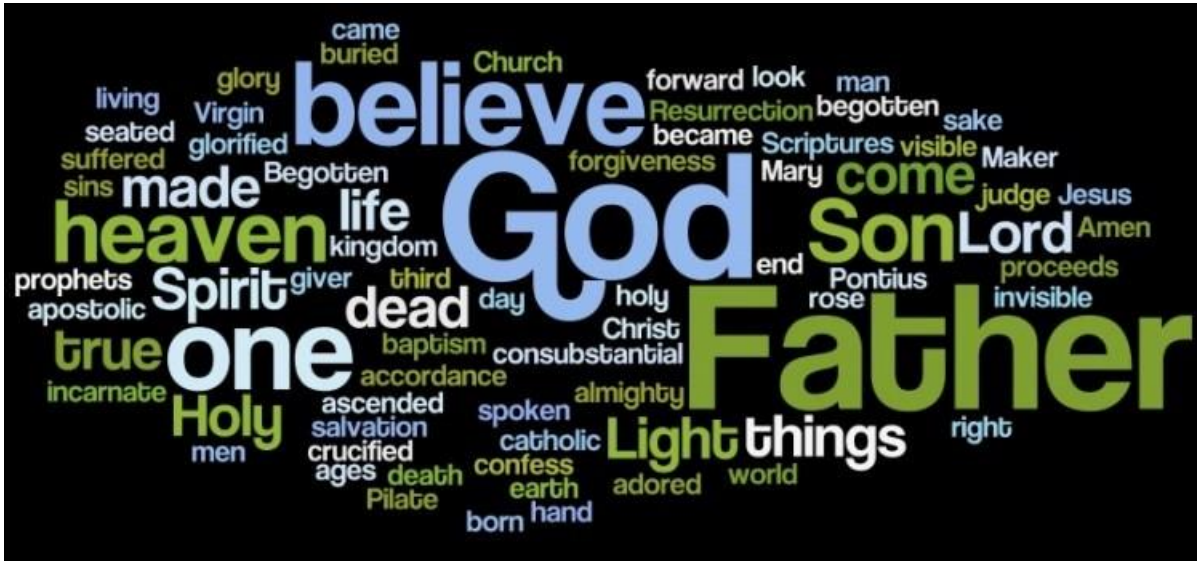
life-j got sober in Oakland in 1988. He moved to a Northern California coastal mountain village in 2002 and helped wake up the sleepy AA fellowship there. He's been involved in service work of every kind all along, but now thinks the most important work is to help atheists and agnostics feel safe and welcome in AA.

He's spent parts of his life as a building contractor, part as a technical translator, and has dabbled a bit in art work and writing. life-j is now semi-retired on a five acre homestead together with his sweetie, and his dogs, chickens, and gardens.

(This article is available as a pamphlet from lifej@mcn.org)

The Daily Reflections

Posted on [January 19, 2017](#)



By life-j

This is not the first time you may have heard me being down on the *Daily Reflections*, and it won't be the last, but I'm going to approach it a bit more systematically in this article.

I realize that the futility ranking of this project is on level with a scientific treatise on why they sell more Christmas trees in December than in July. I should have just thrown the damn thing over my shoulder and never looked back. But here we go anyway.

"I AM A MIRACLE"

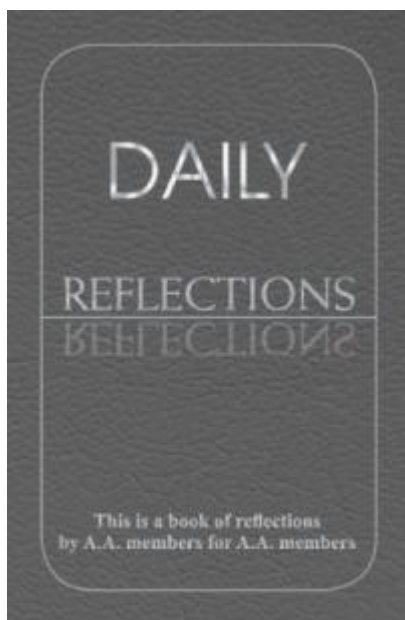
The central fact of our lives today is the absolute certainty that our Creator has entered into our hearts and lives in a way which is indeed miraculous. He has commenced to accomplish those things for us which we could never do by ourselves.

ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS, p. 25

This truly is a fact in my life today, and a real miracle. I always believed in God, but could never put that belief meaningfully into my life. Today, because of Alcoholics Anonymous, I now trust and rely on God, as I understand Him; I am sober today because of that! Learning to trust and rely on God was something I could never have done alone. I now believe in miracles because I am one!

They do give you a five day break without god after this one so you can recover a bit, but this is how the *Daily Reflections* start on January 1st. It sets the general tone.

Bill Wilson had indeed said more or less outright that the purpose of AA is not so much sobriety as it is bringing us closer to god. For instance in the Big Book (page 29) he talks about the stories in the back of the book: “Each individual, in the personal stories, describes in his own language and from his own point of view...” – and then, not “the way he recovered” – but “the way he established his relationship with God”.



Daily Reflections was published in 1990 when I was just a few years sober. We were happy to see it at the time: we needed something. The *24 Hours a Day* from Hazelden was popular, though not with me. I thought it was way too religious. The *Daily Reflections* turned out to not be much better in that respect. I would even say it is worse, because so much of it makes no real sense. Just people mindlessly yakking AA lingo, as in the quote above. I’m a miracle too, but do we have to check our brain at the door?

There isn’t much information about its origins. The General Service Conference decided to undertake making it in May of 1987. I joined AA History Lovers in preparation for writing about this and one member there reports that:

I’ve used over 30 daily reflection books over the years & a few years ago when I started to go through the AA Daily Reflections book. I found it to be a little on the weak side compared to many other ones I’ve worked with. I didn’t find it worth my time so I moved on to another one. I asked around about it & was told by a friend at GSO that when they were putting together the book & asking for submissions to be included from members of the fellowship, they didn’t get much of a response. The normal editing process for a book like this would be that they get more submissions than they need & then they exclude the weaker ones & include the better ones. In this case they didn’t

do that because they didn't have more than needed, they just had about 365 of them so they just included them all, whether they were inspirational/profound or not. That explains why my experience with the book is that it's not something I would recommend to my Sponsees.

From Michelle Mirza, the GSO archivist I got the following, which seems to agree:

In October 1988, the trustees' Literature committee reported the following with regard to the response of the mailing:

"In response to a summer mailing to all delegates with guidelines for submitting manuscripts, material has been arriving at the General Service Office almost daily. The article in the October/November issue of Box 4-5-9 inviting contributions is resulting in additional manuscripts. The subcommittee plans to review manuscripts in December with the hope of having material for the committee to see in January."

However by January 1989, in a report of the status of this project, the trustees' Literature committee reported that there were an insufficient number of manuscripts suitable for publication and that the deadline for receiving additional manuscripts be extended to April 1...

Finally, in 1990, the General Service Conference approved a daily reflections book... (and) the first printing of Daily Reflections was completed in September 1990.

In the Foreword in the book it says they received 1300 contributions.

My problem with the book is that I think that a particularly god-focused group of editors must have been responsible for how it turned out, that it seems to follow a particular formula, and it still puzzles me. Let me explain.

There are probably a couple of dozen daily readings in there which one might call secular in the sense that they do not have any religious message in them (even if maybe a "spiritual" one), but the vast majority follow this script:

No matter what the beginning quote, and no matter what the following "reflection" says about that quote, and even no matter whether or not it even says something intelligent, or coherent about that reflection, which is far from always the case – somehow, even if there has been nothing up to that point to warrant it – they invoke god in (usually) the last three lines. Gratitude toward god, or just plain talking about the things god does in the ordinary course of existence which apparently can't be otherwise understood. There is an obsessive quality about it which it seems couldn't have happened at random if they indeed just barely got enough responses to put the book together. There must be more at work. Or is it really just me having a god persecution complex?

Anyway, I will try to support this in the following. I eventually got statistical, though it took a couple of hours, and I divided the daily entries into 3 groups. I did not single

out the perhaps 50 entries which were about the traditions, and those were more likely to be of a secular nature:

- The religious, where god is the most important part of whatever is being talked about. The ones where AA shows the side of itself where it is more of a religion than a recovery program. And you just can't get all religious without talking a bunch about god, so those are nothing but, such as January 1st. There were 34 days of that.
- Those entries where a god or higher power is invoked for no good reason, such as where a person may be talking in a perfectly sane and sensible manner about their subject, but then feels compelled to thank god at the end, or in some other manner get Him involved. There were 208 days of that.
- The secular ones. I have to confess that there were more secular ones than I had expected. I did define secular as broadly as I felt able to do, including quite a few which generically talked about spirituality, some which in passing mentioned faith, in a couple of instances even prayer – however, so long as they didn't specifically refer to a deity, but only to the state of being as it relates to a person themselves, and one for quoting the 6th step where the reflection itself did not invoke god. There were 124 days of these, and my broad definition may include about 20 which some people would say belong to category 2.

So the overwhelming majority invoke a god in some manner. What I find so annoying about these is that with the majority of them it is entirely unnecessary. They would have been every bit as meaningful without. Someone offhandedly remarking how grateful he or she is to their god or higher power, where they could simply have said they were grateful.

Take May 19, "Giving Without Strings". A bit naïve like much in this book is, but otherwise much in tune with the strong core aspects of the program – until they throw in "my life is full of a loving god of my understanding..." – a piece which could just as well have been left out, and the reflection would have said exactly the same with respect to its applicability to the real world.

Then take May 20, it talks about "One Day at a Time". A fine reflection for that day and without any deities invoked. But of course they **could** just as well have taken the opportunity to thank their higher power for it.

When I sit in a meeting and say I'm offended over something like May 19, and the religious people get offended over me being offended, I sometimes ask, now what about May 20, are you offended that they did **not** invoke their higher power on that day? I usually get blank stares in response. Well, if you weren't offended that no god was mentioned on May 20, then couldn't it also have been left out on May 19 where it was absolutely uncalled for? I usually get another blank stare for that.

It doesn't seem to register how offensive it may be to some whenever all the god talk is there.

While there are a few dozen good, and even some "very good" entries (for instance January 12), many of the reflections by agnostic standards do seem unusually naïve or even irrational for having been published so relatively late in the century.

I credit this book with much of the fundamentalism that has taken root since its publication. Many places where I find myself in meetings it is read at the beginning, and its overwhelmingly god-laden material sets the tone for the whole meeting. I even sometimes go to a Living Sober meeting where the first half, or more, is taken up with discussing the daily reflection, as are all the other meetings there during the week. Results in an awful lot of god talk before we can get to the Living Sober part.

In the end it's difficult to say whether they indeed got enough contributions. Further investigation into this book's history could include looking into who were the people on that literature committee, and the people who selected the stories, and were they edited? Did they say hey, we better throw a god comment in here and there, or was that truly from the people submitting the stories? I imagine this would be in the area of the almost impossible. I just have this funny feeling that something's not quite right about it all.

All in all, the book is offensive. All the more since it was not put together in the 1930s or 40s, but in more modern times. Offensive in light of the requests non-believers have made for material to support our recovery better, starting more than a decade before publication of this book. Not possible, apparently. But more of this religious stuff? No problem, it seems. Hopefully the times will be changing.

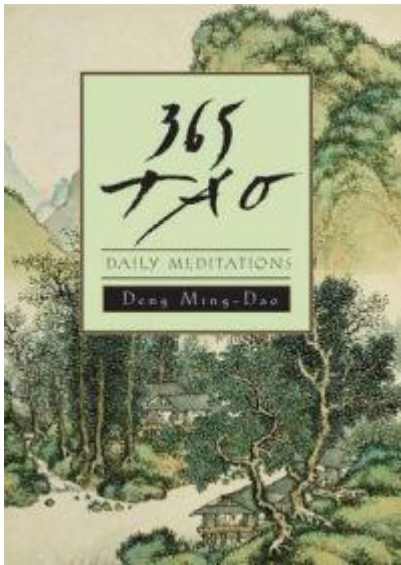
* * *

But then, maybe I shouldn't be surprised.

We do have other daily readers which are better. There is *Touchstones* from Hazelden (written for men) and though it still has quite a bit of god stuff in it, it's a much better book. Mostly because the authors seem to not have checked their brains at the door while that's mostly the case with *Daily Reflections*.

Then we have of course [*Beyond Belief: Agnostic Musings for 12 Step Life*](#) by Joe C. which was published in early 2013. We (my girlfriend and I) have been using various readers for a few years, and we were grateful when we found Joe's book.

He's using an amazingly broad range of quotes – from Mother Teresa to Albert Einstein – for his daily reflections, which take us into philosophical areas often not touched on at all by most recovery literature.



My absolute personal favorite is *365 TAO* by Deng Ming Dao. We've all been discussing whether and how AA is or should be "spiritual but not religious". *365 TAO* accomplishes this better than anything else I've seen.

This last year we used *Forgiving & Moving On* by Tian Dayton. We weren't particularly happy with it, though it did help us look at how forgiveness is every bit as important as making amends. Still, too much god stuff, though not as bad as the *Daily Reflections*, so it got us through this last year's mornings. For the new year so far we don't have anything. So for myself, and for all of us I would like to ask all of you to tell about your favorite daily readers, it would be a good resource for us to have a list of them.

* * *

So we do have some choices for daily readers. We don't have to read about god 242 out of 365 days of the year. It's a shame that with this as with many other issues we non-believers have to look outside AA for good books, or write our own. The worst of it is of course that many doubters and non-believers in mainstream AA never get exposed to those alternatives. So all they have is books like the *Daily Reflections* which promote an interventionist deity to such an extent that its suggestions in many cases are not only useless to a non-believer, but often quite offensive.

While we have seen signs that the General Service Board is staffed by open-minded people, the General Service Conference which makes all the decisions for AA literature seems bent on exercising "tyranny of the majority" by keeping all of AA as Christian as possible. Some of our early literature has specifically Christian roots. What Bill wrote in 1938 with three years of sobriety is forgivable. The way Bill's every word from those beginnings is canonized while his later writings are ignored is not.

The publishing of a book like the *Daily Reflections* fifty years later when we should all have known better or the recent pamphlet "Many Paths to Spirituality" is deeply

shameful and offensive for an organization which claims to be “spiritual, not religious”.

Wake up, AA.



Don't Fix It If It Ain't Broke

by [life-j](#) April 09, 2017

By life-j

I agree, it ain't broke. What I think instead is that it was never whole in the first place. So can we please fix it now?

I'm just going to look at one issue. There's too much to try and tackle it all at once.

Let's start by presenting an argument by Jeannie Young which I came across at [trans4mind.com](#). She writes about women but most of it, and certainly the whole principle of her argument, applies to me as well (she is associated with another program, Women for Sobriety, but for now we just want to look at her argument as it pertains to AA, not at her program):

Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) has helped millions of people recover from alcoholism. For many women, however, AA may not be the best choice when it comes to the difficult task of quitting drinking. The main reason it may not be the best choice is this: AA is

based on the philosophy that self-centeredness is the root of alcoholism. In other words, AA's approach is to instill humility and minimize egotism in its members. While this method may have been appropriate for white males in the 1940's when AA was founded, it does not meet the very different needs of women today. Here's why:

- Women who have a problem with alcohol oftentimes suffer from feelings of guilt and low self-esteem.*
- Women already judge and berate themselves mercilessly.*
- What women need to recover is to develop a sense of competency in themselves and rebuild their feelings of self-worth.*
- Quitting drinking requires overcoming dependencies, forgetting the past and planning for the future.*
- Self-empowerment, not humility, leads to sobriety.*

I have always had issues with the ego-deflation theory. I grew up with a flattened ego. OK, I gained some ego while drinking, but I mostly stopped throwing my weight around when it wasn't fueled by alcohol anymore. OK, I have control issues, I got those from being overly-controlled as a child. An important thing to look at, because it has nothing to do with ego – what drives it is irrational fear. If I don't go around trying to control the world around me, of course the world will fall apart without me holding it together, but way worse than the world falling apart – I'm afraid I will not earn my parents' approval for being the A+ controller they raised me to be. For me, it's all about fear, not about a big ego.

Wouldn't it be nice if we could get by without all this adult child psychobabble? AA doesn't like stuff like that. AA likes to talk about "the Solution." But what my argument above indicates is that here we are trying like all get-out to break down my ego when it was already broken down practically beyond repair. So take a person full of fear and try to break down an ego that isn't there? "The Solution" is just dandy, but not if it's the wrong solution to a misidentified problem.

The people who made up early AA were mostly (or had been) well-educated, high salaried Type A personalities who wielded at least some power in their community, in some cases a lot. I imagine they were well suited to having their egos taken down a peg or two. If the program in its early version worked for them, it is because it was made for them. And there are still people in AA like that, of course.

Some of these, and I would include Bill Wilson here, never really got their egos taken down, though they did start to put them to better use. Bill changed quite a bit after he had been sober a decade or two, but basically what Bill did was to move from being a stock broker to being the de facto leader of a worldwide organization. If anything, he moved to a position with more opportunity and encouragement to throw his ego around, not less. And I think he did. Even if he gave God all the credit. I have recently listened at length to a couple of his talks, one from the early '50s, one from the late '60s. I didn't come away doubting for a minute that he loved to hear himself talk. Same thing strikes me listening to another Type A'er, Clancy I.

Maybe this sounds like I'm having it in for Bill. I'm not really, he was just another drunk, but I do have it in for the saint, the myth, the legend messenger from god who, while he at one time said it is about principles, not personalities, is getting hoisted upon a higher and higher pedestal built of Big Books, and it does the program damage.

By three years sober Bill Wilson, like many of us three years sober, thought he knew everything, and he decided to write a book about it. He had his brilliant moments, such as the beginning of the chapter "More about Alcoholism," but much of the rest is counterproductive to helping many alcoholics. As most of us have, Bill got wiser as he put a decade or two sober behind him. But he did keep struggling with many things.

In the Berkeley Fellowship, we had a guy come in in the early '90s who was very likable, mid-40s, well-spoken, well-mannered, obviously intelligent, educated, friendly, helpful . . . I have really nothing but good to say about him. When he came in it was obvious he had tanked pretty badly, but he recovered fairly quickly. At around six months he had gotten his realtor's license. After another six months, he was back to making six figures. He was in a different league than me. I could be envious, but I'd rather say that ego isn't necessarily a bad thing, even for people that have a lot of it, if they otherwise have good personality traits.

I know I'm mixing ego with confidence here, though they're not the same thing. A person who has genuine confidence, believes in themselves, and is likely to have high self-esteem, is not likely to ever have to flee into addiction to cope with life. So even for our friend here, ego and self-esteem are likely to have been mixed up. What they have in common, though, is a relative absence of those certain kinds of fear which can make a person incapable of ordinary human interaction.

Me on the other hand – I'd been brushing teeth and showering with some regularity for quite some time by the time I was a year sober, but I hadn't really even gotten any new clothes yet. I'm one of the other kind of alcoholic. With respect to my intelligence, I'm sure I could have been making six figures too, but I didn't have it together, I didn't have the ego or the confidence for it. Some people are driven, I never was. In fact, I wasn't just not driven, I was actually held back by low self-esteem and general fear of just about everything. Certainly in no shape to go about selling real estate. I didn't have the upbeat personality it would take. It was beaten down before it could rise.

I'm not going on about my awful childhood out of idle self-pity. I'm quite well over that. The point is that while some of us alcoholics indeed have big egos that would do well with a bit of deflation, there are many – in my estimation actually a majority – that need the opposite: Empowerment.

And AA fails us entirely with that. In some ways, AA can make it worse, as Young points out above. I need to take a moral inventory? Admit my shortcomings? I had them yelled at me since I could talk. Still, good to admit them of course, but then

what? How well does it really help someone with low self-esteem to look at their shortcomings?

Of course while pondering these things I grew emotionally in AA. After a decade or more of hanging around AA not really ever getting what I needed other than – and this is, of course, big in itself – support to not drink – I started gaining some self-esteem. I started being able to hold my own in an ordinary human conversation. I gained further self-esteem from the feeling that I was helping others in whichever ways I could. My material life shaped up somewhat, though barely to middle-class standards. But it all happened way slower than it seems it ought to have with better tools. There must be better tools than what we have.

For an alcoholic of my kind, things pretty much can't help but improve if you go to AA a lot and try to do the right thing. Though I had too many bad things happen to me early in life, I am, after all, no lower than the lower middle of the spectrum. So though I can't speak for those who were viciously abused throughout their childhoods, I wouldn't be a bit surprised if they feel so beaten down that it only feels like AA is beating them down further.

There are alcoholics so downtrodden from their early life that it's hard to see how the AA philosophy can make it anything but worse. Of course, they don't stick around. They can't stand the boys whistling in the dark, the "happy, joyous, and free" yakking. They know it will never apply to them (and whether that is indeed true or not is of little consequence if they "leave before the miracle happens") and until we make some changes to the program there are many who we will not be able to help much, if at all.

Many have recovered and carved out a life for themselves from within AA in spite of the odds. There is a lot of help from other AA members, but the success we see is often achieved *only* because of the help from such members – and more in spite of "the program" than because of it.

Young continues:

Does giving yourself up to a higher power work for you? The main component of AA's program is spirituality. Specifically, they believe that in order to recover, one must surrender one's will to a higher power. WFS, on the other hand, does not encourage reliance on a higher power or something outside yourself. Women for Sobriety believes that your power must come from within.

If it isn't about ego, maybe it also isn't about my will versus God's will either?

No, that's one of Bill's most outstanding false dichotomies. I'm not trying to play God, that's something Bill came up with reflecting on his own grandiosity and that of his Type A fellows. In most cases it's not about will at all, mine or God's, but about something else, often fear.

We've got two million people staying sober together in a great fellowship of mutual support, but working an awful program – and 10 or 20 million who came to a few meetings, but couldn't handle the cognitive dissonance – and 10 or 20 million more who know about AA but won't even try it. I no longer wonder why, I see so many reasons, I can't keep track of them all.

We need to get away from the ego deflation idea, the petitionable, interventionist higher power, and the Big Book worship. Certainly, we need to try to bring this program into the new century. I think the secular AA movement has a lot to offer here. Whether we succeed, or whether AA will fall apart or wind up as an obscure religious sect of no great relevance to society, or even to recovery, remains to be seen. There are other programs that make more sense than AA, but they are small.

I see AA as holding a lot of responsibility at this point. If there had been a lot of readily accessible alternatives we could merrily continue on our path, and tell people to go somewhere else if they don't like AA, but the fact that AA has worked so hard and successfully to attain a near monopoly on recovery in spite of helping so relatively few of those who at one time or another walk through our doors, I think gives AA a great responsibility to fix recovery.

Just imagine what two million people could do together if we had a program that made sense.

Artwork

Featured Image: *Be Gentle*, oil, 1976, by life-j

Back to Basics and Other Religionists

(from the book A history of Agnostics in AA, also posted on the aaagnostica website June 2017)

By life-j

Introduction

In a history of secular AA we need to talk about groups and individuals whose purposes are at odds with ours. Some of them are actively fighting inclusion of non-believers as rightful members of AA. Others are simply going about their business promoting their honestly held belief that a god is central to recovery, and that the steps must be worked exactly as Bill Wilson wrote them in 1939.

In his later years, Bill seemed genuinely concerned that the fellowship he had set in motion, and for which he had written the basic text, was becoming increasingly and unduly heavy-handed with the god stuff.

Dr Bob was much more of a Christian than Bill, but they both came from the Oxford Group with its heavy religiosity. And while the non-religious part of AA has finally begun growing and claiming its rightful place within AA it is no wonder that in a heavily religious place like North America there are factions in AA pulling in the opposite direction.

And just like we have our own secular movement, there are religionists who have their own groups, and they have been around for quite some time. Many of these individuals or groups claim to be part of AA, though AA disowns some of them.

Some also choose to distance themselves from AA entirely, and have their own groups, their own meeting schedules, their own literature, and their own Big Book which of course is the first edition. **Alcoholics Victorious**¹, founded in 1948, recognizes Jesus Christ as its “Higher Power” and uses the 12 Steps and the Bible as recovery tools. **Celebrate Recovery**² was founded in 1990 and believes that AA is too vague in referring to God as a higher power and promotes a specifically Christ-based 12 Step program (“God” remains in their steps; “as we understood Him” has been removed). Celebrate Recovery claims to have had more than two and half million people complete its program.

These are just two examples.

What all of these “religionist” groups and individuals – both in and out of AA – have in common is the idea that the Big Book is the way to get and stay sober. They treat the Big Book as a Bible and the 12 steps as “sacred” rather than “suggested”. Some consider Bill to have written the Big Book with direct inspiration from god, while others simply accept it as an infallible book of instructions. But they’re all really based on connection with God. And since there is only one way to get and stay sober, and that involves God, they have little patience for agnostics and atheists. We’re simply doing it wrong, and we’re destroying AA with our un-godly ways.

Under the circumstances it is hard to not have the same intolerant attitude toward them in turn. It would be nice if we could just have the fundamentalists, the middle-of-the-roaders, and the unbelievers each work the program however they see fit and

work together for our common purpose – to help the next suffering alcoholic – but it's just not happening.

We non-believers have never claimed that our way is the only way.

Primary Purpose

The most informative article on these groups that I found, "An Enquiry into Primary Purpose and Back to Basics AA Groups", is on a British site called **AA Cultwatch**³. The article appears to be well researched, and doesn't seem to suffer much from any bias.

One of these groups, "Primary Purpose", was inspired by Joe & Charlie's Traveling Step Work Circus. Joe McQuany got sober in an insane asylum in 1962, and in 1973 met up with Charlie Parmley who had come to Little Rock, Arkansas to speak at an Al-Anon convention. They found that they both liked to study the Big Book, and around 1977 they began taking a Big Book study program on the road. They also made tapes of their seminars which were widely distributed.

Their study program took off. It was based on the principle that everything an alcoholic needs to know to get and stay sober is in the Big Book.

A special lunch with Joe and Charlie as speakers was organized at the 1980 International AA Convention. A hundred Joe and Charlie tape sets were given away as door prizes for the 1500 people who attended the lunch. "Invitations exploded and within a couple of years, Joe & Charlie were presenting about 36 studies a year worldwide." They were a "reaffirmation" of the belief that the Big Book said everything that needed to be said to the alcoholic with a desire to stop drinking. "Studies have been given in 48 states and most Canadian provinces. Additionally, Australia, New Zealand, England, Scotland, Ireland, Germany, Switzerland, Sweden and the Netherlands have all hosted the Big Book Study seminars with Joe & Charlie... Since 1977, an estimated 200,000 AA Members have experienced the spiritual benefits of these collective studies." (**Big Book Seminar**⁴)

A "Primary Purpose" founders' meeting was held on January 26, 1988, in Dallas, organized by Cliff Bishop, one of Charlie's early sponsees. Cliff died in 2016.

Our Big Book Study Meetings went pretty well. On occasion, we would have folks from other groups, which were heavy in Discussion Meetings, who would want to share their ES&H with our Group. I'd write a little note to let them know our meetings were to learn what the First One Hundred did that worked so well for them. We were not interested in using meeting time for individuals to share their thoughts or experiences. I would hand them the note and most of the time, they would then join us in our study.

They were quite into proselytizing too:

Those who make up our Group are very active in taking the message of the Big Book into those places where suffering alcoholics wind up seeking shelter and help. We try to get to them before they become “discussionized.” (**The Primary Purpose Group of Alcoholics Anonymous**⁵)

For these people it is not about sharing experience, strength and hope, but instead about passing on the exact message of the Big Book. What Bill Wilson wrote with three years of sobriety is, for them, simply the first and the last word.

Joe died on October 25, 2007 and Charlie on April 21, 2011.

Back to Basics

The other main fundamentalist group is Back to Basics. It works much in the same way, but has different origins.

Another determined person, Wally P, launched Back to Basics, with some tapes, in December 1995. He later also published a variety of books, first among them *Back to Basics* in 1998, and that year the first real seminars were held.

B2B groups similar to Primary purpose have sprung up in many places. The two have references to each other, even though they aren't directly associated. Wally P is still going strong, as you can see from his speaking engagement and workshop schedule for 2017 at the website **AA Back to Basics**⁶ but he will not be doing any workshops in 2018 in order to focus on writing more books.

The only statistic we have on the number of B2B meetings is from 2009 from AA Cultwatch. At that time there were 130 groups listed in the US. Some of these meetings were also on the pertinent Intergroup schedules while others weren't, either because Intergroup didn't want them, or because the meetings themselves preferred not to be associated directly with AA.

For Primary purpose they showed the following statistics on their growth:

- 2006: Fifty nine groups in six countries;
- 2007: Sixty eight groups in nine countries;
- 2009: One hundred and six groups in eleven countries.

The biggest cause for concern is not the number of groups but rather the individual members of Back to Basics who remain involved in regular AA and push their agenda wherever possible.

It seems to be a common characteristic of these groups that they are heavily invested in the use of study guides with which they teach a specific, firmly in place, fundamentalist version of AA's program. It is about recovering in one way only, by the book exactly, one size fits all, no ESH, no discussion about it, except perhaps

discussion here and there about what exactly Bill Wilson meant by one particular passage or another.

It is like bible study all over again.

Dick B

There are other prolific Christian AA spinoff writers. Dick B deserves mention.

There is no doubt where Dick B is coming from. On his web page, **Dick B's Web Site**⁷, up front is a plaque with the Big Book on one side, and the Bible on the other. His recovery program is strictly Christian. About the man who introduced him to a new life he tells:

When Peter believed, said this man, he walked. When he became afraid, he sank. And it took Jesus to pull him out of the water. I quickly saw that I had a choice – to learn and believe what God had to offer, or to yield my thinking to the seeming disasters the world was offering... So I resolved to go to the Seattle International Convention of Alcoholics Anonymous in 1990 in order to try to find out what role, if any, the Bible had really played in the founding, development, program, and successes of Alcoholics Anonymous.

And he's a loose cannon for god from there on.

He doesn't mention either Back to Basics or Primary Purpose, so he's not directly affiliated with those groups, and it doesn't appear that he has started a "program" with groups all over the place like the others. But he does refer to the International Christian Recovery Coalition, "An informal, worldwide fellowship of Christians who care about carrying an accurate, effective, message about the role that God, His Son Jesus Christ, and the Bible played in the origins, history, founding, original program, and astonishing successes of the early Alcoholics Anonymous 'Christian fellowship' founded in Akron in 1935."

Dick B mostly has written a lot of books, about 45.

There are titles such as:

- *The Good Book and The Big Book: AA's Roots in the Bible*
- *The Oxford Group & Alcoholics Anonymous: A Design for Living That Works!*
- *Twelve Steps for YOU: Let Our Creator, AA History, and the Big Book be Your Guide*
- *Why Early AA Succeeded: The Good Book in Alcoholics Anonymous Yesterday and Today*

Oh right, there once was Clarence S – one of the first members of AA, from Cleveland, and though he and Dr. Bob had some early conflicts, basically Clarence taught “Akron style” AA – get down on your knees and pray to your creator for deliverance from alcoholism.

Clarence was a busy circuit speaker, and also wrote books.

It may be that all these fundamentalist circuit speaking, book writing travelling circuses learned their ways from Clarence S.

Circuit speakers are a phenomenon in AA which have an aspect to them which perhaps ought to be described as “personalities before principles”. Many carry a relatively down to earth, middle of the road message, while a few do pull AA in a fundamentalist direction.

The Mt Rainier Minority Opinion and the White Paper

While we non-believers are trying to widen the gateway and make AA a bigger tent with room for all, the fundamentalists are doing exactly the opposite. They are trying to narrow down AA as much as they can. They are trying to keep agnostics and atheists out and to deny that we have a right to even be a part of the fellowship. They have in particular been fighting the initiatives within AA to make literature by and for unbelievers and secular AA available.

There are a couple of relatively recent articles of a fundamentalist persuasion, but before we address them let us mention **Gresham’s Law and Alcoholics Anonymous**⁸, written in 1976 by Tom Powers Sr. and subsequently updated by his son in 1993. It is all about the dire consequences of “watering down AA”, as in “strong tea” and “weak tea”. “Strong tea good, weak tea bad”, as in strong, fundamentalist, original Akron style, Oxford based program, as understood by the author. While originally written a long time ago it appears to have had considerable influence on the fundamentalist movements, and to this day is still widely quoted.

Let’s now focus on two other documents.

The **Minority Opinion Appeal to AA Fellowship**⁹ (56 pages) from the Mt Rainier Group in Maryland was submitted to the General Service Conference in 2011. Its sole purpose was to block the publication of “Conference-approved” literature for, by and about atheists and agnostics in AA. What follows is a slightly abbreviated version of the position of the group, from the first page of the document:

- *The program of Alcoholics Anonymous is outlined in the Big Book which is our society’s basic text. The book gives clear cut directions on how to practice AA’s Twelve Steps which are described, in the Foreword to the Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions, as “a group of principles, spiritual in their nature, which, if practiced as a way of life, can expel the obsession to drink and enable the sufferer to become happily and usefully whole.”*

- *Practicing the Twelve Steps enables alcoholics to develop faith in a Higher Power (or God of one's understanding) that is sufficient to bring about recovery from alcoholism.*
- *Consequently, any literature which attempts to describe current atheists or agnostics as being "successfully sober" in AA would be deceptive, misleading, and harmful to **real alcoholics** attempting to find the power necessary to solve their problem. Such a position is fundamentally opposed to the authentic program of recovery detailed in the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous...*
- *Much of our existing Conference-approved literature is geared toward helping non-believers develop enough faith, in something greater than themselves, to succeed with the program of recovery as it is outlined in the Big Book. Consequently, as the Trustees Literature Committee has concluded in each of the previous six attempts from 1976 to 2006, there is no "need" for additional literature on this subject.*

Does any of this sound familiar?

Has it had an influence on "conventional" AA as a whole?

Well, it was presented at the General Service Conference which meets for a week once a year every spring. The conference consists of roughly 130 members: delegates from 93 AA Areas in North America, 21 trustees of the General Service Board (these trustees – 14 alcoholics and 7 non-alcoholics – are the principal planners and administrators of AA's overall policy and finances, which is about as high-level as it gets in Alcoholics Anonymous) as well as various directors and AA staff. It functions as the active voice and group conscience of the fellowship.

How could it not influence conventional AA?

While the GSC of 2011 did not adopt this minority opinion, it certainly had an influence on conference delegates. A proposed pamphlet for, by and about atheists and agnostics in AA was abandoned yet again and instead the shameful "Many Paths to Spirituality" pamphlet was published in 2014.

Moving on...

The **White Paper**¹⁰ originated in Florida. It is 28 pages long and was written by an old-timer there in 2010.

It is very much consistent with what we have shared earlier in this chapter. First, it places the emphasis on a need for a God, at one point even suggesting that, "Sobriety is not the name of the game, God is". The principle here being that "God could and would if he were sought." If you find god, well you don't need alcohol. Second, it denigrates atheists and agnostics and suggests that we really don't belong in the Fellowship.

Here are two quotes:

It is time for the pamphlets, the videos, the Grapevine articles, the speeches of Trustees, and overall attitude of our Central Office to acknowledge the authority of the One who responded to the cries of our co-founder, Bill W, and guided us to the most precious spiritual society on this planet. The role of this “Authority” should continuously be referred to instead of slowly eliminating any mention of Him in our publications and speeches. Without this incredible “Power”, none of us would have experienced a spiritual awakening and sensed the presence of our Creator...

One of the policies being advanced by the General Service Office and some of our Trustees regarding expanding our membership is extremely disconcerting. In a not too subtle way, the idea is being advanced that we could make our Fellowship more “inclusive” if we put “God” in the background and let outsiders think that spirituality in AA was “optional”. This would enable so-called “non-believers” to enter AA with the assurance that they could easily keep their current beliefs. I would rather hear about serving beer at meetings than diminishing God’s central role.

The author of The White Paper was said to have been Sandy Beach, who died on September 28, 2014 at the age of 83. He was ten weeks away from fifty years of sobriety.

Sandy – his real first name was Richard – was, again, a circuit speaker. A very popular circuit speaker. He “shared to great effect with tens of thousands of fellow alcoholics as one of the nation’s most sought-after speakers at conferences, retreats and other gatherings of Alcoholics Anonymous” (**Washington Post**¹¹). His talks are also available online at **Stories of Recovery**¹².

What is clear is that both Sandy as a speaker and The White Paper had an influence on AA overall. Remember it was written in 2010. And The White Paper was widely circulated in Toronto in 2011 among the members of the Greater Toronto Area Intergroup. It is fair to say that this paper played a role in the expulsion by the GTAI of the two agnostic groups at the end of May, 2011.

Conclusion

There are many different groups and individuals operating in the fundamentalist field of AA.

Their ascendancy happened around the same time as the publishing of the *Daily Reflections*, most of it a completely shameless piece of god promotion, and around the same time AA began to stagnate. It seems that these people feel certain that the only way forward is more going backwards.

I have no good explanation for why it all came to a head at around the 50 year mark, but Bill Wilson already seemed to think it was inevitable in 1961: “As time passes our book literature has a tendency to get more and more frozen – a tendency for

conversion into something like dogma. This is a trait of human nature I am afraid we can do little about. We may as well face the fact that AA will always have its fundamentalists, its absolutists and its relativists.”

Well, we certainly do have our fundamentalists, our “religionists” in AA. But shall they rule the Fellowship?

¹ **Alcoholics Victorious:** <https://alcoholicsvictorious.org/>

² **Celebrate Recovery:** <http://www.celebraterecovery.com/>

³ **AA Cultwatch:** <http://aacultwatch.blogspot.ca/>

⁴ **Big Book Seminar:** <http://bigbookseminar.org/>

⁵ **The Primary Purpose Group of Alcoholics Anonymous:** <http://ppgaadallas.org/>

⁶ **AA Back to Basics:** <http://www.aabacktobasics.org/>

⁷ **Dick B’s Web Site:** <http://www.dickb.com/index.html>

⁸ **Gresham’s Law and Alcoholics Anonymous:**
<http://www.barefootsworld.net/aagreshamslaw.html>

⁹ **Minority Opinion Appeal To AA Fellowship:** <http://aaagnostica.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Minority-Opinion-Appeal-to-AA-Fellowship.pdf>

¹⁰ **White Paper:** <http://aaagnostica.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/White-Paper.pdf>

¹¹ **Washington Post:** https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/with-humor-popular-alcoholics-anonymous-speaker-sandy-beach-saved-lives/2014/12/06/6574f254-7cdb-11e4-9a27-6fdb612bff8_story.html

¹² **Stories of Recovery:** <http://storiesofrecovery.org/SandyB.htm>



About Being Here

by [life-j](#) [July 02, 2017](#)

By life-j

Sometimes when Jane and I are waking up together, as I lie there snuggling up to her warm body, still halfway in a dream state, my mind will go places I otherwise don't usually have access to.

One of these mornings about three years ago, it was before my surgery, before I even knew there was something wrong with my liver, as we were coming around together, I said: "Not that I'm in any hurry to get out of here, but today would be a good day to die." Because my life is good. I feel loved, I feel good about myself, I have accomplished, more or less, all the things I could reasonably expect to accomplish in one reasonable life. I live in a place that to me is so beautiful that I don't ever even feel the need to go anywhere.

Of course, I *have* done a lot of traveling, mostly before I turned 25. I have seen a lot of the world. And I have traveled a little since then too, but I mostly like to stay put. If I

feel a need to go anywhere, I figure it must mean that the place I'm in I don't like well enough. Or maybe I'm just lucky to not be restless anymore, or particularly curious about other places.



life-j at age 24 riding the Vienna Express in 1975.

Well, I didn't die that day, but soon after it turned out I had liver cancer. Surgery for this is a big deal. They took out two-thirds of my liver, and the recovery dragged on for about five months, which is even longer than usual.

So here it is the spring of 2017, and now I have a lot of nodules in my lungs that weren't there at the CAT scan six months ago. Metastasized liver cancer. We don't know how long I have to live, but they're estimating between one and two years. Sometimes people get to live a long time after a prognosis like this, but we basically know that there is no cure for what I have. And I'm ok with this, I take it a day at a time. Jane is worried, but that makes sense since it's always harder for those who will be left behind. They have to re-make their lives.

Me, on the other hand, I'll just be gone. I'd still like to stick around for a good while. Enjoy Jane's company which seems like it is getting sweeter by the day, even if we also argue, but that's normal. If we didn't, I'd think we were holding something in. Enjoy this beautiful place, now that it's finally mostly silent, all the neighbors are mostly quiet, though some make a bit too much work noise for comfort sometimes.

Now that the place is mostly finished the way I want it to be, it would, of course, be nice to stick around and enjoy it. But the real issues here are of a more spiritual nature.

A number of things have contributed to my being able to take it all mostly with calm. I think the first thing to set me on a path to being able to accept death as something normal was reading Pär Lagerkvist's *The Eternal Smile*. I don't know when I came upon it, it's more than 30 years ago. I have read it aloud for a lot of people, I remember reading it for my daughter's mom in Yosemite or someplace like that when I was newly sober.

The way Pär Lagerkvist describes god is the only one I have ever liked. He's humble. If I had a god I would want one like that, a god I could take a good example from, not the arrogant, vengeful one I was raised with. But I seem to do ok without one. I also like this novella for the individual stories, and especially the one about a young man who's riding through the woods, and he comes to a mill one evening, and he completes his life there.

There's something about that, completing one's life. One could take the point of view that our lives are never complete, I guess, and that's a defensible position to take, but somehow I have arrived at a place where my life feels complete. In my case it doesn't mean it's so complete I can't add to it. In fact, when I was laying there on the couch for five months, one thing that kept me going was a plan to build an aquaponics system. I had taken some preliminary steps, made a level pad for the greenhouse.

Though I didn't know much about aquaponics, I began studying it on the Internet right there on the couch. I needed a project, something to add to my life, a plan. Something to look forward to, since at that point I was presumably recovering, though I was really weak. Something to do. I have always been a doer. In some ways, I would say that project saved my life, for the time being anyway, though of course I don't mean that to the detriment of the loving care I got from Jane and Patrick, plus help from many other people.

I'm here as a steward of my little spot on this earth. I wonder how it would be if I no longer felt I could do something good for the world. There are many other things I can do besides building stuff, of course, I just really enjoy building stuff. The writing I have done these last few years, the artwork I have made, the guidance I have been able to give my daughter, the energy I have put into AA, and the Laytonville Grange, these all feel like worthwhile contributions to this world, too.

Since I quit drinking and have been going to AA my life has, overall, only gotten better. Especially my sense of myself has improved. I started out shy and scared, and now, for the most part I'm ok with me, comfortable in my own skin. If I had been unhappy with my life, and here I'm not glossing over those periods which were nothing to be happy about, it would be different. But my life has come to a place where it is good. Where I'm happy with, how shall I put it, the way the quality of my

experiences has improved, and how the way I have been able to participate in the world has left me satisfied with my contribution.



life-j's aquaponics project

Sure, we all had big dreams when we were 20, but as we get older we at some point have to say, honestly, how much can a man do? I'm accepting that I didn't get to be the man, after all, who changed everything about the world and made everything in it good. That's just much bigger than me, but we can't see that at 20 when the difference between a normal human lifespan and eternity doesn't seem all that great.

What makes me happy with my life – that's a funny thing to try to explain. If I weren't happy with my life, I imagine I would look at death much differently. I'd have regrets about all sorts of things I didn't do and want more time to do them, while in reality I'd probably just spend that extra time further lamenting that I hadn't done them.

Without question, I wasted much time and made many poor choices in my life. But I changed it, and I'm always making my life a little better. I only contribute good things to life at this point. Well, I'm not perfect, I'm not a saint. I still make mistakes, and I can even be an asshole on occasion. But I don't need to be a saint, I just need to be of a mind to leave the world a better place than I found it. And then accept that there's only so much a man can do.

Speaking of events which changed my outlook on life, here's a funny one: A while back I got a job to translate a big genealogical project. It was about people related to the manor house of Kjærgaard, near Ribe, Denmark. Some of it concerned the history of buildings and communities and some of the people connected with the manor house or living in the area.

Translating the genealogical records particularly was an eye opener. There was nothing in there that we don't already know, but it got to be so real, as I was working on it: People died. Yes, of course, they died, because people die. But half of people's kids died when small, and even when grown to adulthood they weren't home free. Many people died in their 20s, 30s, and lots of women died in childbirth. Rich or poor, it didn't seem to matter, they'd die early in their 50s, often of relatively minor stuff. And then there were a few who equally unexplainably would get to live into their 80s.

People died, and it's amazing to think of how many times each of us alive today may have evaded a death that might have been certain and, if I may use this word, in a sense almost trivial 200 years ago. Granted, such deaths are still the lot of three-fourths of the world's population. But it's easy to lose sight of how incredibly fortunate we are to be living in this time and place, even with all its injustices and the increasingly insane and immoral politics.

Still, it angers me whenever I see a beautiful, strong, young man in his 30s with a bad limp. I am aware how this, the richest country in the world did not give him the relatively minor surgery he should have gotten. There is so much penny wise, pound foolish politics in this country which results in so much unnecessary human suffering. At least 200 years ago they simply were not able to save people. Now it's just a result of mean-spirited, egotistical politics, and I have never been able to close my eyes to injustice.

And yet that translation job brought home to me how many events in our lives are outside of our control. Floods and other disasters happen, and people fall ill and die, and they do so whether they pray to imaginary deities to save them, or not. It is simply the course of life and its random events, in my life as in theirs.

Another big thing that happened in my life with respect to how I live it and how I think about how to live it was my friend Jason getting cancer. Let me start by acknowledging that we have both spent a lot of time in AA, and one thing we both learned there, and both have been lucky enough to be able to apply to our lives, is the concept of taking life one day at a time.

If there is any way I can do things to take care of unfinished business from the past, and it will make my present life easier to live without conflict, then, by all means, I should do them. And as for tomorrow, if I can influence the course of my life with some well-laid plans and a non-hysterical determination to carry them out, then by all means I should do so, as long as I accept that while I can increase the odds in my favor, I don't have any sort of ultimate control. I can only do my best, and even the best-laid plans can run afoul of circumstances. I can be on my way to some important part of that plan, and a bus falls out of the sky and kills me, or I can get cancer or something, as indeed I have. I have to accept stuff like this. I know it's easier said than done. Some people just can't. I'm a lucky guy in many ways.



Jason

Jason had cancer so bad that when they opened him up, intending to do some surgery, they just closed him back up again, gave him a colostomy bag, and sent him home to wrap up his life. And he did it well. Six weeks before he died he was riding his Harley one more time. He still surfed half a year before, and a couple of months before he died he played a concert at Harwood Park. Brown-eyed Girl will always be a song that I remember him by.

When someone started getting sad about it all, he would just tell them, "I'm already overpaid." His life had been good too. He was able to let go of all regrets.

There were times he was in considerable pain. Jane gave him massages sometimes, which helped. Toward the end he would sometimes come over, and go lay down on our couch, and go to sleep, just to be close. But he never seemed to lose his positive spirit. Even when he died, and I was there about three hours before he did, he had lost all strength, couldn't even talk anymore, but he gave me a half smile and a half wink. I knew we were both home free then. Death is ok.



life-j with Charlie around 1984

Most people, when they die, have a bucket list, and it's often about traveling and such. So then another friend of mine got cancer, Charlie. Like me, he loved building things. I'm content to run a water line or build a shelf out of plain plywood, but Charlie was a fine woodworker, turned bowls and things, and built fancy cabinets.

We worked together on some kitchen projects back when I was a contractor. When he was told he had cancer, he tried chemo once or twice but decided to not deal with all the discomfort. He was going to go out in style. And this meant not wasting his time lying around being sick with chemo treatments. He had things he needed to build, yet. A couple of somewhat ordinary things, a door, and a table, but then also he wanted to build a guitar. He'd saved just the right piece of wood for that guitar for god only knows how many years, and he wasn't about to not get it done.

That was his bucket list, build some things. There may have been more on it, I don't know, but these building projects took up a lot of his last bit of time, so that was probably pretty much it. I like that, shows great humility to still want to make something for the world, rather than do a whole bunch of traveling.

I have a place or two I may want to go, but it is not that big a deal to me. I'm happy here. Not idiotically happy, just happy in a content sort of way. If I never go anywhere again, that's really ok. Any day I spend here, and maybe even get to do something I like to do, is a good day.

So in this way, I have been learning from my friends. I guess it's all about acceptance. This is a concept they push a lot in AA, and there it is mostly a very

godly thing: “Nothing, absolutely nothing happens in god’s world by mistake,” it says in The Big Book – and therefore we should accept everything.

Well, right off I think this is a bunch of shit. I have to say I don’t understand why I should or would accept things any less if instead everything, absolutely everything in “god’s world” happens by random chaos. There’s almost even more reason to accept it then because there is no way at all for me to control it.

With a god in charge, I could at least try to influence god to do things my way by praying for something, in other words, not accept god’s initial decisions after all, at least until he had taken time out to consider that maybe I had a better idea than he did. But with no god there to meddle with it all, what else can I do but to accept it?

Things are so much simpler without a god. I don’t have to concern myself with whether I go to heaven or hell after I die since neither one makes sense to me. I don’t have to wonder about my score, and whether events in my life are god’s way of rewarding me for good behavior, or punishing me, or giving me a challenge to learn from or whatever. Christians concern themselves with all that stuff way too much.

I’m simply here while I’m here, and I don’t have to clutter my mind with all that. I guess I could be called an existentialist. Believers get their morals from gods. To me, common sense is enough. I don’t want to argue with anyone about the meaning of life. Life is whatever we make of it. I can see with my own eyes that things go better in this world if I speak my truth, and conduct myself in a socially kind and responsible manner.

The meaning in my life comes from what I put into it. Ultimately one could say there is no meaning to anything. But we don’t live in a vacuum. My life has meaning in the context I live in. I have a partner, a daughter, friends I care about. I have a beautiful place where I can sit by my pond and simply be one day, and with all sorts of projects to work on another day. I have my artwork and my writing. This all has meaning in the context I live in.

I don’t need to make it complicated and ponder ultimate, irreducible questions and problems. I have been raised in a society which, while mostly Christian, has given me a variety of moral values. Doesn’t mean I would call those values Christian values, I think that is putting things on their head.

Rather, over the centuries society has infused their religion with the moral values they were going to live by anyway because in the course of the development of a culture certain ways of people relating to each other make better sense than others.

So as a society, you can collectively arrive at a social contract that says don’t kill or steal from your neighbor, or you can put together a religion that tells you the same thing. It’s nice to have it sanctioned or commanded by a god. Gives it authority and weight. If you believe in that god. Otherwise, you can just arrive at the same social

contract by seeing that it works, and so may as well go by it. Same difference to me. I just can't see making life's big questions too big. Keep it simple.

So I have lived by this in my dedicated if imperfect way. I imagine if my brain chemistry had been just a little bit different I could have been depressed, could have lived based on regrets, and other negative feelings. In the end I guess I have to accept it as not much other than simple chance and good luck that my life is good, and that my feelings are mostly in the positive register. True, I have worked for it, but my work could as well have been fruitless as it could have been successful.

Today I have a cancer which I most likely will not be able to recover from. I could be dead a year from now, maybe two. But what else can I do but accept it? I'm just grateful that a variety of events and people in my life together have all coalesced to leave me with a positive outlook.



life-j with Jane

I want to again recognize the joy of being with Jane these last 10 years or whatever it's been. Like everything else in my life, it has not been perfect. I haven't, she hasn't, it hasn't. But it doesn't need to be. Other than when we've just had an argument, anytime I look at her I jump with joy. I feel loved. Feel is probably the key word here. I may have been loved before, but not known it, not been able to fully experience it, feel it, trust it, believe it. Now I have, here I can.

We don't know where it is all going. Maybe I'll be gone in a year. Maybe something unexpected will let me recover, and live to be 90. Maybe Jane will die a few years

before me. This would be awful for me. To be the one left behind. And I realize that Jane is facing such a scenario. But at least she has a daughter, a grandson, and siblings close by. She has finally begun establishing herself as part of the community here and making friends. And at least I can leave her a place where she has a good shot at living comfortably for a good while.

My daughter Melina has been another blessing in my life. Funny that things should happen such that I got to be a dad at 45. It has been a real gift to be able to do things with her which my own parents were always too busy to do, but which at least my uncle Hejse did with me quite a bit. I'm grateful for the things he taught me.



life-j and Melina

In turn, it was beautiful to take Melina for a walk when she was just maybe 2-1/2, up to Strawberry Creek, sit and play by the water which U.C. campus authorities warned could be unhealthy. We'd sit there, and occasionally a sun ray would find its way down through the redwoods or eucalyptus, and a water nymph would alight, and we'd look at it as if we never really had looked at it before, which in a very real sense I guess we hadn't. It's really a special experience to get to do all kinds of firsts with a child. We spent many days by that creek.

Now let me just wrap up with the following story. It's all about continuity, and in a sense about closure. Doing things like this which feel like they have significance is part of what makes my life feel full, and having my life feel full is what it takes to be able to turn it over in good spirits when it is time to do so.

When I went back to Denmark in around 2012 to visit my mother, and my daughter came up from Italy, she and I went back to the creek of my childhood. Melina had just turned 16, and she is a well thought out sort of person, but still, I don't know how much she understood of it. We did go there once when she was about three, but of course, she could not remember.

Myself, I was somewhat disoriented there and got lost a few times. Not seriously. After all, there's no place these woods are more than a half mile across, or maybe a mile, but even though the underlying landscape is the same, things have changed a lot in the 50 years since I played here. Trees that were now large had been saplings then. A shooting range had long since been closed, no one ever came here anymore. The paths were gone, the rutted, muddy roads were gone — only thing left was the creek. It didn't flow quite as well as when we were kids, and I no longer dared to drink from it like we did when I was 10, but somehow I needed to pass my creek on to Melina. Make it home to her like it had been to me. I know that could never really happen, but maybe I could just somehow give her the creek anyway, make it hers like it had been mine.



The creek

I thought of a ritual that would do it. I couldn't start giving her a speech or something else weird, but what I ended up doing was to bow down and cup my hands, and ask

her to cup hers. Then I scooped up a handful of water and poured it into hers. Now it's her creek too. I think she understood, or else she was just too graceful to say she didn't. Or maybe all she understood was that here was something really important to me.

We don't see each other often, nowhere often enough, but I try to somehow make the time we spend together real, even if it gets to be intense sometimes. We both felt a little awkward, but not too much. Then we took pictures of the place all around and walked back out to civilization. Got lost a few times on our way out. Not seriously. After all, these woods which seemed endless to me when I was a child, and where I got lost many times until I got to know them from one end to the other, are only small. The town was small, not even a village. My grandparent's place is gone, burned down, replaced by some contractor's dream monstrosity. I'm gone, long gone. Continuity is a hard thing to create these days, I did my best, I hope it works, and Melina gets to walk with my creek in her heart.