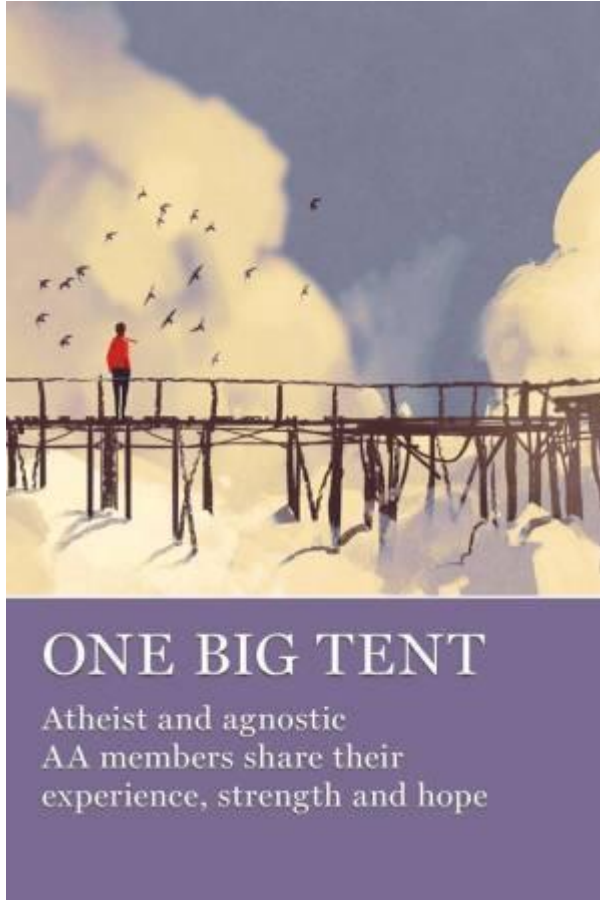


One Big Tent



Review by Thomas B.

A most auspicious event took place during the opening Panel of the recent third Biennial International Secular AA Conference that took place during August 24 through 26 in Toronto, Canada — Jon W, Senior Editor of *The AA Grapevine*, announced the publication this month of *One Big Tent, Atheist and agnostic AA members share their experience, strength and hope*.

He also had graciously arranged for 250 copies to be available for sale to those attending the Toronto conference.

This collection of stories from AA members who are atheist, agnostic or nonbelievers — *and* successfully sober in AA — finally fulfills the request initially made in July of 1976, by two AA trustees, members of the Literature Committee, for literature to be published by the GSO for atheists and agnostics “to assure non-believers that they are not merely deviants, but full, participating members in the AA

Fellowship without qualification”.

During the intervening decades, a number of further requests from the AA fellowship for such literature were made and considered at several of the annual AA General Service Conferences held each April. However, none of these received the requisite two-thirds majority of substantial unanimity for approval by the Conference. Roger C has reported on these efforts in several articles, such as [An AA Pamphlet for Agnostics – The 1980s](#), on *AA Agnostica*.

Following one other request for literature for atheists and agnostics, the General Service Conference in 2009 did approve the publication of a pamphlet which it claimed was for atheists and agnostics. Some 300 stories from atheist and agnostic AA members were collected by GSO with the anticipation that they would constitute a substantial portion of the pamphlet.

In August of 2014 the pamphlet, *Many Paths to Spirituality*, was finally published by GSO, and it landed with a resounding thud of disapproval among members of the secular AA community. However, the pamphlet contained no stories from atheist and agnostic alcoholics sober in AA.

Not a single one. Rather, it was a hodgepodge of disjointed quotes, which were succinctly described by one commentator as “Chapter 4: We Agnostics-lite.”

AA *Agnostica* published a scathing [review](#) by Chris G of the pamphlet on August 13, 2014, followed by a Roger C commentary the following Sunday, [Still No Pamphlet for Agnostics in AA](#). In his commentary Roger reported that some 100 secular AA members rated it with a 1.7-star rating out of a 5-star maximum, including some 58 comments, the vast majority of which were sorely displeased with this effort. These were sent to delegates, board members and staff of GSO.

In late 2014, life-j, an atheist member from Northern California, compiled from the *Grapevine* archives some 39 stories written by atheists and agnostics that had been previously published by the *Grapevine*, beginning in 1962. In an article published on AA *Agnostica*, [A Grapevine Book for Atheists and Agnostics in AA](#), life-j and AA *Agnostica* requested permission from the *Grapevine* to publish a book of these articles. This request was denied. AA *Agnostica* then requested that the *Grapevine* publish a book of our stories similar to other special purpose literature it had published for African-American, Hispanic, Women, Youth and LGBTQ members of AA. This request too was denied. And that led to the article, [No Grapevine Books for Atheists in AA](#), posted on AA *Agnostica*.

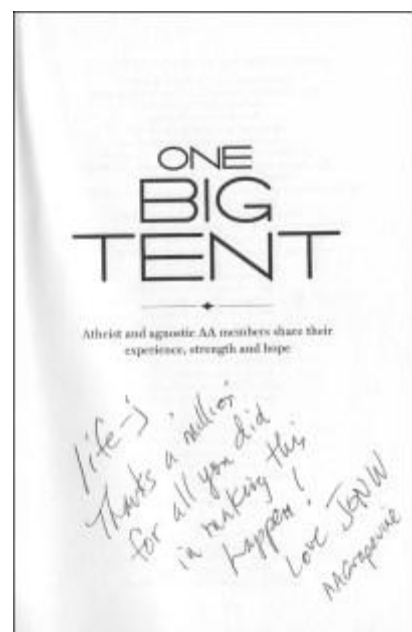
But the pressure for the *Grapevine* to publish such a book continued on AA *Agnostica*. In 2016 I wrote a letter to the *Grapevine* again and we got this response: “Your request was presented at the AA *Grapevine* Board of Directors January 28, 2016 quarterly meeting. The Board discussed your request and will forward (it) to the Conference for approval.”

And indeed, at the April, 2016 General Service Conference, the *Grapevine* asked the body of delegates if it could publish a book of stories from atheist and agnostic members of AA. The answer was yes!

As a kind of test-run, the October, 2016 *Grapevine* issue published a special section for atheist and agnostic members. This section featured five stories by atheist and agnostic AA members and a sixth article by former Chair of the General Service Board, Ward Ewing, who was a keynote speaker at the first 2014 Secular AA Conference in Santa Monica.

Skies did not fall, seas did not boil, mountains did not crumble !!!

At the April 2018 General Service Conference, the AA *Grapevine* announced it would soon publish a book of stories by atheist and agnostic members. *One Big Tent, Atheist and agnostic AA members share their experience, strength and hope*, some forty-two years after it was first proposed, has finally come, indeed, to a most fruitful and beneficial reality.



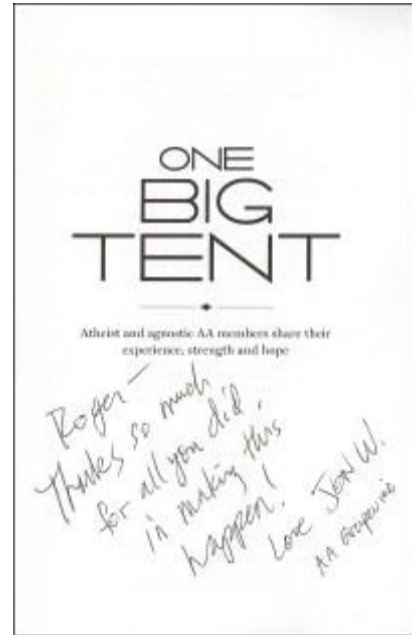
One Big Tent without doubt effectively demonstrates at least two things:

First, that our efforts – the work of life-j, AA Agnostica and many, many others – were an important part in the publication of *One Big Tent*. The Senior Editor of the AA Grapevine, in copies of the book given to life-j and Roger, acknowledges our contribution in getting this book put together and published.

Let's continue to fight for what is right within the recovery fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous. It has results!

Second, *One Big Tent* recognized that atheists, agnostics, even militant nonbelievers, are sanctioned and legitimate members of AA as long as they meet the only requirement for AA membership – a desire to stop drinking – as our third tradition states. It demonstrates once and for all that no AA member is required to conform to the beliefs of other members nor do they need to deny their own.

Let's now examine this historic publication, a major milestone in the ongoing history of AA.



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The general introduction to the book, *One Big Tent*, states that each of the stories were written by “atheists, agnostics, freethinkers or nonbelievers, who have struggled with alcoholism, yet ultimately found a common solution in AA.” Following the general introduction, the book consists of five chapters with stories related to the following themes, also the names of each of the five chapters:

1. Staying Sober – No Matter What
2. Supporting Each Other
3. One Among Many
4. Group Life
5. One Big Tent

The first chapter, “Staying Sober – No Matter What,” has nine stories. It includes a story from Jim B., the first acknowledged atheist/agnostic in AA, who is credited with inserting the phrase, “*as we understand Him*” after God in the third and eleventh steps.

As the specific introduction notes, each of the stories illustrate “each AA is free to find his or her own way of staying sober.”

Chapter Two, “Supporting Each Other,” also has nine stories, which relate how non-religious members of AA care for and support each other. Now 32 years sober, Jack B. came into AA recovery at age 21. In addition to being young, he was gay and waffled between being either an

atheist or an agnostic due to his religious upbringing. In his story “Three Strikes, You’re In,” he emphatically urges AA members to be true to themselves and to resist conforming to any majority point of view:

So dare to be as authentic as you can. Sameness is boring. I am grateful my terminal uniqueness didn’t chase me away from AA. Today I celebrate the differences that made the beginning of my recovery difficult. The Fellowship made me feel like I belonged for the first time in my life.

The third chapter, “One Among Many” consists of eight stories that demonstrate essentially that “AA is a We Program,” as the sub-title states. An anonymous writer in the story “An Atheist Asks,” however, seriously questions if AA is truly a “We” program by pointing out a phenomenon which occurs in many AA groups throughout North America:

“We” can’t claim to love and include everyone who wants to stop drinking – and then make that love conditional on the acceptance of spiritual beliefs, especially when the only spiritual choice presented in our literature is nothing but a thinly veiled Christian idiom.

He closes his story with a most pertinent question, “Does my faith (or, lack thereof) afford me the courage to put aside my fears for the opportunity of understanding something different?” To me, this in essence correlates to the core of AA’s inclusive code of love and tolerance, as noted on page 84 of the Big Book.

Chapter Four, “Group Life,” has seven stories, including a story by AA *Agnostica* author, life-j, which examines the idea and experience that participation in AA service work is a key component for many AA members who are nonbelievers, whether at the group level or higher up at District and Area. In my four-and-a-half decades of recovery in AA, I’ve known many atheists, agnostics and nonbelievers who are actively involved in AA service work.

A friend, Sam E, Chairperson of Secular AA, posits that this is so because when you look at AA’s Twelve Concepts of Service, which delineate how AA governs itself unlike either the Steps or the Traditions, there is not one mention of the “God” word.

A prominent example of this is AA’s first nonbeliever, Jim B., who died in 1974 after 36 years of continuous sobriety, and who described himself as being “a militant agnostic!” Jim started the first AA groups in Philadelphia and Baltimore. Later, he also started groups with his wife, Rosa, after he retired to San Diego. As well, he was instrumental in the publication of the landmark [*Saturday Evening Post*](#) article by Jack Alexander, which first brought nationwide publicity to AA in March of 1941.

The concluding Chapter Five, “One Big Tent” delineates the title of the book with ten stories which describe how due to the overarching principle of Unity every AA member potentially can find a comfortable place within the Fellowship of AA.

In his story, “Practice, But Don’t Preach,” Eddie B. from Ahwahnee, California, perhaps most succinctly states the essence of what One Big Tent means for each member of AA:

This is a spiritual, not a religious program. Let’s keep it that way. I won’t force my beliefs on you if you don’t force yours on me. Say what you want, and so will I with the help of my Higher Power whom I chose not to call God, and together we can stay sober one day at a time.

In the story, “We Share Common Ground,” the Rev. Ward Ewing, Trustee Emeritus of AA, relates the essence of the 2014 talk he presented in Santa Monica at the first International Conference of Secular AA members. In it, he reiterates that the culture of AA, grounded in tolerance and inclusivity, is compatible to believers and non believers alike, who by sharing their recovery stories are enabled together to stay sober each day at a time.

* * *

I strongly recommend that you read this book, which represents a major milestone in the history of AA. It more than adequately fulfills some 42 years later the suggestion made by two trustees in 1976 that AA publish literature that describes the experience of atheists, agnostics and freethinkers in AA who are able to recover and stay sober in the Fellowship of AA despite their doubts about or refusal to believe in an anthropomorphic God.

Is *One Big Tent* a perfect book? No, there is no perfect book, but it is the first book that AA has published which I have read with a minimum of grimaces and exasperated exclamations of, “This is poppycock!” As mostly an agnostic, sometimes atheist, I could relate to everything in the vast majority of the stories. What a marvelous relief !~!~!

One Big Tent is available at the [Grapevine Online Store](#).

You can also find it as a kindle at all of the Amazon sites, including [Amazon USA](#).

*And you should go down to your nearest AA Central Office and make sure *One Big Tent* can be purchased there and is available for all AA groups that want to have copies on their Literature Tables. And that, really, should be every single AA group.*

The time has arrived.

