life-j
Collected Published AA Articles

Initially written mostly for the AA Secular, Agnostic, Atheist and Freethinkers Online Community
# Table of Contents:

### From AA Agnostica:  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My Path in AA</td>
<td>June 25, 2013</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our new Chatroom</td>
<td>Feb 2, 2014</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(We closed it after a couple of months)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yet Another Intergroup Fight</td>
<td>March 2, 2014</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Grapevine Book for Atheists and Agnostics in AA</td>
<td>September 7, 2014</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(includes a section with responses to the article)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wounded Warriors</td>
<td>August 5, 2015</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Jellinek Curve</td>
<td>August 22, 2015</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My Path in Alcoholics Anonymous</td>
<td>January 12, 2016</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(a revised version for the book Do Tell, much the same as the first one, so not included here)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science May One Day Accomplish This</td>
<td>May 12, 2016</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(a shorter article on the Sinclair Method, I kind of like it better, also included)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open-minded</td>
<td>September 22, 2016</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(the Grapevine article in the October 2016 issue focusing on atheists and agnostics in AA)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Secular AA 2016 Austin Convention</td>
<td>November 17, 2016</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(also included in the book A History of Agnostics in AA)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Daily Reflections</td>
<td>January 19, 2017</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Back to Basics and Other Religionists</td>
<td></td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(from the book A History of Agnostics in AA, also posted on the website July 6, 2017)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Logical Fallacies of the Big Book</td>
<td>February 22, 2018</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moments of Clarity</td>
<td>October 21, 2018</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### From AA Beyond Belief:  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Sinclair Method</td>
<td>November 22, 2015</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t Fix it if it Ain’t Broke</td>
<td>April 09, 2017</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>About Being Here</td>
<td>July 02, 2017</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Podcast 88, Interview with life-j, transcript</td>
<td>April 18, 2018</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Call for Better Networking</td>
<td>April 19, 2018</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And for that, I am Responsible</td>
<td>August 8, 2018</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transcript of 4-17-2018 talk at the Laytonville Fellowship</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As Bill Also Sees It</td>
<td>November 07, 2018</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AA and the Art of Automobile Maintenance</td>
<td>November 11, 2018</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fix Broken Self Esteem with Ego Deflation? Huh?</td>
<td>November 18, 2018</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AA in the 21st Century</td>
<td>December 02, 2018</td>
<td>189</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Appendix A – Pamphlets
All my AA pamphlets. Some of the content written by me, some by others  
(provided as separate PDFs which may be added to the back of the book). Some of this is copyrighted material, as indicated)
As of March 2017 the doctors gave me one to two years to live, though I’m still doing quite well here in December of 2018. 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.

Besides this book I have also written a variety of other material, some of which is of a more personal nature including a three volume photo album with my personal and family history with genealogical tables and other relevant material. While this will not be made available to the general public, it exists, and parts of it may be made available to interested parties upon request.

Of more general public interest may be My Stories – Memoirs and Essays, and The Art Work of Life Jensen, a catalog of all my art work. Write to lifej@mcn.org or, once I’m gone probably Roger of aaagnostica will have some contact information.
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.
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)*.
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 immoral, 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.

Copyright © by The AA Grapevine, Inc. Reprinted with permission.

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 nonbeliever 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

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 Curmudgeonness 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.

![Form Image](image)

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”:**

*I would like to feel more included. My quest for sobriety is as valid as 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 alot 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… exception, 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 AA’s 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 us 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 alkies 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 lose 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 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. (Athiest, 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-hierarchic, 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” atheists 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 atheists 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.
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.
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 an 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.
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.*
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”.

62
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 Jehovah’s 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.
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 nalmefene. 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 nalmefene 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. Nalmefene 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 AAgnostica 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 of 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 injectionable 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

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 immoral, 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 is 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.
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 lifej

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 Victorious1, founded in 1948, recognizes Jesus Christ as its “Higher Power” and uses the 12 Steps and the Bible as recovery tools. Celebrate Recovery2 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 Cultwatch³. 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 Seminar⁴)

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)

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 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, 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 (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 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 Post11). His talks are also available online at Stories of Recovery12.

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/
8 Gresham’s Law and Alcoholics Anonymous: http://www.barefootsworld.net/aagreshamslaw.html
12 Stories of Recovery: http://storiesofrecovery.org/SandyB.htm
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.

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 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.

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.

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.
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.
Isaac Newton said “If I can see farther, it is because I’m standing on the shoulders of giants”. I want to look at whether that’s the case with us in AA, too.

Lately we have had increasing cause for concern over Big Book fundamentalist groupings in AA asserting that the AA program as laid out in 1938 is the one and only proper way to recover. They have canonized Bill, and the Big Book, and they have circulated publications such as the “Minority Opinion by the Mt Rainier AA Group” in which they recommend against development of literature for atheists and agnostics with a lot of circular arguments along the lines of “the Big Book is right, because the Big Book says so.” It’s problematic enough that initiatives such as these stifle attempts to get AA to develop badly needed secular literature, but in this article I will address what I think is a greater concern. Everybody seems to be scared of saying it out loud, but someone needs to: What if early Bill Wilson and much of what's in the Big Book is simply wrong?

Bill obviously had something right. Not only are there a number of brilliant passages in the Big Book, but around two million people have helped each other stay sober in AA, and that’s no small accomplishment, even if another 10 or 20 million, or more, walked through our doors and didn’t get the help they needed.

But when Bill was pacing the lobby of the Akron hotel, and realized he needed to talk with another alcoholic, that, I will contend, is the moment when the program was born, and that, I will further contend, is by far the most important part of the AA program.
Bill and Bob went on to help a great many others, even though they also acknowledged that many were not helped, but in the process they did help themselves.

Then at three years sober Bill – like most of us at three years sober – figured he knew everything, and he decided to write a book about it, and I think the book is full of wrong and unnecessary information. I’m not just talking about “open to interpretation” but possibly so far off the mark in key areas of its philosophy that it is amazing we could make it as far as we have with it.

Bill seemed to have an intuitive sense of what it takes for alcoholics to help one another. But once he went on to try to explain how it works he went completely off the chart.

AA is all about one alcoholic talking with another. Of everything Bill wrote in the Big Book, and during some of the following years, a great deal is without question helpful, but some of it may be outright detrimental to recovery. We won’t know until we collectively gain the willingness to look at it, which is sorely lacking at the moment, even somewhat among secularists and agnostics.

I can already hear some old-timers say “So you think you’re smarter than Bill?” I don’t know, but I’m allowing for the possibility that maybe I’m as smart, give or take a bit. But the real advantage I have over Bill is that I am standing on the shoulders of giants.

As a 29 years sober member of AA with 4000 meetings behind me I have of course learnt from Bill’s writings, but much more from our collective 80 years of experience. That’s where I find my giants, much more so than Bill, and especially among those secular members now searching for new ways.

The fact that I’m 29 years sober doesn’t leave me any smarter or wiser than anyone else in this program with 20, 30, 40 years sobriety, but I think we have to start giving ourselves credit: Just maybe someone, anyone with 30 years of sobriety, someone who is building on the collective 80 years’ experience of other sober alcoholics in AA, can see things that Bill with three years of sobriety, couldn’t?

Already when Bill wrote the Big Book there was considerable fighting in the fledgling AA fellowship about whether a god was an important part of recovery, or even needed to have any part in it at all. Since the 1930s were religious times, since the fellowship had come from Oxford Group roots, and perhaps especially since Bill was a great salesman, the religious faction won out.

The religious argument never died. In fact, Bill himself, as he gained 10, 20 years of sobriety, tried to modify his stance. He did this in his 1961 Grapevine article “The Dilemma of no Faith” and in many other places as well. If at this point he had outright tried to tell the fellowship that he had changed his mind and that much of what he wrote in the Big Book was wrong, he would have met with little success.
That sort of thing had been tried before. Around 1908 Anna Jarvis, an unusually talented and dedicated woman, for several years worked to get Congress to establish a Mother’s Day, and eventually she succeeded. Within a few years she got to see how commercialized it came to be, and she was disgusted with it, and she then spent the rest of her life working to have the holiday rescinded, with no success, of course. The florists loved it. She was even arrested for protesting it once, and eventually wound up in an insane asylum behind it all. The expense of her last days there were in part paid for by the florists.

Bill was too smart to accept a similar fate, so he just went along with the big movement he had created and mostly kept telling the same story over and over, and, of course, not expecting different results.

When Bill wrote the big Book it may not even have been a majority of those first “more than one hundred men and women” that came to decide how the next two million alcoholics would work their program.

They had, all of them collectively, not much more time in sobriety than me.

And yet there are religious people with 30, 40, even 50 years of sobriety who believe more in this three years sober Bill than they do in themselves and who won’t believe their own eyes and recognize the agnostics with a similar length of sobriety who can demonstrate an equally good, sober life.

Sobriety isn’t all about time, of course, but it is questionable at best that the experience of those first hundred people, most of whom had been sober only a few months, and several of whom even relapsed after their story had been published, should later take such precedence over the experience of many thousands of long time sober, agnostic, present day members of AA.

Old-timers who are now trying at all cost to keep agnostics in AA from gaining recognition will, without giving it a second thought tell any present day newcomer with less than a couple of years sober, to just “shut up and listen”. And they will walk all over agnostics with decades of good sobriety, if they can. Isn’t it time we paid more attention to the varieties of present day experience, and maybe a bit less to that bunch of newcomers 80 years ago?

Bill and Bob set a movement in motion which has helped many. But they were just another couple of drunks. Just like we non-believers today are searching for new paths, Bill read a few books to see if he could come up with something other than the strict Oxford group program. So he read William James, and Carl Jung and a few others, and armed with all that knowledge, he wrote the Big Book. And he had a few good connections, and a bit of good luck, too.

According to a talk by Jim Burwell in Sacramento in 1957, at the time the Big Book was published there were eight people with more than six months sobriety. Some of them, and many of those with less time, relapsed. Six of the 20 who had a story in
the first edition at some point later committed suicide. Really not an impressive crowd of “more than one hundred men and women” to model your recovery after. But Bill had no trouble embellishing the truth at that time.

Bill and Hank Parkhurst were business men. They were salesmen. Jim Burwell said Hank was the pushiest salesman he had ever met, and he was a salesman himself. They approached the making of the big book like salesmen, and while it took a while, eventually sales picked up.

The Big Book has sold an impressive 30 million copies or thereabouts. If all current members own 2 or 3 of them, like I do, and some have gone into libraries, that still leaves about 20 million sold or given to newcomers who didn’t stay, and gives us a rough estimate of how many people we have failed, at least from among those who either were serious enough to buy one, or whom someone else cared enough about to buy them one. No telling how many people we failed beyond that, but this number is already plenty big.

It is customary in AA to blame the alcoholics themselves for this failure, though Bill himself eventually recognizes the problem with that in his 1961 article *The Dilemma of No Faith*.

But the dilemma we’re suffering is not one of no faith, but of what to do with a faith based, one size fits all recovery program based on a book full of embellishments and manipulations.

And Bill had quite a dilemma all along: How to explain to himself all those recovering alcoholics with no faith who seem to have good, well-lived, sensible lives, and for that matter also many non-alcoholics do, who are non-believers?

This is supposed to be a program of honesty, after all. There must have come a point when Bill had to get honest with himself about this. How did that contribute to his depression, and his various bouts with escapism? I’m starting to read Bill’s later writings from this point of view. There wasn’t much wiggle room in the Big Book version of the program. And so later, his main quest would be to try to undo some of the damage done with his uncompromising early version of the program, all the while keeping the whole fellowship from unraveling. I would have been unhappy if I had been in such a predicament. But if everyone around you treats you like a saint, you’d better try to play the part.

His basic message in his later speeches is so eerily similar from one to the next to where it sounds like it could have been spoken by a robot. Bill says everything he knows the Christian crowd gathered wants to hear. Except that he does add one new thing: Some cautionary remarks about making the program too rigid, and about being inclusive of agnostics, the stuff which I imagine would have troubled him the most.
Thomas B. has told me that around 1990 Nell Wing, Bill’s secretary for 30 years, and AA’s first archivist, told him that she and Bill had been working on a secular book which they hoped would be used instead of much of the original literature. We have not found any indication yet that such a manuscript exists, but this information at least comes from very close to the source, and would support the point of view that even though Bill may still have been a believer, his wheels were spinning hard, looking for a way to modify the program away from the religious dogmatism which so many were trying to cement into place.

Bill, for our purposes, was first and foremost a salesman. His talent was pulling AA together, much less so the making of a program for it. It could have been simple: One alcoholic talking with another. Instead the program is awful. Bill’s gone, and now all we have is this awful program. What makes it work at all is of course those few principles which we may call spiritual for want of a better word: Honesty, open-mindedness, willingness, humility, service, living by the golden rule. And with those principles practiced diligently almost any kind of program can be made to work, no matter how awful.

I know I have been hard on both Bill and his book here. I wish I didn’t have to be. Sure he had some grandiose ideas when he wrote the book, but I was a mess at three years sober myself, I should allow him the space to be, too. The problem lies with the movement that has canonized Bill and his book. If we could somehow get to a place where the big book was no longer held up as the final word on recovery, but be taken for what it is – the salesmanship of a three years sober alcoholic – then we could view it with all the respect it actually deserves – it is our founding document, and for a three years sober guy to have written it, it is actually quite amazing, even if it turns out that much of it is wrong.

Instead, because there are so many big book fundamentalists that cling to it, I think we are left with no other option than to go after it. We don’t need to re-write the big book. We need to stop using it. If we don’t somehow dislodge it as our primary recovery book, AA will simply die off over time.

The culprit, as Bill also pointed out later in his recovery is something rather more like human nature. There are a lot of people who wish for a father in the sky to look after them, rather than take full responsibility for their own recovery, and there are people that really like having a program handed to them that tells them exactly what to do. These are the people who are happy with the program as it is, the 5 or 10 percent, whatever, who stay. But we can’t very well fault those people. They are after all only doing the best they can and know how, just like I am in my own way. Thus the only thing left is to attack the program philosophy, and its literature. And it is regrettable that attack is even necessary, but we’d better get on with it. Hopefully we can do that without harming the fellowship, for that, together with our love and care for the next suffering alcoholic is the most precious thing we have in AA.
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.

As part of this mission, life-j has written a number of articles on AA Agnostica over the past several years and these are:

- **My Path in AA** (June 30, 2013). Also published, mildly edited, on January 12, 2016, as a chapter in the book, Do Tell!
- **Our new chat room!** (February 2, 2014). This chat room was closed after several months.
- **Yet Another Intergroup Fight** (March 2, 2014)
- **A Grapevine Book for Atheists and Agnostics** (September 7, 2014)
- **Wounded Warriors** (August 5, 2015)
- **The Jellinek Curve** (August 22, 2015)
- **Science may one day accomplish this...** (May 12, 2016)
- **Open-Minded** (September 22, 2016). This is a reprint of the article published in the October 2016 issue of AA Grapevine.
- **The Secular AA 2016 Austin Convention** (November 17, 2016). This is also a chapter in the book, A History of Agnostics in AA.
- **The Daily Reflections** (January 19, 2017)
- **Back to Basics and Other Religionists** (July 6, 2017). Another chapter in the book, A History of Agnostics in AA.

To date, he has also written three articles for a wonderful website for we agnostics in Alcoholics Anonymous, **AA Beyond Belief**:

- **The Sinclair Method** (November 22, 2015)
- **Don’t Fix It If It Ain’t Broke** (April 9, 2017)
- **About Being Here** (July 2, 2017)

All of these articles are available in a book put together by life-j. Here is part of his intro to the book: “...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....”

You can read and/or download the book as a PDF right here: [My Collected Published AA Stories](#).

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

Thank you, life-j
Logical Fallacies of the Big Book

Posted on February 22, 2018

By life-j

Following up after Standing on the Shoulders of Giants? in this article I would like to open an in-depth critique of the Big Book’s logical fallacies. I have to confess I’m not as sharp as I used to be, so bear with me. Hopefully I get to at least start something, even if I can’t finish it. Please refer to the end notes for resources I have used.

A power greater than myself

The god idea is probably the worst stumbling block for all progress in AA. In part because it is the one thing most insisted upon. In part because it is not necessary, and while I guess it can be of help to folks with a religious inclination, it can be harmful to others by taking away their true empowerment, or even chase non-believers away.

For most of us it appears necessary to accept help, embrace the fellowship, and then start making positive changes in our life. These changes can take many forms, including the steps or not, but what Bill Wilson does is to push the idea that a god is necessary, or else...

This is called a false dichotomy, and it is part of the Big Book’s brilliance that it sells most things as false dichotomies.

A false dichotomy, also called a false dilemma, is:
... a logical fallacy which involves presenting two opposing views, options or outcomes in such a way that they seem to be the only possibilities: that is, if one is true, the other must be false, or, more typically, if you do not accept one then the other must be accepted. The reality in most cases is that there are many in-between or other alternative options, not just two mutually exclusive ones (Wikipedia).

The foremost fallacy you will find in the Big Book is here:

**Page 53**: Either god is everything or else He is nothing. God either is or He isn’t. What was our choice to be?

Page 25: But Bill doesn’t leave us with many options: *We had but two alternatives: One was to go on to the bitter end... and the other to accept spiritual help.*

This could have been simple.

“The doctor” on Page 27 explains quite clearly, and for that matter irreligiously what a spiritual experience is:

*They appear to be in the nature of huge emotional displacements and rearrangements. Ideas, emotions, and attitudes which were once guiding forces of the lives of these men are suddenly cast to one side and a completely new set of conceptions and motives begin to dominate them.*

Entirely agreeable for spiritual experiences I would say.

But it takes only a couple of paragraphs before Bill Wilson turns it into that “what seemed at first a flimsy reed has proven to be the loving and powerful hand of god”, and on page 29 it has become “Each individual, in the personal stories, describes in his own language and from his own point of view the way he established his relationship with God” (NOT “how he recovered”).

**Hasty Generalization**

Bill Wilson does not operate with any well developed facts on which he bases his theories, other than statistical samples of one, or two.

On page 9 Ebby comes and has been sober for two months. As we all know Ebby never really put together any lasting sobriety – which strictly speaking means that whatever Ebby did, did not really work for Ebby, but Bill takes this statistical sample of one, and runs with it, mostly because he can make a theory about it which enables him to write a book about it. This is a fallacy called hasty generalization.

We’re also dealing with a fallacy called faulty cause: Ebby has found religion, and gotten sober, and it is now presumed that the religion is the cause of his sobriety,
though it may very well be something else, co-occurring with the religion, such as plain human help and interest.

Several other kinds of logical fallacies are at work in the Big Book. Here are a few of the more common:

- **Appeal to Ignorance**: attempts to use an opponent’s inability to disprove a conclusion as proof of the validity of the conclusion, i.e. “You can’t prove I’m wrong, so I must be right.”
- **Appeal to authority**: attempts to justify an argument by citing a highly admired or well-known (but not necessarily qualified) figure who supports the conclusion being offered.
- **Begging the question**: entails making an argument, the conclusion of which is based on an unstated or unproven assumption.
- **Tautology**: defining terms or qualifying an argument in such a way that it would be impossible to disprove the argument. Often, the rationale for the argument is merely a restatement of the conclusion in different words.
- **Straw man**: stating an opponent’s argument in an extreme or exaggerated form, or attacking a weaker, irrelevant portion of an opponent’s argument.
- **Non sequitur**: In a general sense any argument which fails to establish a connection between the premises and the conclusion may be called a non-sequitur. In practice, however, the label non-sequitur tends to be reserved for arguments in which irrelevant reasons are offered to support a claim.
- **Appeal to the stone**: Dismissing a claim as absurd without demonstrating proof for its absurdity.

Bill uses this one for instance on page 10 where he says,

*I was not an atheist. Few people really are, for that means blind faith in the strange proposition that this universe originated in a cipher and aimlessly rushes nowhere.*

Bill puts it upside down: atheists are now the ones characterized particularly by having blind faith. And why is that proposition strange? And is this even the proposition we ought to concern ourselves with?

I imagine as you have read through this list you have nodded, “yes, I have seen that one, and that one”. The Big Book is full of it. This makes it real difficult to make a meaningful critique of it. Once Bill builds an argument on a logical fallacy, and then subsequently treats his conclusion as fact, from that point on everything he says about the subject at hand is essentially nonsense. Thus when early on he builds his case for religion, once he has built it on logical fallacies, and established it as fact to his own satisfaction he then proceeds to talk about what god is and can and does and will do based on these erroneous conclusions, but at this point, such as in chapter 5, or 11, there is no way to relate to it meaningfully, it is simply a “fact”, albeit a false one, and as such can no longer be refuted by application of ordinary civil discourse.
What I will try to do is find those places early on in the Big Book, where he establishes these “facts” by way of logical fallacies, and see what the implications are. Here are two more:

- **Cherry picking**: The act of pointing at individual cases or data that seem to confirm a particular position, while ignoring a significant portion of related cases or data that may contradict that position.
- **Survivorship Bias**: When a small number of survivors of a given process are actively promoted while completely ignoring a large number of failures.

The biggest fallacy here of course is that AA works for all, because it works for some of us. We have already looked at how few AA had really worked for, and how poorly, at the time he wrote the book.

But now let’s look at some specific points up through the first chapters where he generates his argument. I will be going through it, and pick out examples of where the problems lie. Long as this article has become, these examples are only a few out of many:

**The Doctor’s Opinion**

Bill leans heavily on Dr Silkworth and while the dear doctor does express a number of quite humble opinions which do give me considerable respect for the man, Bill tries to make anything he says into a scientific fact. For instance:

*One feels that something more than human power is needed to produce the essential psychic change.*

Dr Silkworth is of course entitled to feel that, but that does not really fall within the realm of scientifically based medical opinion – except to Bill, of course.

**Chapter 1: Bill’s Story**

On page 10, what are the “contrary indications”? Should he maybe have had a closer look at those? No, he has “little doubt”, and his very own little doubt is sufficient proof, and sufficient to build a movement on:

*Despite contrary indications, I had little doubt that a mighty purpose and rhythm underlay all. How could there be so much of precise and immutable law, and no intelligence?*

This is “appeal to ignorance”. Since no final argument can be brought against this question because it lies outside of the verifiable part of reality, he can safely take that as the only argument for the existence of a deity.

*I simply had to believe in a Spirit of the Universe, who knew neither time nor limitation. But that was as far as I had gone.*
With ministers, and the world’s religions, I parted right there. When they talked of a God personal to me, who was love, superhuman strength and direction, I became irritated and my mind snapped shut against such a theory.

He goes on at length. But he is also doing something more insidious: Since he himself is now “saved” he can safely berate his former self, but the real intention is to by association berate anyone else who feels the way he claims to have once felt himself.

And once I have been berated sufficiently and don’t have a leg to stand on, because his appeal to ignorance is bulletproof, I will of course have to accept his idea of a god. But he is not directly attacking me, he is attacking his own former self which is very manipulative, since the motive is obvious.

Enter Ebbie, Bill’s convincing evidence from a statistical sample of one:

*Had this power originated in him? Obviously it had not. There had been no more power in him than there was in me at that minute; and this was none at all.*

Ebbie’s claim that god did it is the proof that god did it:

*That floored me. It began to look as though religious people were right after all.*

Now that Bill has been floored, we can upgrade to a statistical sample of two, I suppose.

Ebbie never put together any lasting sobriety, but Ebbie, two months sober is nonetheless enough to build a whole movement on.

He continues with his manipulative tool:

*Despite the living example of my friend there remained in me the vestiges of my old prejudice. The word God still aroused a certain antipathy. When the thought was expressed that there might be a God personal to me this feeling was intensified. I didn’t like the idea. I could go for such conceptions as Creative Intelligence, Universal Mind or Spirit of Nature but I resisted the thought of a Czar of the Heavens, however loving His sway might be. I have since talked with scores of men who felt the same way.*

Those men could be right! But here the statistical sample of “scores of men” apparently do not carry as much weight as the statistical sample of one converted man does.

*My friend suggested what then seemed a novel idea. He said, “Why don’t you choose your own conception of God?”*
That statement hit me hard. It melted the icy intellectual mountain in whose shadow I had lived and shivered many years. I stood in the sunlight at last.

All I can say is it didn’t take much. How could he have been so staunchly against god and suddenly gung ho for?

He does not have to argue at length about, or describe the process, all he has to do is say “Ebby made me do it”. This relieves him of the need for further explanation.

I would certainly call it a “Hasty Generalization”...

Thus was I convinced that God is concerned with us humans when we want Him enough. At long last I saw, I felt, I believed. Scales of pride and prejudice fell from my eyes. A new world came into view.

So Ebbie’s suggestion that man make god in his own image is sufficient to convert him. This is the crucial spot. From here on there is no longer any proof needed or discussion about whether there is a god and/or what this god does or can do. He treats his claims as a fact from here on.

Page 13: [At the hospital] There I humbly offered myself to God, as I then understood Him, to do with me as He would. I placed myself unreservedly under His care and direction. I admitted for the first time that of myself I was nothing; that without Him I was lost. I ruthlessly faced my sins and became willing to have my new-found Friend take them away, root and branch. I have not had a drink since.

This is called a non sequitur fallacy: He did these things and has been sober ever since, but there is no evidence that those things were what caused him to get sober, and not some other cause(s) which he failed to look at because he had already made up his mind what did it.

Belief in the power of God, plus enough willingness, honesty and humility to establish and maintain the new order of things, were the essential requirements.

Reminds of a question in the article God and Diet Pills by Steve B: Would willingness, honesty and humility alone have done it?

Page 14: Simple, but not easy; a price had to be paid. It meant destruction of self-centeredness. I must turn in all things to the Father of Light who presides over us all.

He’s stepping up the religious rhetoric here, “Father of Light”, but we also have another false dichotomy here, the first indicator that it is either my will or god’s will. And since he has had a vision, the whole issue is outside the realm of scientific scrutiny. And from here on it will be treated as fact.

My friend had emphasized the absolute necessity of demonstrating these principles in all my affairs. Particularly was it imperative to work with others as he had worked
with me. Faith without works was dead, he said. And how appallingly true for the alcoholic!

While this passage has some elements that appear to have been borne out by a much larger statistical sample since 1938 – helping others works – Bill Wilson here treats it as truth based on a statistical sample of one man’s opinion. Could variously be considered “Appeal to authority”, “Begging the question”, or a “Non-sequitur”: An irrelevant reason (that Ebbie says so) is offered to support, or prove, a claim.

Page 16: One poor chap committed suicide in my home. He could not, or would not see our way of life.

Or was the godly life just not going to help him, or did he need more help than what they were able to offer? Here we have one over-simplified explanation given to a complicated issue.

Chapter Two, There Is a Solution

Page 17: We have a way out on which we can absolutely agree.

We know the agreement was far, far from absolute, but saying it makes it true. Hasty generalization – unless we were to call it an outright, deliberate lie, of course.

Aside from this, there are a number of good observations in chapter 2 and 3, Bill is not without writing talent, nor without a sincere desire to help, of course. I’m just mentioning this so the reader knows I’m aware of it, but there is plenty of praise for the Big Book elsewhere. Our purpose here is, obviously, to offer a critique of it.

Page 21: But what about the real alcoholic?

This is the first occurrence of the term “real”. He now proceeds to describe what a real alcoholic is. This automatically creates that distinction, and by default creates another class of alcoholics that are “not real”, or maybe not even alcoholic. Though his descriptions and distinctions in themselves have some validity, he continues with it as if it is now established facts. This has aspects of equivocation, and begging the question.

Page 22: Why does he behave like this? If hundreds of experiences have shown him that one drink means another debacle with all its attendant suffering and humiliation, why is it he takes that one drink? Why can’t he stay on the water wagon? What has become of the common sense and will power that he still sometimes displays with respect to other matters?

Perhaps there never will be a full answer to these questions. Opinions vary considerably as to why the alcoholic reacts differently from normal people. We are not sure why, once a certain point is reached, little can be done for him. We cannot answer the riddle.
From a scientific point of view this would be a very important question. More important than many others he asks, but of course this was one Bill was not able to answer, because he really hardly knew anything at the time he wrote the book. The lack of an answer ought to rouse considerable cause for concern about the validity of the rest of his theorizing, even if in practical terms AA can still to a considerable extent be effective without an answer.

But this of course is only because AA happens to do **some things which really do work**, all the while **giving faulty explanations for why**.

**Page 23**: These observations would be academic and pointless if our friend never took the first drink, thereby setting the terrible cycle in motion. Therefore, the main problem of the alcoholic centers in his mind, rather than in his body.

The validity of the second sentence does not follow from the first sentence, and preceding paragraph. Even if, or maybe because, we still do not know if (2) is right or wrong, it makes it all too obvious how Bill tosses “therefores” around without much support for his statements. But of course, Bill having stated this as a truth, it now becomes truth, and will be used as truth hereafter. Manipulation, pure and simple.

**Page 24**: When this sort of thinking is fully established in an individual with alcoholic tendencies, he has probably placed himself beyond human aid.

Here he does say probably, but already in the following sentence it becomes a fact: “These stark and ugly facts have been confirmed”, and “But for the grace of God” – He can invoke god out of nowhere here, and out of context, because he has already satisfactorily argued for the necessity and fact of god’s involvement. Here he is just hammering it home. He will do a lot of that.

**Page 25**: There is a solution. Almost none of us liked the self-searching, the leveling of our pride, the confession of shortcomings which the process requires for its successful consummation. But we saw that it really worked in others, and we had come to believe in the hopelessness and futility of life as we had been living it. When, therefore, we were approached by those in whom the problem had been solved, there was nothing left for us but to pick up the simple kit of spiritual tools laid at out feet.

Here Bill uses the very helpful device of switching himself to be a “third person”, as in “if all these other people could convince me (in reality meaning if he could convince himself, and some others), they surely ought to be able to convince you”.

**If you are as seriously alcoholic as we were, we believe there is no middle-of-the-road solution. We were in a position where life was becoming impossible, and if we had passed into the region from which there is no return through human aid, we had but two alternatives: One was to go on to the bitter end, blotting out the consciousness of our intolerable situation as best we could; and the other, to accept spiritual help.**
The device he uses here is to first say “we believe”, but even before the period is out, he has turned it into a certainty. And again, we have a false dichotomy: either we do this or we do that, but are there no other ways? Many things are said here: We are beyond human aid – this is of course obvious from the fact that he has affirmed it several times before, so by now no further argument for its validity is needed. And if the two only alternatives are to go on to the bitter end as best as we could or accept spiritual help, it’s a no-brainer, isn’t it?

**Page 28:** Here was the terrible dilemma in which our friend found himself when he had the extraordinary experience, which as we have already told you, made him a free man.

Yet it appears that Rowland Hazard drank again, even several times before the Big Book was even written, but that doesn’t matter to Bill who is busy making a book. He takes what he can use and leaves the rest.

*We, in our turn, sought the same escape with all the desperation of drowning men. What seemed at first a flimsy reed, has proved (where is the proof – this is just bill’s unfounded assertion, now treated as fact) to be the loving and powerful hand of God. A new life has been given us or, if you prefer, “a design for living” that really works.*

*The distinguished American psychologist, William James, in his book “Varieties of Religious Experience,” (one of the three books Bill read before he found himself entirely qualified to write the BB) indicates a multitude of ways in which men have discovered God. We have no desire to convince anyone that there is only one way by which faith can be acquired. (But it is understood that faith is the essential, unavoidable component) If what we have learned and felt and seen means anything at all, it means that all of us, (an Ad Populum logical fallacy, appealing to the listener’s ability to believe that the sample quoted is indeed much larger than it is, and therefore represents an unquestioningly large and convincing sample) whatever our race, creed, or color are the children of a living Creator with whom we may form a relationship upon simple and understandable terms as soon as we are willing and honest enough to try.*

Here it is getting too hard to swallow, so let’s wrap up for now with the end of the next chapter.

**Chapter 3: More About Alcoholism**

**Page 43:** Once more: The alcoholic at certain times has no effective mental defense against the first drink. Except in a few cases, neither he nor any other human being can provide such a defense. His defense must come from a Higher Power.

Anyway, with the need for a higher power firmly established, I will wrap it up.

In chapter 4 Bill reels completely out of control. Basically there you will find Straw Man and Non Sequitur arguments.
And of course the rest of the book is more of the same.

There are Big Book study meetings all over the country, where people cling to every word as if it were the truth. The objections to the Big Book as briefly presented herein should be obvious to anyone who doesn’t check their brain by the door, but as we know, it isn’t.

I can’t deny that there are things of value in it, but I’m coming away with the conclusion that more in it is downright detrimental. We need to stop using it. I know World Service depends on sales of it to keep their whole operation going, which does not bode well for change. But all we can do is chip away at it one day at a time.

Here are some of the sources I have referred to:

- Common Fallacies in Reasoning
- Fallacies (Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy)
- Fallacies (University of North Carolina)
- Fallacies (Changing Minds)
- Logical Fallacies or Fallacies in Argumentation
- Logical Fallacies (Purdue Online Writing Lab)

The most exhaustive of all, because it is linked and linked seemingly unendingly:

Wikipedia: List of Fallacies

And, finally, an area which I did not even touch upon, but it is rampant in there as well, cognitive biases:

Wikipedia: List of Cognitive Biases
Podcast Episode 88: Interview with life-j, transcript

April 18, 2018


00:00 John S.: Welcome to episode 88 of AA Beyond Belief, the podcast. I’m your host, John S.

[music]

00:27 John S.: Today we’ll speak with Life-J, a friend of both AA Beyond Belief and AA Agnostica. Life has written several articles for both sides and was also published in the Grapevine. Life will share his story with us, and we’ll talk about the Sinclair Method, his thoughts on recovery, his thoughts about AA, present and future, what he thinks about secular AA, the use and limitation of technology, and a need for improved networking among secular AAs.
01:00 John S.: How you doing Life?

01:02 Life-J: I’m doing pretty good. I’m pretty good. It’s a sunny day here for a change. Yeah, I’ve been good.

01:07 John S.: Well, it’s really nice of you to agree to join us. I’ve been wanting to talk to you for a long time. You’re an important voice in the secular AA community, and you’ve done a lot for AA Beyond Belief and AA Agnostica with all your great writing. And there’s just so much that you have to offer with your ideas and your experience, so I really had been looking forward to this. I’m wondering Life, if you wouldn’t mind too much, just giving us a little bit of background and what finally happened that convinced you that you needed help with drug and alcohol addiction or either, and then we’ll just go into your AA story a little bit and take it from there.

01:44 Life-J: My life was just coming apart. I wasn’t doing much other than drinking. I had a room down in my basement where nobody could see whether I was home or not. And I would sit down there and drink and smoke the evening and the night away and sometimes make it to work and sometimes not. Once you can’t work anymore things start going downhill pretty fast, the bills won’t get paid, you lose a place to live, and all of that stuff. And I just barely averted that happening.

02:16 John S.: And about how long ago was that?

02:18 Life-J: Well, I had a back problem. I was working as a contractor at the time, and there was a time there about a half a year before I quit, I was working for some really wonderful people, and the guy happened to be an orthopedist, so I asked him if he wouldn’t mind taking a look at my back. I didn’t have any health insurance. He took me and sat me down at the dining table. Him and his wife were sitting there. First thing he asked me is, “Have you ever drank too much?” And I thought about that for a minute. Of course, everybody’s drank too much at one time or another, right? So, as I was sitting there thinking about what to answer, he says, “Have you ever been wasted for weeks on end?” And to that I said, “No, no.” So, he said, “Alright, let’s go take a look at that back.” Obviously, the reason he asked me that question was he could see I was in the middle of being wasted for weeks on end.

03:16 Life-J: I had a lot of respect for this guy. So that started making me think that maybe there was a problem, so he sent me down to Highland Hospital. That’s the big public hospital in Oakland, and the first thing the guy there asked me is, “Have you ever drank too much?” And of course, by then I got smart enough to answer “No” right away, so that I wouldn’t get found out. [chuckle] Well, you know how that goes. But anyways, from that point on, I stopped drinking every day. I stopped drinking. And I wasn’t going to drink until... Well, tomorrow I wasn’t going to drink, but today I just needed a couple beers to relax. And that’s the way it worked every day until finally I woke up one morning and realized that... So, I quit, and I quit on my own, and just the absence of the atrocious hangovers was enough to make it okay. I don’t remember having DTs and stuff. I was just okay. About five
months later I realized I was going to drink again if I didn’t get some help, so that’s when I started going to AA. My 30th birthday was actually last Tuesday.

04:28 John S.: Oh, congratulations. And now, you grew up in Denmark, is that right?

04:33 Life-J: Yes, I did, and that’s a drinking country. [chuckle] When we were big enough to walk a quarter-mile down to the grocery store, people there would send us down to get beer. That’s how it was.

04:47 John S.: Yeah, and they didn’t really have a drinking age or anything there, did they?

04:51 Life-J: No, I don’t know if they do now, but it certainly isn’t enforced very much, but we could go out and drink when we were 15.

05:00 John S.: Yeah, I think it was that way. I lived in the Netherlands as a kid, and my older brother and sister, they were teenagers, and they tell me, “Yeah, I don’t think there was actually any kind of a drinking age [chuckle] or anything, at that time anyway.” But it’s also a very secular country, isn’t it?

05:16 Life-J: Yeah it is. Yes and no. It’s a funny situation, because Denmark has State religion, but being as that everybody’s a member, it also means that nobody really cares that much. [chuckle] You’re just a member, right?

05:32 John S.: Right.

05:32 Life-J: As kids we had to endure a couple of really religious teachers. Of course, we had religion talk in schools, even though it’s not like a Catholic school here necessarily or anything, but it just so happened that our teachers were quite religious, and we prayed, and they told us about bible stories in church class and all that kind of stuff. We had religious education all the way up until confirmation which is fourteen and you didn’t have to participate anymore.

06:03 John S.: So were you ever... Did you ever have theistic beliefs at all?

06:06 Life-J: I think I became a non-believer around the age of eight. My grandmother was a very religious person. She was not the kind who would push it on you, but she did have me pray at night when I was going to bed and stuff. And I had a crucifix hanging over my bed. I was getting beat up in school a lot at the time, and I just looked up at that thing and said, “There’s no way I can believe in this stuff.” So, I endured it for the next five, six, seven years or whatever.

06:39 John S.: So, then you find yourself in the States, and you’re working, and you begin having a problem with alcohol that you recognize and you start going to AA. How did you reconcile the religious nature in AA with your non-belief? And did it present a problem when you were first starting out
06:57 Life-J: It did, but I was desperate enough to have help, and counseling and other things were out because I didn’t have any money, so I kept going to AA. I was actually lucky very early on in AA. I found a meeting in Berkeley called the Humanist Meeting, which was just happening once a week. There we weren’t religious at least. Even the Berkeley Fellowship, you know, it’s Berkeley, people aren’t overly religious there. It’s a couple of people that are and of course they read how it works and all that stuff, but it wasn’t emphasized and there were very few meetings that ended with the Lord’s Prayer and all that. It wasn’t too bad.

07:44 John S.: But then the part of the state that you live now is more of a rural area and is a little bit different?

07:49 Life-J: It’s not all that different. Northern California is one of the more liberal parts of California. When I first got to this little town, there were five people. There was an old guy who was really kind of our spiritual lighthouse. He went sober about the same amount of time as me. And then there was a couple of people sitting and complaining about the DUI and cops. There wasn’t much going on here. I showed up and I just started going to every meeting there was and just another body of somebody who actually was sober was enough to really start changing things. So, from five people back 10 or 15 years ago to now we have a Tuesday meeting, there’s 20 people, 25 or something like that. It’s actually pretty good. We don’t do the Lord’s Prayer. Somebody was suggesting that we brought it back and I just had a shit fit.

08:47 John S.: Didn’t you at one time start a secular meeting over there?

08:50 Life-J: Yes, I did. And it never really came off the ground because it’s a little bitty town out in the middle of nowhere. There’s just not enough people for it, but there’d usually be one or two other people. And here at the beginning of the winter I had to shut it down. Whether that’s temporary or for good, I don’t know. But being as that I have cancer and all, it’s just really difficult for me to go out and sit in the cold and all that and get the meeting started.

09:23 John S.: But you also had a problem with your central office not listing the meeting too, didn’t you?

09:28 Life-J: That was a real problem, yeah. We fought bitterly for about ten months and eventually I just let it go and just started the meeting. And then a couple of years later when people had cycled out, I went back, and it wasn’t a problem then so we just...

09:46 John S.: Okay, what was their initial objection?

09:48 Life-J: That we weren’t going to do the steps the way they were in the big book, and eventually I just decided we don’t even really need to do the steps. We just sit and talk, one alcoholic to another and we find whatever readings we want to read and then if they don’t like us reading the wrong steps then we just don’t read any. That’s worked all right. And in fact, I think that the steps, if we keep on reading
on the steps as the 12 steps, it doesn’t really matter whether we have the alternative steps or what it is. It’s all just going to be this thing that you have to have 12 steps.

10:29 John S.: I know. I thought that was funny. Did you just post a comment about that I think or did someone else that said, “Why is it always 12?” [laughter]

10:38 Life-J: Yeah, I think that was me. So, what I did do is I did a little long hand piece or what’s... Not long hand but a little piece of prose where we just read all the 12 steps together as one piece. It’s kind of the opposite process of the 12 promise, right?

11:01 John S.: Yeah. I did the same thing actually. Sometime ago I wrote a piece that Roger actually published about... I called it “How it works 2.0” and I wrote... I basically went through the steps as a paragraph, not as a linear progression of a list but just as things that we’ve experienced in one way or other. And that’s just, I think, a different way of looking at it. It doesn’t have to be a list of things. But I know that it was 12 because Bill Wilson thought that was a magical number because of the 12 apostles and so forth, right?

11:33 Life-J: Yeah. Yeah. [chuckle]
So, when did you finally learn about secular agnostic AA meetings and how did you get in touch with Roger at AA Agnostic and get involved with writing for his site and so forth?

I can’t remember exactly how it happened. I guess I just sat down and searched for it one time and found Roger’s site, the AA Agnostic, and got really blown away by all the articles there. And I must have written to him and checked in with him. I can’t remember. My memory’s not that good anymore, I’m getting a bit old. [chuckle]

Well, I know...

But it must have been about 2012 or something like that.

Okay. All this is interesting. All of this is fairly recent history, but I wasn’t really aware of that. In 2012, I was still going to my very traditional group, pounding on the big book. [chuckle] So anyway, so you’ve done a lot of writing for Roger and so forth. And you’ve done a lot of writing for AA Beyond Belief.

Yeah, I started translating 20 years ago, and that’s how I actually got into the habit of just writing. Even though that’s through dry technical stuff and all. Yeah, I started writing memoirs and things about 10, 15 years ago, I guess. And little by little I’ve gotten into doing more writing. And so, coming into AA Agnostica and starting to write there, now it’s something I’m actually spending my days with is writing in one way or another. Nothing particularly great or profound, but...

Do you find it helpful to write?

Well, it’s not necessarily all about my own personal issues and stuff. But as far as AA goes, I haven’t done much other writing that whatever you see on the internet there. I don’t sit down and do written inventories and stuff. It always helps pull the brain together to be writing, regardless of what you’re writing about.

I think it helps. And I think it helps other people, because you’re bringing information to people. Or you’re making people think about different ideas that they might not think about otherwise. You have some sort of an underlying philosophy of your recovery that you’re able to reconcile your understanding with the rest of AA. I wonder if you can talk about that a little bit, Life? How do you see your recovery today? It’s not traditional AA per se, but you haven’t actually thrown AA out the window either.

There’s two million people helping each other there. And that’s what we need to tell them, it’s “Yes, those two million people helping each other, the fellowship, the meetings, all of that, they’re the place for an alcoholic to go.” I think the program is terrible. And it’d be nice to get rid of that. But we need the fellowship. We need the mutual help. That’s Bill Wilson’s great discovery, that an alcoholic is most likely to trust another alcoholic if they want to quit drinking.
14:46 **John S.**: But the program itself, as far as the steps and all that, it’s not necessarily helpful?

14:52 **Life-J**: I don’t think so. It’s nice with the steps when somebody comes in and wants to be sat down and be told what to do. They’d say, “Here’s 12 steps for you to work on.” But whether a person who works those 12 steps, or whether they work something else, I don’t think it really matters. What matters is that they do something to change their life and their behavior, and their thought processes and all of that. Everything needs to change, but it doesn’t have to be done with the 12 steps just like that.

15:24 **John S.**: Yeah, I agree with that theory actually. And it seems like there’s a lot of people that do want that structure, I guess. Maybe, I needed it to a certain extent. But then there’s a lot of people who balk at it. They absolutely can’t stand it, especially when it’s written in such doctrinaire language, an archaic language like Arthur-written. But you’re also very interested in science and the newest methods of recovery. And you wrote an article for AA Beyond Belief that is the single most read article on our site. I’ll have to post the statistics, but thousands and thousands of people have read it, plus it’s posted on our YouTube page, because Lyn did the recording of it, and it just gets more hits that anything. But it’s all about the Sinclair method. I wonder if you could talk about the Sinclair method. Just start from the beginning. What is the Sinclair method? What evidence is there that it works or doesn’t work? And how do you see it, if you do see it, fitting in with AA?

16:21 **Life-J**: Well, it doesn’t fit in with AA. [chuckle] No, we need all the help we can get. And Sinclair method, it’s an American Doctor Sinclair, that moved to Finland, and started working over there, because apparently, they were way more open minded over there to his methods than anywhere else. So, as far as I could tell, he’s helped 60,000, 70,000 people in the time that he was there. That’s quite a bit. And they are starting to experiment with another one called nalmefene, I think it is, everywhere in Europe at this point. And, in the US, the naltrexone is approved for alcohol treatment. But the way it is approved here by the FDA is that you take that pill every day, and you stop drinking. And that’s exactly what Dr Sinclair said, if you do it that way it doesn’t work. And I have a dear friend in the program here, who’s had a really hard time staying sober. And finally, I got her lined up with a doctor nearby who was in the program and asked if he would care to try this with her. And he prescribed it the FDA way, no matter how much I told them that that’s not the way to do it.

17:38 **John S.**: Is it because legally they must do it the FDA way? Or do you know why they do that?

17:43 **Life-J**: They don’t have to do it that way. Any doctor can use the medication off-label. So that’s not really the issue. I don’t know why you would do it that way. The doctor here in our local clinic, she’s quite interested and said she was going to experiment a little bit with it. But I haven’t really heard much about it if she has tried to do that or not.
18:08 John S.: Well, the way it’s supposed to work, The Sinclair Method, the way that Dr Sinclair devised it, the way that he believes it should be prescribed, and correct me if I’m wrong, but you should take the naltrexone before you drink. Is it like an hour before you drink or something like that? And by doing that, chemically, it blocks the receptors that cause you to drink in excess. And what happens is, over time, a lot of people, a good percentage of people, experience something, they call it “extinction,” where they don’t even want to drink. It’s not even something they even think about wanting to do. And a lot of people that use The Sinclair Method, some of them will just continue taking the pill and then drinking normally, or some of them just eventually find entire abstinence.

18:58 Life-J: Yeah.

18:58 John S.: Is that pretty much how it works?

19:01 Life-J: That’s how it looks like it works. And we got that movie by... What’s her name?

19:08 John S.: Claudia Christian?

19:09 Life-J: Yeah. It seems to work. I have not been able to personally get involved in the whole thing. Obviously, no reason for me to get involved in it at this point myself. But there’s a lot of resistance in AA against this, because they want you to be completely abstinent. And I think one of the reasons why doctors are hesitant to prescribe it in this way is that it’s not very good for them, legally, to say, “Here’s a pill, now, you need to go out and drink more for it to work.” Especially since when people first start taking the naltrexone, apparently, they get way more drunk, physically more drunk, without having any pleasure. And so, after a couple of days, I guess it starts subsiding, but it does have in it some risks of drunken accidents and this, that, and the other.

20:08 John S.: Right. Right.

20:09 Life-J: I guess that’s part of why doctors are somewhat reluctant. But a person could be doing this under some supervision by family and whatnot. There’s ways to deal with it.

20:22 John S.: Sure. I’m glad that I learned about the Sinclair Method, and I’m going to learn more about it because we’re going to be having a podcast about it here soon. Not in a meeting, but after a meeting, I was talking to somebody, and this was a couple of years ago, and he was just having a really hard time staying sober. And it was just dangerous, and I said, “Have you ever heard of naltrexone? Have you ever heard of Sinclair Method?” And he never ever had. And I said, “You should check it out, talk to your doctor about it.” And I thought that was an entirely appropriate thing for me to do, to give this guy this information that he didn’t have otherwise. Of course, though, here in the States, he went to the doctor and he did prescribe him naltrexone, but they do it completely different. It’s done as a way to...
Somehow, it’s supposed to curb your craving or desire for alcohol, and I don’t know if that’s true or not. But the people I’ve known in my group who have taken naltrexone and drank on it say that their experience drinking on naltrexone wasn’t satisfying at all. Kind of interesting, I think.

21:23 Life-J: Yeah. It certainly has some promise, and science may one day accomplish this. Right?

21:30 John S.: That’s right.

21:31 Life-J: And it already has accomplished it and we just don’t want to recognize it.

21:35 John S.: So, what happens, I wonder, if somebody decides, “Okay, I’m going to use the Sinclair Method, but I also need the support of people in AA”? Because there’s a lot that goes on with alcoholism that other people can’t relate to. We have
some issues in our lives, and only another alcoholic, as you said, will understand
what we're dealing with. And it seems like it should be possible for someone who
says, “You know what, I'm going to use the Sinclair Method to treat my alcoholism,
but I also want the fellowship with other alcoholics,” and maybe someday in the
future that will happen. There will be people in AA meetings who will openly talk
about being on the Sinclair Method while working a program of recovery to help
them with those other issues that come up because of their addiction.

22:29 Life-J: That would be a good thing. And there’s a lot of negative attitude in
AA about that, which is kind of funny. We don’t put people down if they go out and
relapse a bit. There’s a little frowning, but basically, we welcome people even when
they go relapsing. But we don’t welcome a medication that helps them cut down on
their relapses...

22:57 John S.: And even in our own secular community, where most of us are
Atheist or Agnostic and have a love for science, there’s also a resistance to it,
incorporating it, at least within AA. So, I don’t know how I feel about it. I think the
way I approach it is if I think it might be helpful to somebody, after a meeting, I will
let them know about it. And I certainly think it holds some promise. It’s not for
somebody like me who’s been sober already for a long period of time, but it certainly
might save a life. I often think it would have saved my brother-in-law’s life if he
would have known about it.

23:35 Life-J: We are trying to save lives, right?

23:38 John S.: That’s the bottom line.

23:38 Life-J: That seems to me that that would be what we were trying to do. Then
there’s... In AA, we say, “No, we don’t want to save lives that way.” And that’s kind
of a shame because it should be about damage control. It’s a way better situation if
a guy cuts back from drinking a case of beer to drinking two beers a day.

24:00 John S.: Right.

24:01 Life-J: It doesn’t necessarily fit in with AA philosophy, but it saves his life.
Maybe a few months down the road, he’ll cut out those other two beers and maybe
he won’t, but at least he gets his mind and body in a clear enough state to where he
can start looking at where is he going next.

24:20 John S.: Right. I used to think like that when I was new. I was amazed that I
could not drink for a week or a month or two months or whatever. And when I’d go
to meetings, I’d watch these people who had been sober for a year or two or
whatever, and then they would relapse, and they’d feel awful about it. And then they
couldn’t continue celebrating their anniversary and so forth, and I used to think
inside, I’d think to myself, “Well, heck, it’s still, if you just drank once in the last
three years that’s pretty damn good.”
24:51 Life-J: Yeah.

24:52 John S.: Considering what I was doing at the time, I thought that was pretty damn good and the person should feel good about themselves. I remember going up to one of the old timers, I said, “Why do we make such a big deal about the number of years that we have? Why can’t we just celebrate how long we’ve been in recovery, regardless of whether or not we’ve been sober the entire time?” because that’s... A lot of people might relapse, but they learn something from it and they help other people from it, and it seems like it takes the stigma away. But anyway, the old timer says, “Oh, no, no, no, we need to do it the way that we do it.” So, whatever.


25:23 John S.: But that’s still a question I ask myself sometimes, is like, “Why do we make such a big deal about the number of days that we put together?” It is something to feel good about, I guess, but on the other hand, if one does drink, it almost compounds the feeling of guilt and the fear of coming back.

25:40 Life-J: It does, it does. And I think it keeps a lot of people from coming back. Speaking of that, I had one beer, that was, I don’t know, about two and a half months after I got sober, something like that. And that’s the best beer I ever had...[chuckle]

25:56 Life-J: It’s not because it tasted good or anything, I can’t remember if it did. But I hadn’t really missed drinking, not that much anyway for that time. But having that one beer set up a craving like I had never had before.

26:12 John S.: Oh, wow.

26:15 Life-J: It was all I could think about the next day and a half or so, and then it started subsiding a bit again. With every liquor store I drove by, the steering wheel started pulling.

26:25 John S.: Right.

26:26 Life-J: So, I had never experienced craving because I had never had a situation that put restrictions on my drinking. I never knew that I was physically addicted to this stuff, and that let me know that I was. So, I think that was the best beer I ever had.

26:46 John S.: That makes sense.

26:47 Life-J: I could, of course, just as easily have gone in and got myself a 12-pack and been off and running.

26:52 John S.: Right. So, let’s talk a little bit about... I wanted to talk about what you think is the future of AA altogether, which I know is a huge topic. But if you
could talk about that a little bit. Talk about the future of how secular AA fits into that picture, and then also talk about an idea that you have or that you feel that there’s a need to improve the networking within a Secular AA community. So, tell us, first, how do you see the future of Alcoholics Anonymous?

27:21 Life-J: It depends on whether it can get out of its 1938 framework, I guess. AA will still keep existing, but I think... Wasn’t it Joe that said they’ll be like the Mennonites. [chuckle]

27:36 Life-J: And there’s a lot of risk in that, course. In percentage of the American population, it’s already going downhill, even if in actual numbers it’s pretty much maintaining. But it needs to open up, it needs to get out of its 1938 philosophy. And it’s a very difficult situation because World Service depends on sales of Big Books and other literature to keep functioning. And how are we going to help World Service keep functioning without depending on Big Book sales? Because as long as they’re pushing Big Book sales everywhere, it’s going to stay the same. And that’s a real problem, but...

28:22 John S.: You know what gets me about that from a business perspective though? Okay, if you’re AA World Services and you’re a publisher, why are you only publishing one book? Wouldn’t you want to come up with a different book? I think that if AA said, “Okay, guess what? We got a new improved Big Book for the 21st century,” I think they would sell like hotcakes.


28:42 John S.: But it’s like a good business decision would be, “Okay we’re a publishing company and we’ve got this book that was written in 1939, and we’re going to just keep rolling out the same book, all the time.” Well, wait a second, why don’t you write a new book for current people? I mean, keep the old book but write another book. Sell that book, and have it based upon what we’ve learned in the meantime. It seems to me that would sell like crazy, and they’re missing out on money if that’s what they want.

29:12 Life-J: We are alcoholics, so we keep doing the same thing over and over and expect different results, right?


29:18 Life-J: But yeah, that would be a great idea. And if AA would actually start publishing alternative books, that would probably really make a change.

29:28 John S.: Yeah, I think so. And it must come from not just the Grapevine. And even the Grapevine, I love what the... The Grapevine is going to have their Atheist book and stuff, and that’s really cool and everything. But there needs to be something that, in my opinion, if you’re going to have a program of recovery and everything within this fellowship, then we need to update it, and we need to have it
presented in such a way that a secular person can accept it as well as a religious person. It should be something that’s kind of neutral when it comes to belief and faith, and it should... That’s my opinion. But anyway, who am I to say? So, I agree with you. I think that AA will be around, but it depends how relevant, put it that way, how relevant it would be. So, what about secular AA? How do you see that? Do you think it’s a movement?

30:11 Life-J: I think it is. We are pretty small of course, but there’s a lot of long-term recovery in there. And it’s so ludicrous that there’s people sitting in regular AA with 20, 30, 40, 50 years sober that believe more in three years sober Bill Wilson than they believe in themselves, and in secular AA, that have been sober all that long time. We know more than Bill Wilson knew.

30:46 John S.: Yeah. [chuckle]

30:47 Life-J: And yet they treat it like scripture. So, we have a lot to offer. And it seems like most of the time, people that have been around for a long time, they have
thought about things, and especially those of us that have been on the outside because we have been ostracized, we have had an opportunity to really think about stuff and what is it that’s wrong with AA. It’s a lot easier to figure out what’s wrong with AA if you actually think there’s something wrong with it, than if you don’t think there’s anything wrong with it. And so, we have a lot to offer AA. There’s a lot of good thinking heads in the Agnostic community. And so hopefully, we will get to have an influence on it in the long run.

31:42 John S.: But you pointed out, and you submitted something to us, and I think I’ll... If I still have a copy of it, Life, maybe you might want to send it to me. You wrote a piece about the need for improving how we network within the secular AA community. Do you want to talk about that a little bit, what your thoughts are on that? What is the need? And what are the solutions?

32:02 Life-J: Well, we have horizontal communication, and we have vertical communication. Vertical is that we come in and we read the articles on AA Agnostica and AA Beyond Belief, and do podcasts like this, and go to the Secular AA website to find meetings, and all that. But horizontally, we have no communication at all. I have driven to Sonoma County and to Berkeley and to San Francisco to talk with people and to meet people in the other Agnostic meetings. I’ve driven three hours away, and three hours back, to go and meet these people. because that’s the only way I could meet them, because we have schedules of meetings but there’s no contact information. We need this really bad. I talked to the people at the secular AA, and they said, “Yeah, we can’t give away people’s contact information.” And I said, “No, I’m aware you can’t do that without having permission to do so. But for one, you could get the permission. For another, there’s ways of sending an email to somebody without getting their information. You do that on Craigslist and online dating sites and whatnot all the time.”

33:23 Life-J: That’s very easy to do. It just needs to be set up. I met some resistance, I don’t know if we’ve gotten past that or not, but we really need that. When was it about? Was that one year ago or two years ago? I think it might have been two years ago, they had that Roundup, up in Olympia, Washington. I drove up there. And there was... Well, we were about 80, 90 people, and it was great. I would love to do something like that here in Northern California. And, I have done a local, once a year, little Roundup here. It was always fairly small, here in my own place. And after I came out as an Agnostic, it got even smaller. But it would be nice to have a Roundup here in Northern California of secular and Agnostic people. And it’s simply not possible because we can’t contact them.

34:24 John S.: So, it’s like we have all this technology now and there’s all kinds of different ways to use it. I think I get what you’re saying. It’s like, sure, we have these Facebook groups, but Facebook isn’t always the best way to get to know somebody, or to communicate, or let somebody know, “Hey, I’m coming into your town. Do you have a meeting, or can I meet you at some time?” Or whatever. There isn’t any kind of one-on-one personal communication. You can go on the secular AA website and you can find out where the meetings are, I guess, and click on them and drive there.
But you want to have that personal connection. You want to be able to give someone a call and say, “Hey, are you guys meeting? Has anything changed?” Yeah.

35:05 Life-J: Yeah. Yeah. There’s a meeting two hours north of us here and I’ve been wanting to go there for a while. It’s 10 o’clock Sunday morning, that’s not convenient for me, I’m two hours away. Last weekend, we drove up there, I had written down the address wrong. If I’d had a telephone number, granted it’s possible that 10 minutes before the meeting starts the guy wouldn’t have answered the phone, but there is a possibility. Or I would have called them ahead of time and say, “I’m just wanting to make sure the meeting’s here.” And they’d tell me, “That’s the red building sitting back there and there,” and I’d have found it. But not having any contact information, it’s not happening. So...

35:47 John S.: And not every community either has central offices set up. And some central offices aren’t very effective, I can vouch for that here in Kansas City. Not everybody has a central office that you can call and say, “Hey, can you tell me about this meeting,” or whatever. And even if you do, that central office might not necessarily know a whole lot about that particular secular AA group. But if you did have a personal contact... I think I could see how it could be set up, you could have some sort of a private database or something, I don’t know, where you can have people with their contact information to use for networking.

36:22 John S.: You know what I used to think of a need for? This is the idea I had, it would be nice to have a database of all the GSRs for all the agnostic groups in North America, maybe all over the world, and have their contact information and everything, so that if there was something that we wanted to have done at the General Service Conference, we could contact all of them by phone or email or whatever and say, “Hey, we got this issue going on, let’s all get together and push for this at the General Service Conference”. Or, let’s say for example, in Colorado right now, in Denver, where their central office is giving them a hard time, we can all come together and put pressure on that central office, or put pressure on that area assembly where that central office is located to put an end to that discrimination. So that was kind of an idea I had. because you could put this database together, but you know what? Organizing anything in AA is just very cumbersome sometimes.

37:21 Life-J: It is. But I think it’s a good idea, and my experience back when I had my controversy with Intergroup, there were several people there that were agnostics that were part of the Intergroup. We agnostics are very service-minded people, maybe more so than AAers at large. And therefore, I think that getting people together, like you were just saying, would have quite an impact because there’s a lot of people that are GSRs that are agnostics.

37:56 John S.: I know. I think it’s because we feel that there needs to be some change in AA, and I think that’s why a lot of us are more involved. And we are kind of connected. It is amazing that I can talk to somebody in New York and I know what’s going on over there, I know what’s going on all over the world. But that’s only
because I’m involved with AA Beyond Belief and everything. But if I was going to be in Portland next week, I don’t have anybody’s phone number I could call. And that would be nice to say, “Hey, I’m going to be in town but I’m not going to be there the day of your meeting. Can I get together with you?” Something like that.

38:36 Life-J: Yeah, that would be great. If they don’t do it at secular AA, please consider doing it at AA Beyond Belief. In fact, I think it’s a shame that we only have one meeting database. It’d be nice to have two, like we did for a little while there. Be nice to have a PDF of all the meetings you just go in and scan down through instead of having to go in and go through them all.

39:03 John S.: Also, I noticed that the meeting list on secular AA, it’s a little funky. They need to kind of fix that. Because what happens is, you have to sort for the day, the time, the place and all that kind of stuff. But once you do that sorting and you press Enter nothing comes up, you have to refresh the page. It’s kind of frustrating. And they need to fix that. Plus, we need to have... It’s great that we have this technology of the internet and everything, but there’s still a need for paper too, and there’s still a need for phone calls. I see that at work all the time. At work, I’m emailing people all the time, but occasionally, I just need to pick up the damn phone because some things are just too complicated to put in an email, or they won’t get the meaning of what I’m really trying to say. And I think the same thing here. It’s like, yeah, it’s great, but sometimes email isn’t automatic. People don’t respond right away, or you don’t have all the information on a website. Sometimes you can talk to someone, like if you’re in Northern California and you know there’s a secular meeting a few miles away, you can talk to that person and they have all the information in their head. They know, “Yeah, you have to go down this gully or whatever.” [chuckle]

40:12 Life-J: Yeah.

40:13 John S.: I hear what you’re saying. If I still have that article I think I’m going to post it with the podcast. If I don’t have it, I’ll have you resend it so that people can read it and see what you’re talking about. Because as people understand the need for it, then maybe something will happen.

40:29 Life-J: Yeah. Yeah. We really got to do that. And at the Austin conference, there was no central email list of all the people that attended. Apparently, the only thing they had was the emails of the people that had paid with PayPal. And we had no get-togethers there. There were meetings and stuff, and I don’t even know if there was such a need for so many meetings because you can go to meetings anywhere anyway. But what would have been nice, and what’s needed in Toronto for sure, is that it be arranged that people from the same area can get together and meet each other there and start networking. I met a couple of people by chance from Northern California in Austin. There probably were a dozen of us there, and we really all should have sat down and had a meeting and talked about what do we want to do in Northern California. Anything that we can do to network will make us stronger.
41:33 John S.: And to think beyond just the technology, the new technology, but also think about the old technology. There’s also a couple of things too about technology. When it comes to reaching the newcomer, a lot of people don’t think about this. Okay, it’s great that we have all these websites and everything, but if you’re a down and out drug addict or you’re a down and out alcoholic, you don’t have access to the internet. You might not even have a job. There’s a lot of people just out on the street. You can’t find the internet to find anything. So, it’s like, you do have... And in some communities also, just because of poverty in this country, there’s a digital divide. Not everybody has access to the internet. So, it’s like, there’s still a need beyond just the internet to have boots on the ground, people that will take a phone call and go to someone’s house or pick someone up and give him a ride or to print out a meeting schedule and bring it to somebody. Those are still needed. Some of us don’t have a whole lot when we first start out.

42:34 Life-J: Other issues too. I don’t go on Facebook. I’ve been told, “If you want a network in Northern California, go on Facebook.”

42:42 John S.: I don’t know about that, I’m kind of getting disappointed with Facebook. I don’t know what’s wrong with it but... I don’t know. I go on there, but I think that people... They take on a different personality on Facebook sometimes or they... People have different impressions. You can have five people read the same thing and every single person takes a different attitude about it. I don’t know if Facebook is always such a greatest way of doing things. I’m kind of down on Facebook right now. It’s full of Russians. It’s full of Russians spreading misinformation. [laughter]

43:18 Life-J: Yeah. No, but that’s... Back to where you were saying, we really need to have a way of contacting each other by telephone and showing up in person. That’s good old AA, and we need that in secular AA for certain.

43:35 John S.: So, Life, I really enjoyed this conversation. I thank you very much for coming on and speaking with me. And I also thank you for everything that you’ve done for secular AA, all the articles that you’ve written, what you’ve done for AA Beyond Belief and what you’ve written on AA Agnostica. That stuff is meaningful.

43:53 Life-J: Yeah. And thank you to you for having me on here today and thank you for having me on AA Beyond Belief. It’s a very good thing.

[music]

44:16 John S.: Well, that concludes another episode of AA Beyond Belief, the Podcast. Thank you for listening everybody. That was quite a conversation we had with Life-J. He wrote that article about the Sinclair Method some time ago and it is the most popular article on our site. Life did a really good job with that article. And speaking of the Sinclair Method, next week, we’ll be speaking with Gary Bell. Gary was in the documentary One Little Pill, and Gary knows quite a bit about the Sinclair Method, having personal, first-hand experience with it. A lot of good stuff
coming up, I’ll be interviewing Bob K. About an upcoming book that he has written, it’s a historical fiction about Bill W. So, hey, if you enjoy the podcast, if you can and if you would like to, please consider making a contribution. A small contribution of even a dollar a month would help quite a bit. Just visit our Patreon page, that’s at patreon.com/aabeyondbelief. We’ll use the money to pay for transcripts and other expenses associated with producing the podcast. Thanks again, everybody. Until we speak again, you all take care and be well.

Art work by Life Jensen:
# 61 Choices, 1991, oil on masonite, 25 x 22
#19 Comprehension, 1976, oil on masonite, 19-1/2 x 14-1/2
#20 Fears I, 1977, concrete and plastic, 5" tall x 3-1/4
A Call for Better Networking

Posted on AAbeyondbelief by life-j April 19, 2018

By life-j

We secularists, agnostics, and whatever we may be in AA have made some great strides these last few years, in large measure thanks to the aaagnostica, aabeyondbelief, and WAAFT/ICSAA websites, and Deirdre’s long standing list of meetings.

All good, but this mostly facilitates centralized vertical communication. There is only little to tie us together horizontally, on a regional level. So far, if I want to make contact with a meeting 3 hours away my only option is to drive there.

I did also drive up to the regional conference in Olympia, WA a couple of years ago, this was really a great thing to go to, though it was only because I could combine it with other business that I got to go. The folks folks in Toronto had a similar conference together this year, which I flew in for.

All good, but we still don’t have much contact with each other locally here in Northern California, and it’s because if we want to have contact with each other we have to drive there.

The main difference between 18th century technology and our predicament is that instead of 2 days’ travel by horse it only takes 3 hours by car. But that is still absurd in the age of Internet and telephone. It is an all-day event to go to a meeting 100 miles away.
I should think everywhere else in the world the problem is the same.

So we need to remedy that. I hereby call on everyone to help remedy this.

I realize there are anonymity and confidentiality issues, but I should think at every meeting there will be someone who doesn’t mind having their phone number and e-mail address posted. We have Intergroups all over, and most of them are at this point positive toward us, but even sometimes it is also a practical matter. Our small town is 50 miles from where our Intergroup meets. We need to publish a local phone number by a local member, even for the sake of our regular AA meetings so people can call and get pertinent local information, and also because Intergroup is not staffed, we only have a hotline.

Second, this information ought to be available at our other sites in some way. I should be able to – and have more than just one way to – contact a group in Tucson, AZ or Miami FL whether I’m looking to go visit, and need to know that the meeting is still happening, or to do things like send material to them.

A while back I got a shipment of “The God Word” pamphlets from GB with the idea of spreading them around. I have sent out some of them to those meetings I have established contact with by driving there, but that’s all I could do at the moment, and I sat on some of them for a while, but eventually distributed the rest locally. Oregon? Southern California? Colorado? Forget it.

Allow me to describe some of the other problems I have run into:

I’m trying to get some regional networking going. I have visited the meetings in Sonoma county a few times, even visited one meeting each in Berkeley, Oakland and San Francisco.

I have put together a schedule of Northern California Secular and A&A meetings. There was talk in Sonoma County, that maybe the meeting in Napa had closed, but nobody knew for sure. Eventually we found out, took us about a month and a half to accomplish that. An e-mail or a phone call – had it been possible – would have solved it in a couple of days.

To the north of me, a good 2 hours away there is a Sunday 10 AM meeting in McKinleyville. That is – it is on the schedule. I had contact with someone up there a few years ago, when he had first started an A&A meeting, but eventually he had to turn it into a Lifering meeting, because he was getting harassed by the AA police. But now I see it on the schedule again. Do I feel inclined to drive there early one Sunday morning – just to see if it is indeed there? Heck no. But I would have called
or e-mailed long ago, *if I could*, and once I knew, I would have loved to go visit that meeting.

These are the sort of problems we wind up with. I have at various times in the past asked Deirdre and whoever ran the other meeting schedules to do something about this, but of course they’re already plenty busy just maintaining the schedule as is. And getting this taken care of is not at the top of anyone’s list, but please, let’s try do it.

What has brought us the strength in numbers we do have, and the feeling of not being alone anymore is the networking that is already happening through our internet sites, and of course the hard work of the few people running those sites.

Reading [Thomas B’s article](#) a while back on survey results from the Austin convention brings up even more issues with the lack of networking. This event apparently was held without an e-mail list of participants resulting from it, or if there is one, the people who made the survey don’t know who has it. So they resorted to their e-mail list of pay-pal customers. Next time it ought to be announced repeatedly for people to make sure they get put on a convention-wide e-mail list – which ought to be made available to all attendees. Yes it can be done, yes it can be done without violating anyone’s privacy rights, all we have to do is to let people know that the list will be shared with everyone attending.

Some of us attending from the same general area ran into each other at the convention. I think I had even met one or two back home, but basically it was all by chance. We ought to have had a way of gathering together at the convention, sort of a mini regional gathering, just an hour to help people from the same area to get to know each other. We were probably about 10 from Northern California, but barely got to talk with each other. Would have been a great opportunity to help us establish something locally, but that is of course also because so far no other options exist. There are perhaps a few hundred of us here in northern California. We ought to all know each other personally by now. Well, maybe that’s a stretch, but we ought to have been well on our way there, and we’ve barely started. They have at least 7 secular/agnostic meetings in San Francisco a week, and I didn’t know a single person from there, until I recently drove there. There must have been some at the convention?

A couple of suggestions in Thomas’ article on what future conventions should include stood out to me:

More regional conferences so more people can attend. This organization feels very elitist. None of my sponsees could afford to take off work & take a trip to Toronto. I’m sure many people in AA can’t.

...would love a way to somehow identify/connect with Secular AAs from my state/local area while at the conference. If I hadn’t already known folks from Santa Monica, I would’ve never known who the other Colorado folks were. Perhaps
voluntary participation in a Secular AA phone list and/or directory published before or during the conference so that folks can connect in person?

Yes we really need such a directory. Whatever can help us get further organized generally, let’s get started.

Here are some further suggestions of things that would help:

ICSAA currently maintains the only directory for all meetings. Would be nice to see e-mail addresses and telephone numbers for all meetings as part of the listing. I know that would entail contacting all the meetings and ask permission to do so. That’s a lot of work, but it can be done. A shortcut would be to program the directory in such a way that it will be possible to send an email to groups without having direct access to their currently confidential contact information. I have seen that done on many other websites, for instance Craigslist.

It is my impression that the directory has been optimized for searching for a meeting on mobile phones and such. While I personally am a luddite and don’t use that technology, I realize that it is a good thing for most users that ICSAA keeps up with the times. And it is likely a newcomer still has their mobile phone. However, it would really be nice to also have a PDF list of meetings, simply organized by locale, like Deirdre’s NY directory used to be.

It is the only good way to get an overview of regional activity.

Half a year ago I volunteered to help make this happen. As my health is slowly deteriorating I can no longer do that, but I would like to see some of this come to fruition while I’m still here. It would be really good to have a Northern California roundup. And of course it would be great to see them everywhere. Seems like the Toronto area is well networked, but I confess I can not imagine how the folks in Washington and Arizona have pulled it off.

Meanwhile, anyone else in Northern California who would like to make it happen, please email me at lifej@mcn.org. Please anyone, anywhere, feel free to give my address to anyone who seems to earnestly seek recovery.

But this is not just about Northern California, it’s about everywhere.

I think we non-believers are on an average more service-minded, and have given more independent thought to what recovery is about than the average AA member, so we are in a unique position to help AA move forward, but we would be much, much more effective if we could reach each other individually.
"And for that, I am Responsible"

This is an audio recording and transcript of a talk that life-j gave at his home group on April 17, 2018. In this talk, life-j does a great job laying out succinctly and clearly a case for change within the Fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous.

Posted 8-8-18 on AAbeyondbelief, with the audio

https://aabeyondbelief.org/2018/08/08/life-j-and-for-that-i-am-responsible/

00:00: I'm life. I'm an alcoholic.

00:03: I've been writing a lot this last year—a couple of years actually. So, if you get tired of listening to me, I'll send some of my writing around so you can sit and peek at it. Anybody who’s interested, I’ll try to find a way to get it to you. I got some old pictures too that I’ll send around.

[chuckle]

00:19: Nice to see so many people here tonight. When I came here 16 years ago, we’d usually be about five over there in the lumber yard. Kenny was there, as often as not, drunk and belligerent.

[chuckle]

00:35: And now you got twelve years sober, right?
00:40: Congratulations and... Yeah, sometimes there’d be another member drunk and between us, we could pretty much run the meeting. And there was old Tom and there was Peabody and Bruce who are both dead now. I don’t know that they died directly from alcoholism but probably the same demons that made them drink killed them somehow.

01:03: Yeah, and then Joe and Shawn showed up at some point, and came for a little while, and then they stopped showing up, and then when I called them up and said, “Why?” They’d say, “Oh, well there’s not really much recovery here.”. And, I said, “Well, then you gotta bring it.” And they did and they’ve been coming ever since, and that’s a good thing.

01:24: I don’t want to talk a whole lot about myself here, I’d rather talk about AA actually, but the way my days would go, is I would get three or four bottles of wine, or a case of beer, and go home and start drinking about 4 o’clock. Then I’d drink until two or three or four or five in the morning, however long I could stay on my feet and throw up a few times in the course of it. I’d go to bed and if I could get up early enough, after a couple hours to where I’d still be drunk, I’d be okay and maybe I could even get some food in me, and and get some work done. But if I slept in until eight or nine and the hangover set in, I was done. Maybe I’d go out and get a couple of double espresso mochas or something like that, drive by the job about noon and “I can’t make it today, I’m going to have to go home.” I forgot one thing, in the morning when I got up I would say, “Today, I’m not going to drink.”. And then by 4 o’clock, I’d say, “Tomorrow, I’m not going to drink because I really need a couple of beers tonight.”

02:30: That’s how it went for me, and I got sober a little over 30 years ago, down in Berkeley and Oakland. I went and got an “I am responsible” sign. “When anyone, anywhere reaches out for help, I want the hand of AA always to be there, and for that I’m responsible”. If I can shut up early enough to have other people talk, that’s going to be our topic.

02:56: AA works for those of us that are here tonight, and you all know somebody who came here a few times, and then we didn’t see them any more. Some of them come back every once in a while, and stay for a little while, and then we don’t see them again. There’s a lot of people who come here, and they don’t stay. Now, “The Big Book” sold 30 million copies, and there’s 2 million members in AA. We probably, each of us, have a couple of them so that accounts for about 5 million of them, right?

[laughter]

03:29: Then probably another 5 million have gone into libraries and so forth, right? So we got 20 million “Big Books” that we can’t really account for. People came in, and they were serious enough about their recovery, to where they at least got a “Big
Book”. Then they came to a couple of meetings and they didn’t show up anymore. Or somebody else gave them a “Big Book” that cared enough about them. But that’s 20 million people that are not here. I think some of those people just weren’t serious about their recovery and all, but I’m thinking that we need to do something different to see if we can’t help all those people who came and couldn’t stay.

04:18: We do a real alcoholic thing in AA. We kind of say, “It’s our way or the highway.” If you want to recover, we have some suggestions here. If you don’t want to do the suggestions, that’s okay, go back out and drink until you’re sick enough to where you come back and will do it our way. That’s not good either.

04:40: Bill was sober three years when he wrote “The Big Book”, and it was a good thing that he wrote “The Big Book” because if he hadn’t done that, I don’t think we would have been able to pull the Fellowship together the way we did. Other than that, there were eight people that were sober more than six months when he wrote “The Big Book.”, and there were another 100 men and women, it was probably more like 70 or 80 who had an average of three months.

05:07: This means that I, for instance, probably have about as much sobriety time as all those people together who put “The Big Book” together. And there’s a bunch of other people in here that do too. And, here tonight, we probably between us, have about five times as much sobriety as all those early AAs. I think that’s important because I think that maybe it’s okay if between us, we start thinking for ourselves a bit instead of just saying, “Okay, here’s “The Big Book”, read the Doctor’s Opinion.”

05:44: We do have a book here that tells us how to not drink, what to do to change our lives. Living Sober, that’s a really good one. The other books, they’re our founding documents and therefore, they do deserve some respect, but I think they should more or less be retired. I don’t know. You probably all seen Ron’s [collection of antique] washing machines, right? Beautiful, right? But don’t you [Ron] have a modern washing machine in the house? Yeah. But those machines are still beautiful, and they are still a great thing.

06:21: I think we should treat our literature the same way. Have respect for it, but we need to start doing something else. There’s hundreds of books on recovery out there and many of them are much better than the ones we have. Now of course, we all did get a lot of things right. Not only are there some brilliant passages in “The Big Book”, “More About Alcoholism”, and other passages, but he made a bunch of really important discoveries. An alcoholic will trust another alcoholic before they trust just about anybody else, their parents, their kids, their spouse, their doctor, their clergyman, whatever. Of course, we don’t trust probation officers and cops or any those guys, but we trust each other and it’s because we understand each other. Every once in a while, it comes up at home. I tell my wife, “Yeah. I used to drink three, four bottles of wine in a night.” She’s dropping her jaw, “How could you do that?” You all know I have a problem with sweets, I go buy a box of cookies and she wants to hide it, right? Because she knows I’m going to eat the whole box. “Why can’t you just have one?” because she doesn’t understand that kind of stuff, right?
Another thing Bill discovered was that, helping another alcoholic helps us stay sober, and that’s a really great thing. And we need a tribe to belong to. We have the fellowship and it’s really a great thing that we all sit here and get together tonight. I used to not belong anywhere, and that was one of the nice things when I went to AA, I could sit down and say, “I’m an alcoholic.” And I could say, “Okay, so that’s my problem. Okay, now we got it defined. Now, I’m cool.” And I’m here with all these people who are alcoholics too. I sat next to this really big guy at our second meeting and he started talking about fear. He was afraid of people and I was afraid of people and it took a long time before I got over that.

Another thing is, we do it one day at a time or an hour at a time, or five minutes at a time, whatever. If I had had to never drink again, I don’t know if I could have done that, but just taking it one day was okay.

Like Larry likes to say: After I’d been here for a few months, it wasn’t that I could never drink again, it was... I don’t ever have to drink again. And that’s a big difference. Another one is, don’t take that first drink because that’s the one that gets you drunk. That’s something you need to be around for a little bit before you understand it, because I’d always say, now the first one didn’t get me drunk, so I’m going to have to drink three or four just to get started, right?

Anyway, and the really important one is that we have to work on ourselves. It’s not just enough to quit drinking, but to work on ourselves in many ways. The Steps is one way and they can be helpful to a lot of people if you just need to sit down and be told what to do, or somebody who is religious, but there are people who it’s not that great for, in part because of all the God stuff.

The principles that really work, whether you do them in the steps or you do it some other way are honesty, open-mindedness, willingness, humility, service, and living by the golden rule, and gratitude and acceptance. Those are the real basic principles and you can build 12 steps around it or something else.

But there are problems in our program. Probably the reasons why those 20 million people aren’t here. One problem of course the God stuff, and I know that there’s religious people here, and for them it’s a great comfort to have a God and all this and that’s good with me, I’m fine with that. It’s just, there are a lot of people who don’t like it. Well, there’s about 20% agnostics or atheists in this country, so that’s not enough to explain why 90% percent of the people who come here don’t stay. There’s more, there’s more. I don’t have all the answers, but I’m not going to go on and on about the God stuff. I do enough of that for everyday purposes, right?

But there’s another thing, when Bill wrote “The Big Book”, most of the people who came and participated in AA in the early days, they were failed
businessmen, they were type A people, they were people who probably needed to have their egos taken down a peg or two, [chuckle] including Bill, right? He was an egomaniac. I think these days, it’s probably even the majority who come here with low self-esteem. We hate each other, and we hate ourselves...

[laughter]

11:37: What good is it going to do for somebody who comes in here with low self-esteem and be told that they need ego deflation. Many of us were abused as children. Some just violence and some sexually. I wasn't abused sexually but a lot of people have been, especially women. So they come to AA and we say, “So what was your part in it? I got born into the wrong family. I should have thought of that before I was born but...

[laughter]

12:12: People are downtrodden when they come in here, they don’t need ego deflation, they need empowerment, they need encouragement to blossom. We don’t have that built into AA. We really need that somehow.

12:33: Another thing I’d like to talk about a little is acceptance. That’s a really an important thing. Now, it’s not because nothing absolutely nothing happens in God’s world by mistake. That’s not the reason why I should accept everything. Now if everything in this world happens by chance, don’t I have every bit as much reason to accept it? Whether God did it, or chance did it, I had no part in it. It’s there, I have got to accept it. It doesn’t make any difference, but acceptance is the first thing if we want to change anything.

13:07: If I don’t accept my alcoholism, I’m not going to be able to change it, because I’m saying it’s not there. I have to accept it, then once I accept it, then I can ask, can it be changed? Is the effort worth the outcome? Is it just for myself or are there other people who are going to benefit from it?

13:35: I had surgery four years ago, so I went and I talked with the surgeon and I said, “Could you please do the surgery the way they did it in 1938, because that was a really great year.”

[laughter]

13:42: And so he said, “Yeah sure, you got a 5% or 10% chance.” And so I said “That’s really great odds. I’ll take it.” This is how we do it in AA. Those of us who are here, we recovered, even me who doesn’t have a god. I put up with all that stuff, and I recovered. I learned to lose my fear of people, I learned to love everybody instead of hate everybody. I’m grateful to be here, make no mistake about that, but I just think there’s a lot of things we need to do different. A 5% or 10% chance of getting sober in here, that’s not good enough. Society keeps changing and we keep doing the
same thing. The United States has grown by 30% since the early 90s and AA has decreased by 20%. That doesn’t add up very good.

14:46: AA is kind of like a bicycle with training wheels, and we don’t want to take the training wheels off. We want to keep rolling with them, we don’t want to think for ourselves. We don’t need to leave our brain at the door. I would like to see AA work for those other 20 million people. AA has worked really hard to become the only game in town, and that’s what they do at all the recovery places. They give people a Big Book and keep them there for 30 days and charge some ungodly sum and then send them back home again.

15:27: Part of the problem and why it doesn’t work, is that they go back to the same environment they came from. At least if we are in AA, we are in our regular environment all the time, and somehow or other, either we learn to stay sober in spite of it, or else it doesn’t work. But those people that go to recovery centers, that’s a rough deal, it is. In AA, we are taught that we can’t keep doing the same thing over and over and expect different results. That’s very important for us individuals and I think it’s every bit as important for our Fellowship.

16:01: If we don’t make some changes, AA is going to keep on going down and become some funny little sect that nobody goes to. That would be a real shame, we got a great Fellowship. Even if we only are 2 million out of the 30, that’s still a lot. We’re everywhere. I’ve gone to meetings in a dozen other states and a couple of other countries, and it’s everywhere. I’ve gone to a meeting in Las Vegas at 2:00 in the morning. People there were just going about their daily business.

[laughter]

16:31: That’s a place that never sleeps. It’s pretty wild. Yeah, AA has saved my life. There’s no question about it. When I walk out of here tonight, I have 2 million people walking behind me shoulder to shoulder. It doesn’t just give me courage not to drink, but to go out there and hold my head high and be part of the real world, which I couldn’t do when I was drinking, I couldn’t do it when I was young either. I was just a fuck up.

17:10: So, I just want to ask you all to join me in looking for what there may be in the way of changes we can make to this program. That would be a good thing. I want AA to be here for the next alcoholic who comes in here. Not just tomorrow and not just next year, but 50 years from now too. So that’s our topic. “When anyone anywhere reaches out for the hand of AA for help, I want the hand of AA always to be there. For that I am responsible.”

17:40: Thank you all.
Moments of Clarity

Posted on aaagnostica.org  October 21, 2018

By life-j

I’ve always loved hearing stories where people talk about their moment of clarity. That’s where recovery begins. A friend talked about how he was on a thousand mile drunken trip with a few cases of beer behind the passenger seat, and halfway to his destination he pulls over to the side of the road, slumps, and says to himself “I can’t do this anymore”, then turns around, goes home, goes to an AA meeting, and stays sober.

From blindly stumbling along my friend in that moment embarked on a path of self-reflection. There may have been rocks and boulders along the path; I can’t remember the rest of his story, but this was the beginning. My own moment of clarity was similar to this, but I’ll get back to that in a bit.

True self-reflection is at the core of recovery, whether we come to it from a sense of grandiosity or are feeling downtrodden, with a lack of self-esteem. Up until that point we’re like an 18-wheeler that has lost its brakes.

Our thoughts about ourselves are stuck. I am the way I am, and that’s fine, there’s nothing wrong with me, so get out of my way; or I can’t do anything right, nobody likes me, I’m worthless, may as well kill myself. Or anything in between: we’re stuck. For a while drinking is the only thing which seems to give any relief from
being stuck. For me alcohol was liquid courage, but eventually it only makes it worse.

But something happens in that moment of clarity.

In the Big Book, Bill Wilson quotes Carl Jung, the Swiss psychologist and psychiatrist, that only a spiritual experience can change things. And while Bill wanders off into god-land, Jung’s explanation is entirely down to earth:

*To me these occurrences are phenomena. They appear to be in the nature of huge emotional displacements and rearrangements. Ideas, emotions, and attitudes which were once guiding forces of the lives of these men are suddenly cast to one side, and a completely new set of conceptions and motives begin to dominate them.* (Big Book, p. 27)

Maybe it simply starts with the realization “I’m slowly killing myself”, or it’s like crawling down a slope and suddenly it turns into a precipice and your foot slips. Whoa! That was close. Or narrowly escaping a serious traffic collision. Remember that rush of adrenaline, and what to do with it afterwards. Just stand there shaking. It can be like all of this, and yet different.

But what is it that really happens in that moment of clarity? For some of us it changes our lives forever, for others it is a fleeting glimpse that is soon lost. Well, I’d like to suggest that we start collecting stories which focus on that moment. Maybe if we put them together in a book it can help us see a pattern.

Here’s mine:

I’d been drinking every night for quite some time, had a three week around the clock binge in the middle of it, when I was working for some people I really liked, doing some repairs to their house. I had some back problems, and since the husband was an orthopedist I asked him if he would mind having a look at my back. So at the end of the day he asked me into the living room and sat me down, and asked point blank if I had ever drank too much. I hadn’t really expected that, and since of course everybody at some point had drank too much, and while I was sitting there mulling it over, he asked me if I had ever been wasted for weeks on end.

Now to *that* I confidently answered no right away. It didn’t really register that he probably asked because I was obviously right in the middle of it. So he said okay, let’s have a look at that back. And he didn’t find anything obvious, but decided to send me down to Highland Hospital to have it checked out. So first thing the doctor there asked me was “have you ever been drinking too much?” Of course by then I had gotten wise to it, and could answer no right away.
But the whole thing got me thinking. Mostly because these were really nice people. I had worked for them off and on for a number of years. They were unusually nice people, both of them, I had a lot of respect for them in a way that reached to my core, and my drinking was never the same again, though for starters it got worse. I drank with a vengeance every night, but I really wanted to quit, or at least take a break, so every morning I would tell myself that tonight I’m not going to drink.

Well, by 4 o’clock I’d say “tomorrow I’m not going to drink, I just really need a couple of beers tonight to relax”. Twelve hours and a case later I’d hold my bed still long enough to lay down in it. And it didn’t register when I got up that I was telling myself exactly what I had said many mornings before, and would keep telling myself for another four or five months. This was the time of incomprehensible demoralization, as Bill calls it.

I’m coming to, I don’t know whether I am awake yet, or still dreaming. I get to see my life ahead of me.

My material life was still remarkably together, I still had my house, my truck, most of my friends I’d see occasionally, several of my customers had hung on, but it was about to change. The last three weeks I had stayed home, building a dollhouse for my girlfriend’s little daughter, drinking around the clock. The dollhouse actually came out very nice except it was half the size of a good size refrigerator, and I can’t imagine what they did with the damn thing after I was out of their lives, but I couldn’t deal with people anymore. This was the point, I guess where many lock themselves up and drink themselves to death, slowly, or quicker than they had imagined, as the case may be.

So, I’m coming to, and I see where it’s going. Pretty soon I’m going to get my house foreclosed on, I’ll probably get some money out of it, go rent an apartment, drink up the money, stay until I get evicted, move into a friend’s basement, stay there until they get tired of my ass and throw me out, and then I’ll be out in the street, sleep where I can, and be up and in front of the liquor store at ten to six with the rest of Y’ all.

I don’t even think the prospect of it in itself scared me all that much. It was the clarity of the vision. I never knew whether it was a split second or whether I lay there for a half hour, but it was as clear as if I was living through it, and it scared me stark raving sober. I groped around for a calendar, eventually figured out which day it was and circled it. I had quit.
I did have one beer a couple of months later. I was taking a lady out to dinner. What went through my head? I had quit. I don’t know. I’m never going to get laid if I sit here all tongue-tied, or something like that, maybe. A beer will help. I’m lucky, it was all I had. Those last couple of months I really hadn’t missed it all that much. Just the absence of the atrocious hangovers coupled with the slowly lifting fog had been enough to make life worth living. But this one beer set off a craving like I had never experienced before, since I had never let anything get in the way of my drinking. But after I dropped the lady off at her house, no I didn’t get laid anyway, I remembered that I had quit drinking. All the next day, and half the day after that it was all I could do to hang on. I pulled through, and a couple of months later, when I started entertaining the idea of a beer again I realized I’d better get myself some help. So I went to an AA meeting. It was a Wednesday at noon. But that beer was the best beer I ever had. It was the one that allowed me to experience a craving I had never known. It let me know that I was indeed addicted to alcohol.

Looking back, what happened? All I know is that at that moment I had the clarity and strength to stop. A gamma ray made it through the earth’s magnetic field and hit my brain in just the right spot? Only a slightly better explanation than that god did it. But maybe if we put our stories together we will see a pattern and understand more than we do now. Maybe we could put a book of stories together and I think it may be the sort of book which could be quite helpful to newcomers, too. So bring ‘em on.
As Bill Also Sees It

by life-j November 07, 2018

By life-j

A few of Bill’s thoughts on inclusiveness and widening the gateway.
All AA approved 😊

Our membership ought to include all who suffer from alcoholism. Hence, we may refuse none who wish to recover. Nor ought A.A. membership ever depend upon money or conformity. 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 3, long form

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 immoral, 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!

_Anarchy Melts July 1946, Grapevine_

Others refuse to accept all the Twelve Steps of the recovery program. Some go still further, saying that the “God business” is bunk and quite unnecessary. Under these conditions our conservative program–abiding members get scared. These appalling conditions must be controlled, they think, else A.A. will surely go to rack and ruin. They view with alarm for the good of the movement!

At this point the group enters the rule and regulation phase. Charters, bylaws and membership rules are excitedly passed, and authority is granted committees to filter out undesirables and discipline the evildoers. Then the Group Elders, now clothed with Who Is a Member of Alcoholics Anonymous? authority, commence to get busy. Recalcitrants are cast into the outer darkness; respectable busybodies throw stones at the sinners. As for the so-called sinners, they either insist on staying around, or else they form a new group of their own. Or maybe they join a more congenial and less intolerant crowd in their neighborhood. The elders soon discover that the rules and regulations aren’t working very well. Most attempts at enforcement generate such waves of dissension and intolerance in the group that this condition is presently recognized to be worse for the group life than the very worst that the worst ever did.

Those who slip, those who panhandle, those who scandalize, those with mental twists, those who rebel at the program, those who trade on the A.A. reputation–all such persons seldom harm an A.A. group for long. Some of these have become our most respected and best loved. Some have remained to try our patience, sober nevertheless. Others have drifted away. We have begun to regard these not as menaces, but rather as our teachers. They oblige us to cultivate patience, tolerance, and humility. We finally see that they are only people sicker than the rest of us, that we who condemn them are the Pharisees whose false righteousness does our group the deeper spiritual damage.

_Who is a member of Alcoholics Anonymous? August 1947, Grapevine_

Though three hundred thousand did recover in the last twenty-five years, maybe half a million more have walked into our midst, and then out again. No doubt some were too sick to make even a start. Others couldn’t or wouldn’t admit their alcoholism. Still others couldn’t face up to their underlying personality defects. Numbers departed for still other reasons.

Yet we can’t well content ourselves with the view that all these recovery failures were entirely the fault of the newcomers themselves. Perhaps a great many didn’t receive the kind and amount of sponsorship they so sorely needed. We didn’t communicate when we might have done so. So, we AAs failed them. Perhaps more often than we think, we still make no contact at depth with those suffering the dilemma of no faith.
Certainly, none are more sensitive to spiritual cocksureness, pride and aggression than they are. I'm sure this is something we too often forget. In AA’s first years I all but ruined the whole undertaking with this sort of unconscious arrogance. God as I understood Him had to be for everybody. Sometimes my aggression was subtle and sometimes it was crude. But either way it was damaging – perhaps fatally so – to numbers of non-believers. 

Then, for the first time, it burst in upon me how very dead faith can be – when minus responsibility. The doctor had an unwavering belief in his ideals. But he also practiced humility, wisdom and responsibility. Hence his superb demonstration. My own spiritual awakening had given me a built-in faith in God – a gift indeed. But I had been neither humble nor wise. Boasting of my faith, I had forgotten my ideals. Pride and irresponsibility had taken their place. By so cutting off my own light, I had little to offer my fellow alcoholics. At last I saw why many had gone away – some of them forever.

*The Dilemma of No Faith AA Grapevine, April 1961*

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.

* Tradition Four, Grapevine March 1948*

As time passes, our book literature has a tendency to get more and more frozen, a tendency for conversion into something like Dogma, a human trait I am afraid we can do little about. We may as well face the fact that A.A. will always have its fundamentalists, its absolutists and its relativists.”

*February 6, 1961 letter*

To some of us, the idea of substituting “good” for “God” in the Twelve Steps will seem like a watering down of A.A.’s message. But here we must remember that A.A.’s Steps are suggestions only. A belief in them, as they stand, is not at all a requirement for membership among us. This liberty has made A.A. available to thousands who never would have tried at all, had we insisted on the Twelve Steps just as written.

*1957, Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age, p 81*

Moreover, all people should have the right to voice their convictions. This is good principle and good dogma. But dogma also has its liabilities. Simply because we have convictions that work well for us, it becomes very easy to assume that we have all the truth. Whenever this brand of arrogance develops, we are certain to become aggressive; we demand agreement with us; we play God. This isn’t good dogma; it’s very bad dogma. It could be especially destructive for us of AA to indulge in this sort of thing.

Newcomers are approaching AA at the rate of tens of thousands yearly. They represent almost every belief and attitude imaginable. We have atheists and agnostics. We have people of nearly every race, culture and religion. In AA we are supposed to be bound together in the kinship of a common suffering. Consequently, the full individual liberty to practice any creed or principle or therapy whatever should be a first consideration for us all. Let us not, therefore, pressure anyone with
our individual or even our collective views. Let us instead accord each other the respect and love that is due to every human being as he tries to make his way toward the light. Let us always try to be inclusive rather than exclusive; let us remember that each alcoholic among us is a member of AA, so long as he or she so declares.

AA Grapevine, July 1965, Responsibility Is Our Theme

This was the great contribution of our atheists and agnostics. They had widened our gateway so that all who suffer might pass through, regardless of their belief or lack of belief.

Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age, 1961

Bill Wilson Comes of Age:
It would seem that it is a basic principle – that when a person expresses their thoughts, and then later expresses other thoughts that to some degree contradict the earlier thoughts – 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 thoughts, in some cases considerably more. Bill Wilson wrote the Big Book with 3 years of sobriety. When therefore he kept writing all through his later years we ought to pay special attention to that.

This compilation was originally made as a regular three panel pamphlet. For a printable PDF copy of this and other pamphlets, please e-mail lifej@mcn.org

All material herein © Alcoholics Anonymous®, or AA Grapevine®, according to the indicated source, and reprinted by permission.

A couple of other quotes have since been provided by other members:

The first sentence of Tradition 4 guarantees each A.A. group local autonomy. With respect to its own affairs, the group may make any decisions, adopt any attitudes that it likes. No over-all 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. For example, an A.A. group could, if it wished, hire a paid preacher and support him out of the proceeds of a group night club. Though such an absurd procedure would be miles outside our tradition, the group’s “right to be wrong” would be held inviolate. We are sure that each group can be granted, and safely granted, these most extreme privileges. We know that our familiar process of trial and error would summarily eliminate both the preacher and the night club. Those severe growing pains which invariably follow any radical departure from A.A. tradition can be absolutely relied upon to bring an erring group
back into line. An A.A. group need not be coerced by any human government over and above its own members. Their own experience, plus A.A. opinion in surrounding groups, plus God’s prompting in their group conscience would be sufficient. Much travail has already taught us this. Hence we may confidently say to each group, “You should be responsible to no other authority than your own conscience.”

*AA Grapevine, March 1948*

Most of [young people’s] difficulties have arisen from the fact that the more desperate cases in A.A. often patronize them, saying ‘You aren’t an alcoholic.’ Actually I had intended this part of the book to offset that sort of thing [...] In this connection, there is another difficulty. My writings, after they have aged a bit, tend to get frozen, so that any change always produces the dickens of an uproar.

*1962 letter to Ken C. of the Young People’s Group in Halifax, Nova Scotia*
It has probably happened to most of us during the times when we hadn’t put our lives back together yet, or back in our drinking days, that we’d be nursing an old vehicle along and there would be days we’d say, “Dear god, please let it start”. And that’s about as religious as most of us got about automobile maintenance. I had this old van and I did a lot of work on it during the 20 years I had it. But I never once saw in the manuals, “You can’t fix your truck without god’s help, so before adjusting the valves pray to god for guidance, and after you have completed the task give thanks for god’s help fixing your truck.”

I imagine even the most devout Christian would think that an automobile manual which includes prayer should hardly be relied on. We want plain common-sense instructions.

So why do we have to get a god involved in our recovery?
Don’t get me wrong: Anyone who is of a religious mindset, if they feel a need or an inclination for a god in their life, and thus also in their recovery, that’s fine by me. It’s not my business to tell them what to do or not do, or what to believe. Let them do with their program what they want. I’m only talking about my program and about our program – the one we work together. The stuff we read, and how we talk to each other.

I cannot see why the rest of us should be admonished to get a god involved.

Bill Wilson and his early recovery comrades attended the Oxford Group, a decidedly evangelical Christian group which wasn’t even so much focused on reforming drunks as on general salvation. Surely that influenced Bill’s thinking a great deal.

Then, when he wrote the Big Book, he and Bob were three years sober. Jim Burwell tells that there were altogether only eight people with more than six months sobriety when they published it. Of those first 100 people the book talks about, the majority only had a couple of months, and many relapsed. One of the 20 people whose story appeared in the back relapsed before the book came out. Six of them at some point later committed suicide (1). I’d say they didn’t have a lot to show when they wrote the Big Book. But Bill was a salesman and had great plans for his fellowship: he was going to make a movement, and he needed to have a book to do that, and he needed it right away. So, he wrote it at three years sober when he really didn’t know much about alcoholism yet and didn’t have much in the way of facts to back up his claims.

I wish he could at least have kept it simple, instead of making this big, complicated god focused program.

Bill Wilson and Hank Parkhurst were salesmen. I imagine these guys as telling half-truths, exaggerations, embellishments and the occasional outright lie to their clients, and then having to go drink to forget about it. Salesmanship is about making a sale. And while there are many honest salesmen who want their clients to be happy, it would be odd if these guys belonged to that category, when you
consider how much they talked about making amends. And all their salesmanship and half-truths carried over into the big book.

I can see why Bill invoked a god – it lent some weight and authority to his book. I do believe that Bill really had those religious visions (by which I’m not saying that he indeed did make contact with a god – or that he didn’t) and he was probably honest about that part.

I of course also concede that he did have some great ideas. Whether they were indeed his own, or whether he just managed to pull some of the right things together from various other sources, I don’t think we need to be overly concerned about. I wish he could have kept it simple, but obviously he had discovered some principles that worked:

- An alcoholic will trust another alcoholic more than they will trust just about anyone else, and so as alcoholics we’re in a unique position to help each other in recovery.
- Helping other alcoholics is one of the best ways to increase our own chances of staying sober ourselves.
- Most of us need a tribe to belong to, and we greatly increase our chance of staying sober by going to meetings and by associating with other recovering alcoholics.
- If the tribe is defined in such a manner that we are made to feel that we belong, then most of us will indeed feel that we belong, and we are more likely to stay.
- Don’t take that first drink, that’s the one that leads to a drunk.
- For most of us it is not enough to merely stop drinking. We need to make some real changes in our lives. It also helps our recovery if we can contribute to making this a better world, especially for alcoholics and their kin. Having a plan or a program of some sort can make it much easier to do. But however we do it, our recovery will most likely include working with such general principles as honesty, open-mindedness, willingness, humility, service, living by the golden rule, acceptance, and living one day at a time.
- Take it one day at a time, one hour at a time, even 5 minutes at a time if that’s all you can do. You can postpone that drink 5 minutes, or the argument, or whatever other stupid shit you’re thinking about getting yourself into.
- Doing the right thing helps keep you sober, because you will have no reason to feel bad about yourself. At least you won’t be adding to the reasons for feeling bad that you showed up here with, and even those will slowly fade away if you keep working on really changing your life.

Our program really did not need to be much more complicated than that.

Of course, it helps many of us to have a program with specific instructions on what to do. The steps work quite well for many people, especially those who seem to come in wanting to be told what to do, and who are of a religious frame of mind.
It works poorly for many who come in in a rebellious frame of mind, but even many of those will eventually adopt the steps.

But having a mind of your own is not a character defect to be belittled as Bill Wilson did it in the Big Book. Especially when it comes to the religious aspect of the program.

We have to say to Bill’s credit that as his sobriety matured he did a lot to moderate his earlier stance. Here are a couple of things he said later:

*In AA’s first years I all but ruined the whole undertaking with this sort of unconscious arrogance. God as I understood Him had to be for everybody. Sometimes my aggression was subtle and sometimes it was crude. But either way it was damaging – perhaps fatally so – to numbers of non-believers.* (The Dilemma of No Faith AA Grapevine, April 1961)

Agnostics, atheists and freethinkers can in most cases no more be convinced to change their ways than anyone else that the fundamentalists pass judgment on and try to make change. We seem to have been born that way, with a skeptical mind. “Once you see it, you can’t unsee it.”

And while most of us are rather average human beings just like most of the religious crowd, it is among the sceptics that we find those who will step forward and change the world for the better. Nothing in this world ever changed for the better by people placidly going along. Throughout history there are many examples of how going along made the world change for the worse.

Let us encourage diversity! Encourage dissent! And always encourage respect and love for one another.

Even though Dr. Bob said he felt sorry for me, I still like at least one thing he said:

*“Let’s keep it simple.”*

---

(1) These facts are from the following sources:

Talk by Jim Burwell 1957: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZzZYvaLy52o](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZzZYvaLy52o)

Most of his talk is about putting the Big Book together.

Silkworth.net: [http://silkworth.net/timelines/timelines_public/appendix1.html](http://silkworth.net/timelines/timelines_public/appendix1.html)

This article was originally written as a pamphlet. To obtain a printable PDF of this and other pamphlets, please e-mail lifej@mcn.org
Fix Broken Self-esteem with Ego Deflation? Huh?

by life-j November 18, 2018

*By life-j and co-authored by Beth H.*

I was lucky to be able to attend the 3rd ICSAA convention, and one workshop in particular stood out. Halfway through it I broke down sobbing. That’s how close to home it struck. It was called, “Reframing the steps for people on the flip-side of Bill’s controlling, ego-maniac personality” and given by Beth H. You can hear it here: Sounds like a cranky and obsessive title, doesn’t it? Well it covers a big, but little-addressed problem. I did touch upon some of the same issues a while back in my own article *Don’t Fix It if It Ain’t Broke*, but this workshop went way deeper. I asked Beth if I could use her workshop notes as basis for this article, and so, while much of this is my own writing, there are some parts where I have re-written her notes to better reflect my personal journey, and other parts where I have used her notes directly. I’m grateful to Beth for allowing me to use them.
Bill Wilson was about three years sober when he wrote the Big Book, and while his thinking evolved over the years, much of his early writing strongly bears the mark of a three years sober guy. All alcoholics, he assumed, were just like him: white, male, Christian, well-educated, (formerly) wealthy, egotistical, power driven, and with a Type A personality.

While there are some alcoholics today, who fit this mold, many do not, even among the men. Many are of an entirely different type. I think they could even be the majority of those who at one time or another walk through our doors. Bill did suffer from depression, but other than that you get the feeling he had mostly been on top of things, way on top, and he worked hard to stay there. But many of us came to AA downtrodden, abused as children, sexually or otherwise. And while it can often be helpful to just put it all behind us, and focus on what we can do right now to change things, in many cases the AA approach is not helpful. Many of the messages we get in AA working the program are awfully similar to the destructive messages we got during our upbringings and in the abusive relationships we later sought because they were familiar to us: You’ve committed wrongs, you are defective, what was your part in it? You need ego deflation.

Our egos were already flattened many years before we got to AA, if we even ever had any. And while we have surely all committed wrongs during our drinking days, our wrongs were often just incidental acts while trying to navigate a world which we felt we had no real right to be in. We lived out of guilt, shame, and inferiority complexes; we second-guessed everything and everybody out of an all-pervasive fear. Maybe Bill
had been trying to play God, but for us that was the farthest thing from what we were capable of. So when we got to AA and got to hear all the AA messages which sounded all too much like what we had heard all our lives up until then, whether from the people around us, or from our own committee in our heads, all it did was make us feel even worse about ourselves. All we wanted to do was to run, and many of us did, and died an alcoholic death. Some of us stayed because our lives had gotten so bad that it seemed worse to continue living the way we did than to knuckle under, and have AA, too, tell us we were no good.

Yes, that’s how it felt, and while many of us stayed because we had nowhere else to turn, and many of us indeed found help, love and companionship in AA, our recovery was often *more in spite of “the program” than because of it*. Our recovery was slow, because everything about the program’s Type-A approach felt wrong to us, and it was only the love from some of the other members that sustained us. So because of elements of the program, here I am after 30 years still struggling with many things which it seems I ought to have been able to resolve years ago. Countless others who had been more damaged than us could not stay. They were the ones whom the program totally failed. We strongly believe it was mostly not their own fault, and we who stayed are now asking our fellow members to have an honest look at how the program can be hurtful, and recognize the need for the program to not only be designed for ego-maniac personalities like Bill’s, but also for those who sustained a lot of harm in their lives. We still need One Big Tent, but it needs to be way bigger than what Bill could envision with three years sober. The God stuff does chase many people off, and that is finally being recognized, but we think this is a much bigger problem yet, and it urgently needs to be addressed. We can call it by many different names. When I call us the downtrodden, this indicates that the problem lies outside ourselves, harm was done to us, and while I do believe this to often be true in a socio-political sense, I recognize that at this point in our lives, having been running from the problems with the help of alcohol, all we can do now is to take responsibility for making changes in our own lives that get rid of all the twisted survival skills we acquired early on, and which in most cases have not served us at all well for many, many years. We have to accept the world as it is, our upbringing as it was, and learn to take charge of our lives from here on. And we need empowerment to do this, not a god or yet some other external authority figure or dogma to submit to. We have lived a life of shame and low self-esteem. Some of us did put together a twisted ego of sorts with the questionable help of alcohol, so we may relate somewhat to both sides of the following table, which shows some of the differences between ego-maniac tendencies, and a shame-based life.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Egomaniac tendencies</th>
<th>Shame-based tendencies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sense of entitlement, the world’s their oyster</td>
<td>Feel unworthy, undeserving, leave the good stuff for someone else</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feel superior to others</td>
<td>Feel inferior to others, defective, unlovable. Not guilt (something I did) but shame (who I am)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seek praise from others to validate inflated sense of self: “I’d prove to the world I was important.” (Bill’s Story)</td>
<td>Avoid attention by fitting in, for fear of being found out (as defective)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can’t handle criticism, or erroneously perceive criticism, because everything is about them</td>
<td>Can’t handle praise because undeserved; can’t handle criticism because too painful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack empathy, use other people as supporting cast where they are the star</td>
<td>Very in tune with other people’s feelings but not their own; try to control how others feel towards them to makeup for hole inside (use esteem of others as a substitute for self-esteem)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Create the egomaniac false self to avoid conscious or unconscious feelings of inferiority</td>
<td>Create false personas that look good on the outside to prevent others from seeing the (believed) ugliness within</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavior is driven by the largely unconscious defense mechanism of “I’m the best” to avoid feeling “I’m the worst.”</td>
<td>Behavior is driven largely by internalized feelings of shame, being unworthy, defective, unlovable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t care what most people think. Think they know better. Play God.</td>
<td>Care way too much about what anyone might think. Hypervigilant to avoid being blind-sided (complex PTSD). Treat others like they are God in the sense that others have the power to determine our worth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t ask for help because they think they don’t need it; it would be an admission of weakness.</td>
<td>Don’t ask for help because they don’t want to bother anyone, feel they don’t deserve it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Always want more – driven by need to succeed, to top others, anything that feeds the ego</td>
<td>Never feel like they’ve done enough (or are enough)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Always have to be right. Unable to see the world from other people’s point of view. Differences of opinion are seen as right/wrong, and theirs is right.

Point of view depends on whose approval is needed at the moment. Lack a solid sense of self. Do a lot of second-guessing of themselves, their thoughts, feelings, opinions. Chameleon.

Don’t respect authority

Need approval from authority, or will rebel against authority, but may need alcohol and/or drugs to pull it off.

So this does not exactly make the Big Book wrong. It does work to a large degree for the egomaniacs it was made for – it just makes it horrendously incomplete.

When I’m asked to “look at my part in it,” all it reminds me of is my dad terrorizing me to confess to whatever infraction he had discovered. And it makes it way too easy for me to get stuck on who in my past I can blame for the problems in my present, something which doesn’t serve me at all.

There can be some value in looking at all these traumatic events of course, but it is unsafe dealing with them in a peer support system which primarily focuses on where we were wrong. It might be better with the help of a trained professional, but many of us came to AA because we couldn’t afford such help. The way we are admonished to approach these traumatic events in AA, is to look more at our own faults. We have lived a shame-based life where we were all too prone to looking at our own faults. True, we did it in an unproductive, going-in-circles way, characterized by self-centered fear, but the AA program just plows through it all much like a construction company building a subway would plow through an archaeological site before there were laws against it.

While the ego-maniac members of AA come in with guilt for things they have done, we come in with shame for things we think we have done.
Years of abuse well to the surface when we are told to:

- Take the cotton out of your ears & put it in your mouth.
- Quit playing God.
- It’s your pride & ego that keeps you from believing in God
- You’re looking at the problem.
- Let’s talk about your defects
- You have the same big ego, only you feel special because you think you’re worse than everyone else.

This triggers shame responses so that we aren’t listening anymore or we get defensive. Our response to AA’s attack on our supposed big egos is to try to salvage that little bitty sense of self we may still have, a little flickering flame. We go hide in that place out behind the wood shed where no-one can find us. We hide there as long as we can, until it gets late and we have to go face the inevitable beating. AA? Nah, we aren’t coming back.

So, a gentler approach to recovery is needed. We need to build self-esteem, not have our egos taken down. We need positive affirmation. Rather than a list of defects of character – we already have a list a mile long – or a list of people we have harmed – we have already harmed the whole world by our very existence – we need to make a list of the critical things we say to ourselves, and make a list of affirmative statements to counteract it.

We need to treat ourselves to things other people do, but we normally wouldn’t – nice things, maybe even self-indulgent things such as spending money on frivolous stuff if we are realistically able to do so, and take time for ourselves, which we would too willingly give to others. It’s a long road, every step of the way we will tell ourselves we aren’t worth it, but we need to keep doing it, until those voices subside.

And while the egomaniac personality needs to pick up the phone and call someone to remind themselves that they can’t, and never really could, do it alone, we need to do it to remind ourselves that we no longer have to try to make it alone anymore. People are willing to help, even if it is hard for us to believe it. Big difference. We need to call to find out that the person we’re calling really isn’t bothered by our call. That we, too, are allowed to ask for help.

We need to give ourselves pats on the back for big and little accomplishments and decisions – another day sober, picked up the phone, trying to change our lives. We need to start learning to treat ourselves as well as we would treat a friend. Bill Wilson admonishes us to be hard on ourselves, easy on others. We already are.

Compare what we’d say to a friend to what we say to ourselves:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What I’d say to a friend in this situation</th>
<th>What I say to myself</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sounds like you’re going through a really tough time. Take it easy on yourself</td>
<td>You brought this on yourself, you deserve it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It’s not your fault, there are many factors beyond your control.</td>
<td>You suck. You can’t handle anything. Why do you bother to get up in the morning?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You look fine. No one pays any attention to the little things we focus on about ourselves.</td>
<td>Everyone is staring at you because of your glaring imperfections. You shouldn’t go out in public.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Came in second? That’s fantastic, congratulations!</td>
<td>LOSER!!! What a wasted effort.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Another job will come along, your friends and family will stand by you</td>
<td>You’re unemployable. Don’t let anyone know you’re out of work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Everyone’s kids have problems. I’m sure you’ll work this out.</td>
<td>You’re a complete failure as a parent. Why don’t you off yourself and maybe they’ll get someone better.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It’s okay to cry. I’ll listen and be there for you.</td>
<td>Stop crying. You look even uglier with your face all contorted like that.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

My upbringing for the most part was about what other people think. This was how my parents operated. They were more concerned with what other people would think about me, and, by reflection, about them, than about my well-being. They did not want to have to be ashamed of me, and they let me know, directly, that I was to not be an embarrassment to them. My comfort, well-being, identity, happiness, my development into a functioning human being was subordinate to all that. This generalized “other people” ran our lives. Some of us rebelled. I did so myself. Rebel or else submit. It was the only way out, since I did not want to live my life based on what other people might be thinking. That I still in a round-about way, by rebelling, wound up living my life based on what other people were thinking did not register with me at the age of 16. I started drinking and smoking pot, growing long hair, and constantly battling with my parents about how long my hair should be. Wearing work clothes instead of something nice.

Rebellion gave me an identity to replace what I had beaten out of me. The trouble, of course, is when to give up the rebellion. Normal people with a normal upbringing give it up by 20. I held on. It became so much a part of my life that without it I would again no longer have an identity. And while I have slowly given up most of the
rebellion, I still don’t feel comfortable in “normal” clothes. I am distinctly uncomfortable in “nice” clothes, not just a pinstriped suit, but even “normal nice.” If I have nice clothes on I have to be careful to not get them dirty, and it triggers the same PTSD discomfort I felt when I was forced to wear the “nice” clothes my mother had picked out for me as a kid, even in middle school, even into high school. So now I seem stuck wearing Walmart sweats, so I don’t have to deal with it. It’s a way of rejecting those parts of society where I might ever again be compelled to wear nice clothes, and have to feel inferior. I isolate myself first, so you don’t do it. Does it serve me? Of course not.

My dad died 6-7 years ago. And I have to confess I’m glad he did. Since then my mom and I have actually been able to become friends. She, too, after passing 80, has blossomed some, not having to work my dad’s agenda. But the generalized “other people” has been a spectre hovering over our family most of my life.

Let me relate a little story – this happened when I was about 55 years old, well into adulthood, one might suppose? My parents lived in Denmark, so I would only visit them about once every three years, for about three weeks each visit.

So one day – I had been there perhaps a week for the first time in 3 years – my parents set me down: “We didn’t sleep last night,” my mother says. [emphasis pause]
“Finally about 4 am your dad said to me – if you die first, do you want me to wait until after the funeral before I tell him?”

[emphasis pause]

My mother continues, “We cannot – WE CAN NOT – handle this. Yesterday afternoon when your dad took you to the bank, he was SO embarrassed that your overalls were not hemmed up. If you are going to keep visiting us, you HAVE to have some decent clothes on. What aren’t other people thinking?”

My dad was an orphan. I have had a lot of work to do on forgiving him. He didn’t deserve the cards he was dealt any more than I did. Frankly his hand was way worse than mine. But knowing that didn’t really make mine better, though in the long run it did give me some empathy for him.

Finally, being able to forgive has been way more important to me than looking at my character defects. Forgiving is an act, and a state of mind and being that is empowering. “I” have the power to forgive. By doing so I’m building the magnanimous person I should have been all along.

So to use the steps as “suggested” works rather poorly in many respects. We have to change the negative self-talk, and while they still are going to make us look at some parts of ourselves we’re not proud of, we need to take stock of what we DO have to be proud of FIRST, so we don’t lose sight of it.

So here are some thoughts on how the steps miss the mark for those who came into AA feeling downtrodden, and some of what it may take to make them work better:

1. Powerlessness & unmanageability – not just alcohol but other people. We try to control how people relate to us by second-guessing the world, and we feel responsible for things we can’t control. Life was unmanageable long before we started drinking. I need to begin to straighten out what’s mine to do and what is not mine. We need to look at the power we do have – to set our own standards, not let others determine our worth, not take responsibility for things we can’t control. The power we must give up, paradoxically, is the power we don’t actually have. Then we can aim to become more empowered, not less.

2. I need resources beyond my own, mostly I need some new input – books, doctors, AA. I know how to be responsible and self-sufficient, I don’t know how to be emotional, social, or interdependent, accept help. AA meetings and AA people are a great place to try out new behavior, check whether a long-held assumption is actually true, see if people are really thinking what I think they’re thinking. Find a group that will love me until I learn to love myself.
3. I make a decision to be in recovery – not to turn my life over to yet something else outside myself. Besides being abstinent I need to feel my feelings, pay conscious attention to my life and take corrective actions where needed. If I don’t pay attention, I revert to old habits. It requires conscious effort to change ingrained undesired thoughts and behaviors.

4. We don’t need to be hard on ourselves and easy on others. We need to be honest about ourselves and others. My behaviors and beliefs when I was a child – when different than thoughts and feelings I was told to have – were met with consequences (usually further shaming). I do not have defects of character, I have survival mechanisms learned as a child which no longer serve me, and I need help to get rid of them. They were an unfortunate necessity with lasting effects. My part in it? None as a child. But as an adult, it is my responsibility to stop doing what I learned to do, and treat myself better. Once I let go of my unhealthy survival mechanisms I will develop better skills in my relations with those around me.

5. Get rid of secrets – shame is about fear of being known (or found out and found defective). Once our secrets are exposed we find we really aren’t so bad.

6. Don’t use the word defects – it triggers a shame response. Call them survival skills – don’t feel, don’t trust, don’t talk, don’t think well of yourself, don’t do anything unless you’re the best, etc. They just don’t serve us any more, we’re no longer in the same environment, though we may behave as if we were.

Some undesirable behaviors that stem from shame:
- Judgmental of others who don’t live up to our very high shame-based standards
- Putting others down to feel better about ourselves
- Questioning people’s motives when they’re nice, generous, or complimentary
- The “I reject you first defense” – contempt for people and groups that we believe would never accept us
- Self-deprecating talk so no one can hurt us because we already know
- Rage because we feel threatened even when we may not be.

7. Thank our low self-esteem and its many offshoots for getting us through our difficult childhoods. Tell them we appreciate what they did for us, but we don’t need them anymore. We are adults and can choose who we want to be, set our own standards, not live in fear because we are not dependent on unhealthy people anymore. Yes, change the behaviors, but don’t fault ourselves for having them or feel that there’s some bad part of us that has to be removed.

8. List not only persons we had harmed – including ourselves, but also people who have harmed us, whom we hold resentments against or are still afraid of.
9. Make living amends to ourselves as well as to others – for the rest of our lives.
   • Continue all the esteem-building work we did before beginning the steps
   • Apologize out loud for critical thoughts – I'm sorry, I should not have criticized you like that. You didn't deserve it. You're just being human.
   • Look over our past accomplishments – graduations, promotions, events, whatever. Take a minute or several to feel proud and acknowledge it instead of dismissing it as nothing. (What would we have said to someone else?)
   • Look in the mirror and say something nice every day.
   • Wreckage of past – do the things we denied ourselves. Maybe back to school, career change, mend broken relationships, more attention to our health
   • Say no when asked to do something we really don’t want to do – we make our own choices and accept the consequences
   • Take better care of ourselves physically, emotionally, socially (stay connected!)
   • Stand up for ourselves when we don’t want to be a part of something. Need to make waves, rock the boat sometimes for our own integrity.
   • Learn to forgive, and do it, magnanimously. Not for our perpetrators’ sake, but for ourselves.

10. Inventory
    • What did I do right today? Pat on the back, give myself credit
    • What did I do better than I used to do – credit for progress, perfection not required
    • What underlying thinking or feelings motivated the behaviors I didn’t like? Try to make the unconscious conscious so I can work on it.
    • Challenge my thinking – when I judge whatever I did as not enough – enough for what? For who? Some fictitious, unidentified “what people think” that is really just me projecting my old shame-based standards?
    • Learn about defense mechanisms – deny, minimize, rationalize, intellectualize, project, justify, etc. Their purpose is to protect us from things we can't face, but now I want to face them rather than continue to act them out. When I’m doing one of these – Why am I being defensive? In what way do I feel threatened? (an ad hoc step 4 – how does it affect me?) Is it a realistic fear? Does it really threaten my self-esteem or only how I think I may look to others? Self-esteem comes from within.

11. Take time to be at peace with ourselves. Know that we belong, we’re just like other people – frustrating and glorious, imperfect and magnificent. OK to have a quiet mind and just be.

12. Personality change sufficient to overcome alcoholism – when I don’t live in constant pain and fear, I don't need to self-medicate. When I express instead of
stuffing my feelings, I don’t need alcohol to numb me. When I’m not painfully self-conscious, I don’t need to take the edge off. When I acknowledge that I have a place here, I don’t need to be self-destructive.
When I work with others – I get to see my own progress. It is a joy to watch others begin to claim their power and take back their lives. My past is useful to others like me.

I didn’t have a god-sized hole. I had a me-sized hole. Now, bit by bit, I’m finally becoming full of myself instead of being full of everyone and everything else.
Some Thoughts About

AA in the 21st Century

by life-j  December 02, 2018

By life-j  - written September 2016

A couple of days ago it was two years since I had my big surgery. I had cancer, and they took two thirds of my liver out. When the doctor came in I asked him: “Could you please do the surgery exactly the way they did it in 1939?”

Right – I really did, right?

No. Would you jeopardize your life like that? So why would you do that with recovery where your life is equally on the line, even if perhaps not quite so urgently for some of us?

Bill Wilson was three years sober when he wrote the Big Book. Let me be perfectly clear: For someone who didn’t already have a big fellowship to lean on, and for being three years sober in 1938 he did good. Let’s just give him all the credit we can: He did amazingly good.
But he was three years sober.

The Emperor’s New Clothes: “But he has nothing On!”

If you who are reading this are three years sober – congratulations! Those first three years in many ways are a bigger achievement for you, and for us, than the next 25 years were for me, who is 28 years sober. On the other hand – those of us who have been sober for well over a decade, when we look back, one of the first things that come to mind is probably “Yeah, when I was three years sober I thought I knew everything!”

And so, it was with Bill Wilson.

Though when he wrote the Big Book he was able to be humble enough to write, “We realize we know only a little.” Only later was he to realize how little he had indeed known. But he had set a fellowship in motion which had taken on a life of its own. By 1955 there were perhaps 150,000 members, many of whom would cling to every word in the Big Book, and he had to resign himself to that.

In a February 6, 1961 letter he writes:

“As time passes, our book literature has a tendency to get more and more frozen, a tendency for conversion into something like Dogma, a human trait I am afraid we can do little about. We may as well face the fact that A.A. will always have its fundamentalists, its absolutists and its relativists”.

We now have some people with 20, 30, 40 years sober who insist on living their life according to the writings of this three-year sober guy, all the while later in life he cautiously tried to moderate his stance:

“In AA’s first years I all but ruined the whole undertaking with this sort of unconscious arrogance. God as I understood Him had to be for everybody. Sometimes my aggression was subtle and sometimes it was crude. But either way it was damaging – perhaps fatally so – to numbers of non-believers.” (The Dilemma of No Faith, AA Grapevine, April 1961)

So, we can’t help but ask:

How relevant is Bill Wilson’s original 1938 message here almost 80 years later?

What makes the AA message so special, that 80 years later there is nothing, absolutely nothing in it that needs to be changed? (Other than a few gender specific embarrassments about what the little woman at home should do, and such.)

I know there are people who try to live their lives by every word of it. This is not hard to understand. We live in a predominantly Christian culture where many base their life on writings nearly two thousand years old. To them it must feel like the Big Book was written yesterday.

However, the number of Americans who do not identify with any religion is growing. And the general population is growing. This all adds up to that while in actual numbers AA is shrinking only slightly, in its share of the general population, drinking or not, it is shrinking considerably. One third of Americans under 30 have no religious affiliation, and there are 13 million people who consider themselves atheists or agnostics, about 6% of the population.

I know that is a small enough minority to where if the majority wants to play righteous and dominate them, it’s a piece of cake. AA has done it for a long time now. Those unbelievers can be ignored, both inside and outside of AA, if one wants to badly enough.

But then what happens to our responsibility statement?

**I Am Responsible. When Anyone, Anywhere Reaches Out for Help, I Want the Hand of A.A. Always to Be There. And for That, I Am Responsible!**

When I was drinking it was my way or the highway, and it seems we have brought that attitude with us into the fellowship of AA: It’s our way or the highway! If you want recovery, you’ll get it on our terms. If you can’t handle it on our terms, go back out and do some more drinking until you’re ready to do what we tell you.

Of course, you’re always free to go seek help elsewhere. Just don’t count on us, unless you’re willing to do it our way.
So, The Hand of AA – is that the hand of one alcoholic talking with another, the hand of a fellowship where we may finally feel that we have come home, or is it the hand of conditional love from a fellowship which does not practice what it preaches?

We, every one of us, must ask ourselves: Who am I willing to let die, just so I can be righteous in my belief?

There are many thousands of sober agnostics or atheists in AA, and many of them have endured the god talk through a decade, or two, three, or four. I have surely sat through more than 4000 meetings myself and had to listen to stuff I did not believe in all through those 4000 meetings, just so I could be allowed to stay sober.

I was even told to “fake it ‘til you make it.” Luckily, I realized in time that if I faked it, it would only take me back to the bottle. I had faked it all my life. Luckily, I made it anyway.

And I’m here to tell about it, and to help my non-believer brothers and sisters in AA trust what they (don’t) believe in and move on to live happy sober lives despite all that is being preached to them.

As Bill Wilson puts it:

_Though three hundred thousand did recover in the last twenty-five years, maybe half a million more have walked into our midst, and then out again. No doubt some were too sick to make even a start. Others couldn’t or wouldn’t admit their alcoholism. Still others couldn’t face up to their underlying personality defects. Numbers departed for still other reasons._

_Yet we can’t well content ourselves with the view that all these recovery failures were entirely the fault of the newcomers themselves. (The Dilemma of No Faith, AA Grapevine, April 1961)_

Are we there to help the next suffering alcoholic, or is our main purpose to serve a god – without genuine consideration for the next suffering alcoholic?

It’s time we make up our minds.

Either the next suffering alcoholic is everything or else he is nothing. He either is, or he isn’t. What was our choice to be?

I hope we will make a better choice in the 21st century than Bill did on p 53 in the Big Book.

_This article was adapted from a pamphlet that life-j created in September 2016, which is available for [download in pdf](#) on this site._
Appendix A

Pamphlets

At some point I started making a variety of print-ready regular three panel pamphlets for non-believers, or which discuss general AA topics of special interest to us. You may also find a couple of them handy to give to openminded believers for starting a dialog. They may or may not be attached to the particular version of my AA Articles that you have in your hands, but they are available as printable PDFs from lifej@mcn.org, and possibly from aaagnostica. Unfortunately they're not very readable when bound in a book, like here, but they are at least copyable.

Northern California Secular, Agnostic, Atheist, and Freethinkers AA Meetings Directory (Meetings from Eureka to Monterey, with map)

Other AA Literature
Books mostly written by and for agnostic, atheist, and Freethinker members of AA. If AAWS won’t make books for us, we have to make them ourselves, though now they have, finally, begun to.
**As Bill ALSO Sees It** (Quotes from Bill in support of non-believers in AA, or at least of widening the gateway).

**Q & A About AA For the Non-religious** (excellent flyer from the WAAFT site, I condensed it a bit to make it fit).

**Open-minded** (My own article in the October 2016 Grapevine).

**Excerpts from the Service Manual** (Bits about the decision making process, mostly about protecting minority opinion, and avoiding tyranny).

**Science May One Day Accomplish This ...** (About Naltrexone, a medication which shows promise in helping people stop drinking, or at least cut back to safe levels, if there is such a thing.).


**God and Diet Pills** (By Steve B, from the book “Don’t Tell”).

**Some Say it’s God** (two articles - “Coincidentally Sober” from October 2016 Grapevine, and a chapter, and “Spiritual Caulk” from Adam N’s book Common Sense Recovery).

**Freethinkers and Agnostic AA Meetings** (Some readings that can be used for meetings, or just serve as an introduction).

**In Memory of Jessie** (She recently passed away. Came out of the agnostic closet at 43 years sober).

**The Secular AA 2016 Convention in Austin** (Written in the Austin airport on my way home. Was posted on aaagnostica, too).

**AA and the Art of Automobile Maintenance.** Having a god is fine for folks that seem to like it that way, but why do we need to make everyone in our recovery program have one?

**Don't Fix if It Ain't Broke.** A look at some problem with the program, in particular the ego deflation idea vs re-building of self esteem.
San Francisco, cont'd
Freethinkers Step Discussion
Women's Building, 2nd floor, (All genders welcome)
3543 18th Street (near Valencia)
Sunday 11:00 a.m.
Info: Noe Z. 415-678-8451

Agnostics and Free Thinkers
Richmond District Neighborhood Center,
741 30th Avenue (between Balboa & Cabrillo)
Sunday 6:30 p.m.

Santa Cruz
We Agnostics (WAAFT)
Louden Nelson Center, Room 2
301 Center Street, Santa Cruz, CA
Tuesday 7:00 p.m. (Open meeting)
Info: Phil, cruzmtn@sbcglobal.net

Santa Rosa
Without a Prayer Group, Tuesday 630 pm
2060 W College Ave, Rm 21, 2nd flr.
Finley Senior wing
Rotating secular format
Info: Chris, 707-495-3196 or csork@sonic.net

Woodland
Candlelit Secular
Woodland Traditional Group
418 Main St
Woodland, CA 95695
Candlelit Secular
Info: kyle.mcderm@gmail.com

Please, anyone from these meetings reading this:

Seems, since there is still somewhat far between us it would be good to have contact information for all meetings. I realize that some may not want their e-mail address or phone number be made semi-public in this way, but for those of you who don’t mind, please send contact info to me, and to the schedule maintained at http://secularaa.org/meetings/

- where you will find that there now are a lot of secular AA meetings

A couple of other websites you may find helpful:
aagnostica.org
aabeyondbelief.org

This schedule is maintained by life-j. For a printable copy, AND FOR UPDATES AND CORRECTIONS, and to get various other available secular and agnostic pamphlets please email lifej@mcn.org
This update: 10-20-18
Auburn
Auburn Fellowship, Tuesday 4:30 pm
244 Palm Ave, Auburn CA 95603
Info: vlmulvaney66@gmail.com

Berkeley
Athen & Agnostic, Berkeley Fellowship
1027 University Ave., Berkeley, CA 94710
Tuesday 7:00 p.m.

Campbell, Silicon Valley
Secular Steptakers
Cornerstone Fellowship 1600 Dell Ave, Ste. S., Campbell, CA 95008
Thursday 8:00 p.m.
Info: racerx525@gmail.com

Clearlake, Lake County
Atheists & Agnostics
Thursdays 1:30
3300 10th Street
Info: joanneemmons@gmail.com

El Cerrito, Bay Area
Courage to Change Fellowship
Godless Heathens IV Saturday 7 pm
6922 Stockton Avenue

Forestville, Sonoma County
Beyond Belief, Sunday 4:00 pm
FUM Church Hall, 6550 Covey Road
Info: 707-495-3196 or csork@sonic.net

Lafayette, S.F. East Bay
We Agnostics, Monday 5:30 p.m.
Little League Hut, 711 St. Mary's Road

Willits, Mendocino County
Willits Freethinkers Group
Meets SECOND and FOURTH Thursdays of the month only, at 4 pm.
Baechtel Creek Village retirement community's community room. 61 Alder Ct., Behind Grocery Outlet
Info: 707-459-1977, please leave message
Or 707-984-8339 lifej@mcn.org

McKinleyville, Humboldt County
Humboldt Agnostics, Sunday 10:00 a.m.
Community Room at Misty Village
2331 McKinleyville Avenue

Monterey
Freethinkers, Monday 7 p.m.
Monterey Fellowship, 519 Hartnell St
Info: montereypeninsulafreethinkers@gmail.com

Oakland
Kehilla Community Synagogue
1300 Grand Avenue
(2 blocks south of Oakland Ave.)
Godless Heathens II Wednesday 7:00 pm
Godless Heathens III Monday 7:30 pm

Petaluma
We Agnostics and Atheists in AA
Petaluma Valley Hospital, Burns Hall
400 N. McDowell Blvd., Petaluma, CA
Wednesday 6:00 p.m. (Sonoma County)
Info: 707-495-3196 or csork@sonic.net

Redding
WE AGNOSTICS (Secular meeting)
First United Methodist Church
1825 East Street, Redding, CA 96073
Friday 5:30 - 6:30 p.m. (closed mtg)
Info: mhhii@aol.com

Sacramento Area
All Tribes Group: We Agnostics, 2627 J St.
Monday 7:00 p.m.

San Francisco
Atheist Agnostics and Others
Women's Building, 2nd floor, (All genders welcome)
3543 18th Street (near Valencia)
San Francisco, CA, Tuesday 7:00 p.m
Info: Noe Z. 415-678-8451

Beyond Belief
1825 East Street, Redding, CA 96073
Friday 5:30 - 6:30 p.m. (closed mtg)

Richmond
Godless Heathens I Sunday 10:30 am
El Cerrito Fellowship 12260 San Pablo Ave.
(Between MacDonald and Barrett)

San Francisco
Atheists Agnostics and Others
Women's Building, 2nd floor, (All genders welcome)
3543 18th Street (near Valencia)
San Francisco, CA, Tuesday 7:00 p.m
Info: Noe Z. 415-678-8451

Beyond Belief
1825 East Street, Redding, CA 96073
Friday 5:30 - 6:30 p.m. (closed mtg)

Willits Freethinkers Group
Meets SECOND and FOURTH Thursdays of the month only, at 4 pm.
Baechtel Creek Village retirement community's community room. 61 Alder Ct., Behind Grocery Outlet
Info: 707-459-1977, please leave message
Or 707-984-8339 lifej@mcn.org

Beyond Belief
Tuesday 5:30, 2170 Hartnell Ave,
Beacon Missionary Baptist Church
Info: mhhii@aol.com

Safe and Secure Group
2515 10th Street
San Francisco, CA, Friday 7:30 p.m
Info: Noe Z. 415-678-8451

San Francisco
Atheists Agnostics and Others
Women's Building, 2nd floor, (All genders welcome)
3543 18th Street (near Valencia)
San Francisco, CA, Tuesday 7:00 p.m
Info: Noe Z. 415-678-8451

Beyond Belief
1825 East Street, Redding, CA 96073
Friday 5:30 - 6:30 p.m. (closed mtg)

Willits Freethinkers Group
Meets SECOND and FOURTH Thursdays of the month only, at 4 pm.
Baechtel Creek Village retirement community's community room. 61 Alder Ct., Behind Grocery Outlet
Info: 707-459-1977, please leave message
Or 707-984-8339 lifej@mcn.org

Beyond Belief
Tuesday 5:30, 2170 Hartnell Ave,
Beacon Missionary Baptist Church
Info: mhhii@aol.com

Safe and Secure Group
2515 10th Street
San Francisco, CA, Friday 7:30 p.m
Info: Noe Z. 415-678-8451

San Francisco
Atheists Agnostics and Others
Women's Building, 2nd floor, (All genders welcome)
3543 18th Street (near Valencia)
San Francisco, CA, Tuesday 7:00 p.m
Info: Noe Z. 415-678-8451

Beyond Belief
1825 East Street, Redding, CA 96073
Friday 5:30 - 6:30 p.m. (closed mtg)
Wounded Warriors, edited by Doyle Arbogast. This is a book by Native Americans, and associated with the Red Road recovery program. This book is raw. It made me realize how sanitized regular AA literature is. This may be the most powerful book about alcoholism, addiction, and recovery I have read. It's honest in a whole different way.

But let's not forget that AAWS puts out at least one good secular book: Living Sober. Some places it seems like they don't even know it. Maybe some people are trying to hide it to protect god.

The AA term "Conference Approved" does not imply disapproval of other literature. Meetings, groups and individuals are free to use any literature they find helpful for their recovery.

And finally, One Big Tent. 4 years in the making and 40 years coming, here’s a Grapevine book with stories by atheists and agnostics in AA. Well done, Grapevine!

For a printable copy of this and other pamphlets, please email lifej@mcn.org

Here’s Some Other AA Literature

Books written by and for agnostic, atheist, freethinker and secular members of AA, and a couple of other good books.

Only one of the books in here is so-called “AA General Service Conference Approved”. We finally had to look for other resources, and begin to write our own, too. But now there is, finally, also a Grapevine book for us.

Some of these titles are available from Amazon, some from the publisher. You will find links to most of these books at: aaagnostica.org, and aabeyondbelief.org

I would like to encourage you to also visit these sites for weekly articles, and lively discussions.

I think it all started with the need for a new daily reader, since the Daily Reflections contain an awful lot of religion, and most of the entries are not even that good.
So to remedy that Joe C wrote Beyond Belief. It takes you to areas of recovery most AA literature doesn’t. Intensely philosophical at times, but very well done. Published by Rebellion Dogs.

Next, from AA Agnostica came Don’t Tell, Edited by Roger C., stories and essays by agnostics and atheists in AA. A very good read. A book with many essays and personal stories about coming out as a sober agnostic in AA, how it feels, and how our relationship with regular AA plays out.

It was followed up by Do Tell, edited by Roger C. A book of experience, strength and hope. This book focuses more just on what it’s like to be a sober agnostic, and how we work our program.


Waiting by Marya Hornbacher, an excellent little book which interprets the steps from a non-believer’s perspective.

Here are a couple of non-AA books we have found very helpful. They're daily readers:

365 TAO by Deng Ming Dao. A very good daily reader. My personal favorite. A spiritual but not religious book. Really – and the only one I have ever come across other than Beyond Belief.

Believing in Myself by Earnie Larsen & Carol Hegarty. Though there is a tiny little bit of god stuff in there, this is a very thoughtful book well worth using as a daily reader on most days.

Particularly helpful for those of us who already had our egos flattened in childhood, and need empowerment more than ego deflation.
Most of us, the idea of substituting “good” for “God” in the Twelve Steps will seem like a watering down of A.A.’s message. But here we must remember that A.A.’s Steps are suggestions only. A belief in them, as they stand, is not at all a requirement for membership among us. This liberty has made A.A. available to thousands who never would have tried at all, had we insisted on the Twelve Steps just as written.

Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age, 1961

Moreover, all people should have the right to voice their convictions. This is good principle and good dogma. But dogma also has its liabilities. Simply because we have convictions that work well for us, it becomes very easy to assume that we have all the truth. Whenever this brand of arrogance develops, we are certain to become aggressive; we demand agreement with us; we play God. This isn’t good dogma; it’s very bad dogma. It could be especially destructive for us of AA to indulge in this sort of thing. Newcomers are approaching AA at the rate of tens of thousands yearly. They represent almost every belief and attitude imaginable. We have atheists and agnostics. We have people of nearly every race, culture and religion. In AA we are supposed to be bound together in the kinship of a common suffering. Consequently, the full individual liberty to practice any creed or principle or therapy whatever should be a first consideration for us all. Let us not, therefore, pressure anyone with our individual or even our collective views. Let us instead accord each other the respect and love that is due to every human being as he tries to make his way toward the light. Let us always try to be inclusive rather than exclusive; let us remember that each alcoholic among us is a member of AA, so long as he or she so declares.

AA Grapevine, July 1965, Responsibility Is Our Theme

This was the great contribution of our atheists and agnostics. They had widened our gateway so that all who suffer might pass through, regardless of their belief or lack of belief.

Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age, 1961

All material herein © Alcoholics Anonymous®, or AA Grapevine®, according to the indicated source, and reprinted by permission.

Bill Wilson Comes of Age:

It would seem that it is a basic principle—that when a person expresses their thoughts, and then later expresses other thoughts that to some degree contradict the earlier thoughts—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 thoughts, in some cases considerably more. Bill Wilson wrote the Big Book with 3 years of sobriety. When therefore he kept writing all through his later years we ought to pay special attention to that.

Tradition 3, long form

Our membership ought to include all who suffer from alcoholism. Hence we may refuse none who wish to recover. Nor ought A.A. membership ever depend upon money or conformity. 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.

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!

Anarchy Melts July 1946, Grapevine

Others refuse to accept all the Twelve Steps of the recovery program. Some go still further, saying that the “God business” is bunk and quite unnecessary. Under these conditions our conservative program-abiding members get scared. These appalling conditions must be controlled, they think, else A.A. will surely go to rack and ruin. They view with alarm for the good of the movement!

At this point the group enters the rule and regulation phase. Charters, bylaws and membership rules are excitedly passed and authority is granted committees to filter out undesirables and discipline the evildoers. Then the Group Elders, now clothed with Who Is a Member of Alcoholics Anonymous? authority, commence to get busy. Recalcitrants are cast into the outer darkness; respectable busybodies throw stones at the sinners. As for the so-called sinners, they either insist on staying around, or else they form a new group of their own.

Or maybe they join a more congenial and less intolerant crowd in their neighborhood. The elders soon discover that the rules and regulations aren’t working very well. Most attempts at enforcement generate such waves of dissension and intolerance in the group that this condition is presently recognized to be worse for the group life than the very worst that the worst ever did.

Those who slip, those who panhandle, those who scandalize, those with mental twists, those who rebel at the program, those who trade on the A.A. reputation—all such persons seldom harm an A.A. group for long. Some of these have become our most respected and best loved. Some have remained to try our patience, sober nevertheless. Others have drifted away. We have begun to regard these not as menaces, but rather as our teachers. They oblige us to cultivate patience, tolerance, and humility. We finally see that they are only people sicker than the rest of us, that we who condemn them are the Pharisees whose false righteousness does our group the deeper spiritual damage.

Who is a member of Alcoholics Anonymous? August 1947, Grapevine

Though three hundred thousand did recover in the last twenty-five years, maybe half a million more have walked into our midst, and then out again. No doubt some were too sick to make even a start. Others couldn’t or wouldn’t admit their alcoholism. Still others couldn’t face up to their underlying personality defects. Numbers departed for still other reasons.

Yet we can’t well content ourselves with the view that all these recovery failures were entirely the fault of the newcomers themselves. Perhaps a great many didn’t receive the kind and amount of sponsorship they so sorely needed. We didn’t communicate when we might have done so. So we AAs failed them. Perhaps more often than we think, we still make no contact at depth with those suffering the dilemma of no faith.

Certainly none are more sensitive to spiritual cocksureness, pride and aggression than they are. I’m sure this is something we too often forget. In AA’s first years I all but ruined the whole undertaking with this sort of unconscious arrogance. God as I understood Him had to be for everybody. Sometimes my aggression was subtle and sometimes it was crude. But either way it was damaging - perhaps fatally so - to numbers of non-believers. ........

Then, for the first time, it burst in upon me how very dead faith can be - when minus responsibility. The doctor had an unwavering belief in his ideals. But he also practiced humility, wisdom and responsibility. Hence his superb demonstration.

My own spiritual awakening had given me a built-in faith in God - a gift indeed. But I had been neither humble nor wise. Boasting of my faith, I had forgotten my ideals. Pride and irresponsibility had taken their place. By so cutting off my own light, I had little to offer my fellow alcoholics. At last I saw why many had gone away - some of them forever.

The Dilemma of No Faith AA Grapevine , April 1961

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.

Tradition Four, Grapevine March 1948

As time passes, our book literature has a tendency to get more and more frozen, a tendency for coversion into something like Dogma, a human trait I am afraid we can do little about. We may as well face the fact that
members can quote “chapter and verse” while other members have never read it, or seldom refer to it. There is no one way to use or look at the Big Book. A section called “How It Works” is read at the start of most AA meetings. It contains the famous Twelve Steps, Six of the steps refer to “God” or “Him”, and the whole section leads to the conclusion that “God” is the answer to alcoholism. Needless to say, this is rejected by nonbelievers.

What are the Twelve Steps?
These are the guidelines which most of AA considers the heart of its recovery process. Although the Big Book itself says they are only “suggested”, they have become essential ingredients in the minds of many members, and there are strong reactions within the fellowship if they are slighted or criticized.

How do nonbelievers like me deal with the religious parts of these Steps?
Many nonbelievers find wisdom and guidance within the steps and just adapt them to their own beliefs. They use the Steps for guidance, just ignoring the God references. There have been many revised or alternate sets of steps written including by non-believer AA members. Some can be found in The Little Book published by aaagnostica.org.

What's a “sponsor”, and do I need one?
A sponsor is a more experienced member whom a newcomer can ask for more individualized, personal guidance in getting sober. It is entirely up to the newcomer to choose and ask someone to sponsor him/her. It is traditional for the sponsor to be the same gender as the sponsee. Having a sponsor is not required, but is generally encouraged. Some of these relationships last for years.

How many meetings do I have to attend?
None, unless a court or treatment program requires it. (Someone, usually the secretary, at AA meetings will usually sign attendance slips, but they are not affiliated with courts or treatment programs.) The common wisdom is for a newcomer to attend many meetings, including different ones. This gives extra support in the difficult early days of sobriety, and exposes the newcomer to many different members and styles within AA. “90 meetings is 90 days” is a common recommendation but not a requirement.

How long do I have to attend meetings?
As long as you want. Some people don't like AA at all, and only attend their first meeting. Many attend for a few weeks, months, or years. Some of us stay involved for decades because we like the people and atmosphere in AA-it helps us continue to grow.

Are there other organizations that might help me stop drinking?
Yes: LifeRing; Secular Organizations for Sobriety (SOS); SMART Recovery; Women for Sobriety, and others. They all have websites, and people are getting sober in all of them. Their only drawback is that they are relatively small, with relatively few local groups. AA’s big advantage is that there are meetings everywhere.

Where can I learn more about AA? Is there something I can read or someone I can talk with confidentially?
General Information: www.aa.org
Google “AA [Your Town or State]” to search for local meeting information and phone numbers. There is often a 24/7 hotline, staffed by volunteers. For the non-religious: www.aaagnostica.org
www.waaf.org
www.agnosticaanyc.org

YOU DON'T HAVE TO DRINK ANY MORE
Adapted from https://secularaa.org/q-a/
This is not an official AA publication.
For a printable copy of this and other pamphlets please email lifej@mcn.org

Q & A about AA
– FOR THE NON-RELIGIOUS:

What is AA?
Alcoholics Anonymous is a fellowship of men and women who share their experience, strength, and hope with each other so 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 a A.A. membership; we are self-supporting through our own contributions. Alcoholics Anonymous 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 achieve sobriety. (copyrighted by the A.A. Grapevine, Inc., which publishes a monthly magazine in print and online.)

Why would I want to get involved with AA?
If you are having problems with alcohol or want to quit drinking and can’t seem to do it alone, the fellowship of AA may give you the support and practical suggestions you need.

But I hear AA is a religious program, using religious language and customs. What if I don’t believe in that stuff?
Most of the founders of AA were religious, and so are many of today’s members, and you run into a lot of religious language in AA literature and sometimes at AA meetings. However, the ONLY requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking, and there are many atheists, agnostics, freethinkers, rationalists, humanists, etc. who got sober in AA. Some of us have been sober for 40+ years, and are still active in AA. You can choose not to use any of the
religious language. Lots of groups include a formal prayer or two in their meetings. Some of us join in, some just remain silent. We’ve now also started over 200 non-religious AA meetings.

**Is AA a religious cult?**
No. A cult is a group of people with dominant leaders who demand all of their followers’ wealth and time, and often demand separation from former friends and family, among other requirements. None of this is true of AA. Many newcomers to AA are confused because they cannot identify who is in charge. No one is.

Authority belongs to the group. The volunteers are referred to as “trusted servants”, to take care of cleanup, chairing meetings, business details, etc.

**So, how do people join AA?**
The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking, and some of us didn’t even have that at first. There is no membership application, no dues or fees, and no membership card. You don’t “join” AA as you would join any other group. You’re a member if you say you are. You can attend a many or as few meetings as you choose. You don’t even have to say or think that you’re an alcoholic.

**What are the rules in AA?**
There are none. Even the twelve steps are clearly stated to be merely suggestions. You’re expected to act civilized at meetings, but we tolerate extreme behavior sometimes. You can even show up drunk, as long as you keep quiet and behave. It can feel like there are “rules” at some meetings, but those will be the customs of a particular group or the opinions of individual members.

**What are AA meetings like?**
Every meeting is self-governing, and AA has absolutely no rules for how AA meetings are to be run. The important thing is that they are a way for people to get together who want to stop drinking and to stay stopped.

The best way to see what they’re like is to go to a few. You won’t find uniformity among meetings, but you may find common features. There may be 3 people present or 100. They may ask if anyone is new, in order to welcome you, but you don’t have to respond. You probably won’t be the only newcomer there. Some meetings are for women, men, LGBT, young people, older people, motorcyclists, or any of a variety of special interests, but usually anyone is welcome at any meeting.

Ask if you’re not sure.

AA does not own any property. Even the national office is rented. Meetings are most often in rented church rooms, because churches have parking lots, bathrooms, tables, and chairs. But they can meet anywhere. Meetings usually last about an hour. They can be any hour of the day, and any day of the week, and usually meet on holidays. They may have a somewhat rigid format, or they may seem chaotic. Members volunteer for the various tasks like chairing, making coffee, etc. The atmosphere is usually informal and friendly, and you can tell some of the attendees know each other very well, while others may be quiet and not interact much. There will often be a fuss made over “birthdays”, i.e., significant lengths of sobriety, in months and years.

Meetings are labelled “open” or “closed”. Open meetings are open to anyone, whether they consider themselves alcoholic or not, while closed are supposed to be only for people who consider themselves alcoholic.

At some point, there will be announcements relevant to the group or AA activities in the area, and there will be a money collection. This is voluntary, and no one cares who donates what. It’s traditional within AA to go by your first name only. This is intended to assure anonymity. AA members often know each other for years, and even become warm friends, and may still not be sure of each other’s last name.

Commonly, people put in a dollar or two if they can. The money is used for rent, coffee, other group expenses, and some is sent to support other levels of AA activity. Some meetings are discussion meetings where someone picks a topic to talk about, and then attendees talk about it. Crosstalk or one-to-one responses are usually discouraged, so it’s a series of individual stories or statements rather than a conversation. The chair may call on individuals to speak, or it may be voluntary. You can pass if you choose to. Some meetings feature a speaker who speaks for part of or most of the meeting. There may or may not be time left for others to share.

Some meetings are study meetings where AA books are read. There is often religious language used, and these meetings often are a challenge for us non-believers. Some dislike it so much they stop attending, but some just ignore it or go along with it. A common motto in AA is, “Take what you like and leave the rest.”

There are now also over 200 meetings started by non-believers, mostly in the US and Canada, with no religious content. A list of them is at: www.agnosticaanyc.org

**What is the “Big Book”?**
It is *Alcoholics Anonymous*, published by the first few members in 1939, and still considered the core text of AA. Its primary author was Bill Wilson, with input from the two existing groups in New York and Akron.

It is universally respected within AA. Some members treat it almost as sacred scripture, even though the book itself states clearly that it is not the final word on recovery from alcoholism. Some
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 immoral, 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!”

For a printable copy of this and other pamphlets, please email lifej@mcn.org

by life-j, Northern California

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.

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 when 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.
Therefore we expect that our Conferences will always try to act in the spirit of mutual respect and love—one member for another. In turn, this sign signifies that mutual trust should prevail; that no action ought to be taken in anger, haste, or recklessness; that care will be observed to respect and protect all minorities; that no action should ever be personally punitive; that whenever possible, important actions will be taken in substantial unanimity; and that our Conference will ever be prudently on guard against tyrannies, great or small, whether these be found in the majority or in the minority.

Would you call it a democratic decision if two wolves and a sheep voted on what’s for dinner?

Joe C.

For a printable copy of this and other pamphlets, please email lifej@mcn.org

Excerpts from the AA Service Manual
On the process of decision making

By Bill W.

Strictly speaking, a democracy operates on the will of the majority, no matter how slim that majority may be. So when making special concessions to the feelings and the often-demonstrated wisdom of minorities, we occasionally may deny democracy’s cherished principle of final decision by a simple majority vote. Nevertheless we actually have found that our Third Legacy method of electing
Delegates has much strengthened the spirit of democracy among us. Unity has been cemented, cooperation has been increased, and when the Delegate is finally chosen, no discontented minority can trail in his wake. To increase the actual spirit of democracy by special deference to minority opinion is, we think, better than to follow blindly the rule which always insists on an unqualified dominance by a slight majority vote.

P 22/24
Consider another example: Our respect for the minority position, plus a desire for unity and certainty, often prompts A.A.’s General Service Conference to debate at length on important questions of policy, provided there is no need for an immediate or early decision. On many occasions the Conference has insisted on a continuing discussion even in certain cases when a two-thirds majority easily could have been obtained. Such a traditional voluntary practice is evidence of real prudence and courteous deference to minority views. Unless it has been absolutely unavoidable, the Conference has usually refused to take important decisions on anything less than a two-thirds vote. …...

Throughout his political speculation De Toqueville insisted that the greatest danger to democracy would always be the “tyranny” of apathetic, self-seeking, uninformed or angry majorities. Only a truly dedicated citizenry, quite willing to protect and conserve minority rights and opinions, could, he thought, guarantee the existence of a free and democratic society. All around us in the world today we are witnessing the tyranny of majorities and the even worse tyranny of very small minorities invested with absolute power. De Toqueville would have neither, and we A.A.’s can heartily agree with him.

P 66/68
Warranty Four: “That all important decisions be reached by discussion, vote, and, whenever possible, by substantial unanimity.” Here on the one hand we erect a safeguard against any hasty or overbearing authority of a simple majority; and on the other hand we take notice of the rights and the frequent wisdom of minorities, however small. This principle further guarantees that all matters of importance, time permitting, will be extensively debated, and that such debates will continue until a really heavy majority can support every critical decision that we are called upon to make in the Conference. When we take decisions in this fashion, the Conference voice speaks with an authority and a confidence that a simple majority could never give it. If any remain in opposition, they are far better satisfied because their case has had a full and fair hearing. And when a decision taken in substantial unanimity does happen to go wrong, there can be no heated recriminations. Everybody will be able to say “Well, we had a careful debate, we took the decision, and it turned out to be a bad one. Better luck next time!” Like many very high ideals, the principle of substantial unanimity does, however, have certain practical limitations. Occasionally a Conference decision will be of such extreme urgency that something has to be done at once. In such a case we cannot allow a minority, however well-intended, to block a vitally needed action which is evidently in the best interests of A.A. Here we shall need to trust the majority, sometimes a bare majority, to decide whether Conference debate is to be terminated and a final action taken. In certain other cases, the majority will also have to exercise this undoubted right. Suppose, for example, that a small minority obstinately tries to use the principle of substantial unanimity to block a clearly needed action. In such an event it would be the plain duty of the majority to override such a misuse of the principle of substantial unanimity.
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 either way we can help them with our support program, or we can dismiss them because they aren’t following our path the way we’re used to doing it.

We’re here for the person who wants to stop drinking, but many people come to AA with the idea of cutting back. We welcome them, hoping they will see the good sense in quitting altogether. We could do that with people trying Naltrexone too.

But even if with some people all we would accomplish is that they got totally with the naltrexone program, took the pill before they drink, cut their drinking down to safe levels, drank socially, never got seriously drunk again, never went to AA, never did therapy, but went on to live a good, long productive life, who are we AAs to stick our nose up at them and say they are not in real recovery? Would it be our business any more than it is our business what the rest of the social drinkers out there in the world do? We only need to focus on those who have a desire to stop drinking, and support the use of Naltrexone for their sake.

### Some online resources for further investigation:

You can simply Google “The Sinclair Method”. Much of the following information will come up.

Probably the most comprehensive general site is [http://www.cthreefoundation.org/#](http://www.cthreefoundation.org/#)

It is aimed specifically at the alcoholics who are looking for a way to try out The Sinclair Method, such as how to find a doctor who will work with them on it.

A couple of good scholarly articles by Dr. Sinclair can be found at [http://cthreeeurope.com/2014/10/16/how-opioid-antagonists-reduce-the-craving-for-alcohol-part-one/](http://cthreeeurope.com/2014/10/16/how-opioid-antagonists-reduce-the-craving-for-alcohol-part-one/)

For those who would like to look at scientific evidence from trials etc., there is a lot of it at [http://cthreeeurope.com/bibliography/](http://cthreeeurope.com/bibliography/)

A good general “self-help psychology” style book, though nothing can completely deliver what the title promises, including Naltrexone:

Roy Eskapa: The Cure for Alcoholism

*This article was written by a regular member of AA. It is not intended to be a substitute for advice from a physician. Though everything points toward that Naltrexone is very safe, and effective, you should always consult your doctor before taking this or any other medication.*

For a printable copy of this and other pamphlets please email [lifej@mcn.org](mailto:lifej@mcn.org)

---

### Science may one day accomplish this….

- **A look at some little known medications that may help a person quit drinking**

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”. 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 of 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”, more of anything that would release endorphines. 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.

It can help take away craving for alcohol in a gradual process, which also makes withdrawal easier. It is non-narcotic, non-habit-forming, no tolerance is built over time, the side effects are slight, a bit of nausea and headache, for most people way less than the hangover they would be facing.

Some of us have gotten sober simply by following the AA way. For us this medication only has interest as a potential means to help the alcoholic who still suffers. We all know people who have tried to stay sober but continue to relapse. Whether they aren't working the AA program right, or whether we in AA have not found a good way to reach them is perhaps important to look at, but to the person still suffering it is of little consequence: They may die if they don't get help that works, and we can't keep telling them it's my way or the highway anymore - we need to support their path to sobriety any way we can. Bill Wilson would have favored this.

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, and 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 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.

Naltrexone on the other hand, taken 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.

Current FDA approval for Naltrexone is that it be taken every day in combination with abstinence, but - though that will seem counter-intuitive to most of us in AA - Dr. Sinclair found that the medication works much better when taken in combination with continued drinking. A similar medication, Nalmefene is now approved all over Europe for this use. And Dr Sinclair, who found support for his work in Finland has helped many thousand alcoholics there.

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. As for the long term success rate they tell me that the main problem is compliance. In AA we often keep going to meetings and work our program for the rest of our lives, and of those that don't many relapse. With 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 the author of this pamphlet 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. 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 suggest to them a medication that will help them 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...
I Am Responsible. When Anyone, Anywhere Reaches Out For Help, I Want The Hand Of A.A. Always To Be There. And For That, I Am Responsible!

When I was drinking it was my way or the highway, and it seems we have brought that attitude with us into the fellowship of AA: It's our way or the highway! If you want recovery, you'll get it on our terms. If you can't handle it on our terms, go back out and do some more drinking until you're ready to do what we tell you.

Of course you're always free to go seek help elsewhere. Just don't count on us, unless you're willing to do it our way.

So The Hand of AA – is that the hand of one alcoholic talking with another, the hand of a fellowship where we may finally feel that we have come home, or is it the hand of conditional love from a fellowship which does not practice what it preaches?

We, every one of us, have to ask ourselves: Who am I willing to let die, just so I can be righteous in my belief?

There are many thousands of sober agnostics or atheists in AA, and many of them have endured the god talk through a decade, or two, three, four decades. I have surely sat through more than 4000 meetings myself, and had to listen to stuff I did not believe in all through those 4000 meetings, just so I could be allowed to stay sober.

I was even told to “fake it till you make it”. Luckily I realized in time that if I faked it it would only take me back to the bottle. I had faked it all my life. Luckily I made it anyway.

And I'm here to tell about it, and to help my non-believer brothers and sisters in AA trust what they (don't) believe in, and move on to live happy sober lives in spite of all that is being preached to them.

As Bill Wilson puts it:
“Though three hundred thousand did recover in the last twenty-five years, maybe half a million more have walked into our midst, and then out again. No doubt some were too sick to make even a start. Others couldn't or wouldn't admit their alcoholism. Still others couldn't face up to their underlying personality defects. Numbers departed for still other reasons.
Yet we can't well content ourselves with the view that all these recovery failures were entirely the fault of the newcomers themselves.”

The Dilemma of No Faith AA Grapevine, April 1961

Are we there to help the next suffering alcoholic, or is our main purpose to serve a god – without genuine consideration for the next suffering alcoholic?
It’s time we make up our minds.

Either the next suffering alcoholic is everything or else he is nothing. He either is or he isn't. What was our choice to be? (p. 53)

For a printable copy of this and other pamphlets, please email lifej@mcn.org

Some thoughts about

AA in the 21st Century

A couple of days ago it was two years since I had my big surgery. I had cancer, and they took two thirds of my liver out. When the doctor came in I asked him: “Could you please do the surgery exactly the way they did it in 1939?”

Right – I really did, right?

Would you jeopardize your life like that? So why would you do that with recovery where your life is equally on the line, even if perhaps not quite so urgently for some of us?

Bill Wilson was 3 years sober when he wrote the big book. Let me be perfectly clear: For someone who didn't already have a big fellowship to lean on, and for being 3 years sober in 1938 he did good. Let's just give him all the credit we can: He did amazingly good.

But he was three years sober.
If you who are reading this are three years sober - congratulations! Those first 3 years in many ways are a bigger achievement for you, and for us, than the next 25 years were for me who is 28 years sober. On the other hand – those of us who have been sober for well over a decade, when we look back, one of the first things that come to mind is probably “Yeah, when I was 3 years sober I thought I knew everything!”

And so it was with Bill Wilson.

Though when he wrote the Big Book he was able to be humble enough to write “We realize we know only a little”. Only later was he to realize how little he had indeed known. But he had set a fellowship in motion which had taken on a life of its own. By 1955 there were perhaps 150,000 members, many of whom would cling to every word in the Big Book, and he had to resign himself to that.

In a February 6, 1961 letter he writes: “As time passes, our book literature has a tendency to get more and more frozen, a tendency for conversion into something like Dogma, a human trait I am afraid we can do little about. We may as well face the fact that A.A. will always have its fundamentalists, its absolutists and its relativists.”

We now have some people with 20, 30, 40 years sober who insist on living their life according to the writings of this 3 year sober guy, all the while later in life he cautiously tried to moderate his stance:

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

The Dilemma of No Faith AA Grapevine, April 1961

So we can’t help but ask:

How relevant is Bill Wilson’s original 1938 message here almost 80 years later? What makes the AA message so special, that 80 years later there is nothing, absolutely nothing in it that needs to be changed? (other than a few gender specific embarrassments about what the little woman at home should do, and such)

I know there are people who try to live their lives by every word of it. This is not hard to understand. We live in a predominantly Christian culture where many base their lives on writings nearly two thousand years old. To them it must feel like the Big Book was written yesterday.

However, the number of Americans who do not identify with any religion is growing. And the general population is growing. This all adds up to that while in actual numbers AA is shrinking only slightly, in its share of the general population, drinking or not, it is shrinking considerably.

One third of Americans under 30 have no religious affiliation, There are 13 million people who consider themselves atheists or agnostics, about 6% of the population.

I know that is a small enough minority to where if the majority wants to play righteous and dominate them, it’s a piece of cake. AA has done it for a long time now. Those unbelievers can be ignored, both inside and outside of AA, if one wants to badly enough.

But what happened to our responsibility statement?
make friends. But, by being open and honest, the friends have materialized.

I encourage agnostics, atheist, freethinkers, and skeptics to share openly at meetings. I know this may be more of a challenge in red states versus blue states and in smaller towns with less diversity. Even there though are people who will relate to you and those are the ones you want to be friends with or to have as sponsors. I believe there are many people in AA who don’t feel comfortable going along with mainstream Big Book philosophy. By letting them know it’s OK to not be an AA mainstreamer in order to stay sober you are being of service to a substantial minority of people in the room. As one AAer told me, “I’ve seen a lot more people leave AA because of all the God stuff than leave because of all those damn atheists in the group.”

Unless the Alcoholics Anonymous WSO amends the Third Tradition to read “The only requirements for membership are a desire to stop drinking and a belief in God,” they can’t kick you out.

God and Diet Pills

By Steve B

I have come to believe that God is to sobriety what diet pills are to weight loss.

The diet pills I’m referring to are the over the counter supplements you see on non prime time commercials on cable TV or obscure channel infomercials. As a rule, these supplements have little pharmacologic value for weight loss. Nevertheless diet supplements are promoted as essential ingredients for weight loss. So you plunk down some hard-earned cash to get this miracle product. The pills arrive in the mail along with a brochure. It tells you these supplements are meant to work in conjunction with an exercise and food restriction program. So the simple math is Eat Right + Exercise + Diet Pills = Weight Loss.

It can be found at http://aaagnostica.org/2013/05/19/god-and-diet-pills/

- along with many other good stories written by recovering alcoholics

It is also in the book “Don’t Tell” published by AA Agnostica, edited by Roger C.

The story is here reprinted by life-j with permission from the publisher.

This article was written by Steve B. He lives in Southern California, and has been in recovery since 1990.

For a printable copy of this and other pamphlets, please email lifej@mcn.org

It was first published on AA Agnostica May 19, 2013
In AA the equation is Go to Meetings + Participate in Fellowship + Believe in God = Sobriety. In the diet pill analogy the food restriction and exercise are the essential components of weight loss and the diet supplements are basically functioning as placebos. Placebos can be effective. Nearly half of people who take what they think is a pain pill will report a reduction in pain. If you think a diet supplement will decrease your appetite you may actually experience a reduction in appetite. Moreover, when you pay money for some diet pills you are more likely to be compliant with all aspects of the program. So, in that sense, the supplements are working.

For many in our society belief in God is much more deeply ingrained than the belief in pharmacology that results in the placebo effect. Functional MRI studies have shown that, in a believer, the areas of the brain affected during prayer are the same areas affected when interacting with another person. So God is real in the praying persons brain if you're a believer. The non-believer does not activate these areas of the brain if saying the same words to himself. [1] I've commented to my home group that the religious person probably does have an advantage in maintaining sobriety in AA. The religious person who comes to AA is very likely to believe that the God in AA is the essential ingredient in sobriety. This attitude is held to as tightly as religious beliefs are in general and is fostered by the AA literature and the sharing at most meetings.

This poses a challenge for agnostics in AA.

For most agnostics fellowship, participation, and being of service are the essential components to sobriety in AA. Yet at the same time our personal philosophical outlook makes us less likely to relate to the group and to be shunned.

One solution is to have “We Agnostics” meetings. AA sanctions several other speciality meetings and a few agnostic ones, although some agnostic meetings have been delisted. [2] I'm fortunate to have one agnostic meeting near me but it's still a 40 mile drive and only once a week. I also participate in a Life Ring meeting, but that is also only once a week and about a 40 mile drive. I live in a densely populated area. There are hundreds of AA meetings a week within that 40 mile radius of my house. Most AA members do not have the option of attending an agnostic oriented meeting.

Another thing that can be done is the agnostic can talk about her or his belief or lack of belief with shares and in one-on-one sessions with other alcoholics. When I am open and honest about my opinions with shares in meetings people may not agree but they can't stop my words. For every five or six people who shuns me someone will come up to me after a meeting and thank me for my share and may say something along the lines of “I'm agnostic too but I just don't talk about it.” I think there are more closeted atheists and agnostics in the fellowship than we realize, although data on this is obviously hard to come by.

I've seen a lot more people leave AA because of all the God stuff than leave because of all those damn atheists in the group.

The fifth tradition of Alcoholics Anonymous states: “Each group has but one primary purpose – to carry its message to the alcoholic who still suffers.” I've done an informal survey of several AA members asking if my contrarian sharing is violating this tradition. Am I poisoning the message with my shares? Everyone, even the majority of religious members, seem to think I'm not in violation. Diversity of opinion may not be completely welcome but with the attitude of “take what you need and leave the rest” the primary purpose is not violated. Believers are free to ignore my sharing.

I've been in 12 Step programs since 1990. I made the mistake of not sharing my opinions and keeping silent about my atheism while I went to meetings for about 12 years. I therefore was dishonest with the group and not participating in the fellowship. I'm not blaming AA or claiming I was victimized by the fellowship. I was dishonest. I dropped out of meetings but managed to stay sober for about five years before relapsing. I'm now back in the program and have about 20 months sobriety. I'm not being silent this time around. I'd much rather be rejected for who I am than accepted for someone I'm not. I'm in the rooms of AA to stay sober, not to
difference, the real deal maker in this scenario, our speaker’s newfound willingness to perceive and imbue with value this most excellent opportunity for enhancing her recovery? Wasn’t her newfound openness and willingness really the crux of the matter, regardless of theistic interpretations?

I find it very difficult to relate to the sharing of AA members who’s Higher Power arranges the world to fix them. They utilize god to fill in the void in their understanding when interesting and impressive things happen in their lives. To me this just smacks of mental laziness. I feel very uncomfortable in meetings where this sort of thing takes place. I think they are dismissing the power of genuine willingness in their lives, denigrating the incredible capacity of humans to embrace change and transform for the better.

If you choose to interpret recovery experiences in this way, you are left with some inexplicable and particularly onerous implications. For example, why did god not similarly come to the rescue of Freddy, or Jim, or Alice, or Tom? Each of them has relapsed and are now out stumbling drunk or shooting up in an alley somewhere! Why did the puppeteer not come to their aid? Is there a merit system involved? Is it karma? Unlikely to be the case, as we all know assholes who have been spared, yet sweethearts who have succumbed.

I believe that the real work in our bus rider’s life is being done largely by her newfound attitude. She is open to solutions and opportunities to grow her recovery that, prior to this time, she could not even have recognized. She is ready for new, life changing experiences that could move her forever away from the needle and the bottle, and instead towards sober well being. This mindset, of open-mindedness and willingness, is essential to recovery. Theistic interpretations are not. And it is this newfound mindset that’s really doing the heavy lifting here. Not god.

Adam N: Common Sense Recovery © AAgnostica and Adam N

This chapter appeared in his book as “Spiritual Caulk and the Great Puppeteer in the Sky”.

Some say it’s god working in your life – but is it maybe just the fellowship and one alcoholic talking to another that makes AA work?

It isn’t hard to understand how AA came to be so focused on god in 1938. It was different times. Those early AAs had a program that worked. It still works. They had that right. But what if their explanation was wrong? Worse yet: What if we’re chasing people who need help away from a program that works with an explanation that doesn’t?

Wish that really, really suck? Here are a couple of good articles. The first one is from the October 2016 Grapevine issue focusing on atheists and agnostics who are staying sober in AA without a god, called “Coincidentally Sober” written by a member in Southern California. The second is a chapter from Adam N’s book Common Sense Recovery on what he calls “Spiritual Caulk” – what we do to fill the gaps in our understanding.

This pamphlet is not an official AA publication

For a printable version of this and other pamphlets please email lifej@mcn.org

life-j
Coincidentally Sober

Once someone posted on their social media page, “GOD EXISTS.” I felt compelled to reply, “Where is your proof?” The response back was, “Coincidences – there are too many to be accidental.” My reply was, “I guess I just haven’t experienced enough to be convinced.”

I have experienced coincidences since I started in AA. The first one occurred when I opened a meeting directory, after finally admitting to myself that I had a problem and needed help. I found a meeting called We Agnostics, located directly across the street from the liquor store that I would walk to at night when I wanted more booze. It was at that meeting that I was able to find a sponsor who I was fairly certain would not be forcing God down my throat. The mere fact that a meeting called We Agnostics existed gave me hope.

The next coincidence occurred after I had read a bit of AA literature. I became concerned about whether I’d be able to stay sober for the long haul since I find it impossible to believe in a god. Would the Fellowship as a Higher Power be enough? That’s when a Grapevine magazine arrived in the mail (via a subscription that I had – coincidentally – won in a raffle). In that Grapevine was an article that mentioned a woman who had remained sober for 40 years using the Fellowship as her Higher Power. Forty years! I was relieved to know that indeed you can be an atheist and stay sober for the long haul, that atheism is not a barrier to sobriety.

And here is another coincidence: I volunteered to become a General Services Representative (GSR) for my We Agnostics home group with the hope that I could figure out how I could advocate for the creation of a pamphlet aimed at alcoholics who had a problem with the preponderance of God in AA literature. And the very first GSR-related event I attended was a “Concepts” workshop. And on one of the tables there was a pamphlet titled, “Many Paths to Spirituality,” which was pretty much everything that I would have advocated for.

Now, if I were one of those folks who believed that coincidences are proof of the existence of God, I would be thinking that God was OK with me being an atheist. I believe God just wants me to get sober, whether I believe in him or not. But since I’m not one who believes that coincidences prove God exists, I’m thinking that the reason there was an agnostic meeting, the reason there was a Grapevine article, and the reason there was a pamphlet is because enough frustrated atheist and agnostic members in AA spoke up. And I am so grateful they did because O probably wouldn’t be here if they hadn’t.

S. B.
Ventura Calif.

Spiritual Caulk

One of the most profound insights I’ve discovered in atheist literature is that god concepts serve the purpose of filling in gaps in our knowledge. ‘Miracles’ like lightening and earthquakes and sudden changes in personalities were considered inexplicable. In order to satisfy the natural human hunger for explanation deities were invoked. To this day god serves the same purpose. Simply put, when we do not understand how something works, we chalk it up to god. God serves as a metaphysical caulk, a generic all purpose filler that effectively fills in the gaps in our understanding.

One time at an AA meeting at San Francisco’s 1010 Valencia I heard a woman talk about a ride on a city bus. She was fairly new to sobriety, feeling pretty shaky at the time. As she rode the city bus she looked up and, there on the seat directly before her, she recognized a fellow member of AA. This chance encounter and their subsequent interaction helped her through a difficult time. She interpreted this as a miracle. She described it as ‘god working in her life’, a very common expression in the rooms of AA.

This is what I have come to refer to, yes, somewhat derisively I confess, as the puppeteer god. It refers to the idea that god arranges worldly matters to reinforce our AA lifestyle, to miraculously guide our ‘spiritual’ development. This god is very helpful, offers us numerous opportunities for growth, but never gives us more than we can handle. On good days god even finds us parking spaces when we are on the verge of being late for some important event, like an AA meeting or a job interview. The puppeteer also likes to miraculously inspire our sponsor to call us just when we most need to hear from him or her. I understand the comfort such beliefs bring. A safe, orderly world. Like a household in which a caring, attentive parent oversees all.

But I wondered as she spoke, hadn’t this other fellow been on that bus before? Undoubtedly when she was still ‘in her cups’, that same rider was right there, sitting before her unnoticed. In fact that very same rider might have been sitting across the way, waving a Big Book directly in her face just the day before! But she would have been unable to acknowledge this fortuitous encounter and all the mutual good that it afforded. Wasn't the
meetings presented a stumbling blocks for us. It seemed like a good enough excuse to go back out and drink. We hope this does not happen to you, and we hope that this meeting will help you put together a sobriety program that helps you navigate through those parts of the program that do not make sense to you, and replace them with things that do.

Together we can do what we could never do alone.

Some Further Resources

Until recently we non-religious members of AA have been scattered without much fellowship among us. And just as it can be a death sentence for many alcoholics to not have a fellowship with other alcoholics, so it has made us unbelievers feel like stepchildren in AA, and it was probably a death sentence for some. We were missing a gathering place where we could show ourselves, and each other that it was entirely possible to live a good and productive sober life without having any god involved in it.

With the Internet it has become possible to know each other, and keep in contact. Our primary gathering place the last 5 years has been AAgnostica, http://aaagnostica.org/
Every week there has been a pertinent article by an un-believer AA member. There is also a lot of useful reference material.

AAgnostica has also published a number of books. Some titles: Don’t Tell, Do Tell!, Key Players in AA History, Common Sense Recovery.

A good daily reader, an alternative to the Daily Reflections is “Beyond Belief” which can be found at http://rebelliondogspublishing.com/

In 2015 another website with weekly articles was launched, AA Beyond Belief: http://www.aabeyondbelief.com/ Also there is a section with comments from readers. A good opportunity to exchange ideas. There are also podcasts and other sound files with interviews or conversations at both these websites.

For a schedule of secular and agnostic AA meetings please visit https://secularaa.org/meetings/

This pamphlet was made by life-j, who lives in Northern California, and has been a clean and sober member of Alcoholics Anonymous for 29 years. A number of articles written by me can be found at the web sites mentioned above. This pamphlet does not propose to speak for AA as a whole. Updated 10-20-17

For a printable copy of this and other pamphlets, please email lifej@mcn.org

Freethinkers and Agnostic AA Meetings

Some suggested meeting readings and other resources

Many of us have had misgivings about the theistic god or higher power concept we find in AA, and have been left feeling that while AA allows us to define our own higher power or have none at all, it does not really give us the space to do so.

We hope that this meeting will supplement other AA meetings by giving freethinkers, agnostics, atheists, and other non-believers and doubters the space and help to explore new paths in recovery here. And we hope that anyone else who just happens to need a meeting today will find something here to help them in their recovery, too.

To us the core principle of AA is that of finding recovery through one alcoholic talking with another, and gaining strength through sharing our weakness with each other, and the recovery we find in AA will likely include such things as honesty, openmindedness, willingness, humility, service, and living by principles similar in nature to the golden rule just like it does for other AA members. Showing up at meetings, sharing our experience, strength, and hope, and working the 12 steps of AA are important tools of recovery for us. We freethinkers have found it better for us
to work the 12 steps of AA without making a god central to recovery.

It seems that any formal reading of the steps, even modified steps, only feeds an expectation that the steps should be worked one way and one way only, so we will not do a formal reading of them at all here. The most important thing at first is to quit drinking and start going to meetings. The steps can easily be found in AA literature once it is time to start working on them. Instead we will just list some of the principles we have found to work in the 12 steps.

The first thing we needed to do to get started with recovery was to fully admit that we had lost control of our drinking and that our lives had become generally unmanageable as a result. From seeing AA at work we came to realize that help from other alcoholics in recovery would be necessary for recovery. We could not do it alone. We decided to start living our lives based on the core principles of the AA program, as we saw them. We took a good honest look at how we had lived our lives, and how our alcoholic personalities had gotten in the way of our relations with those around us. We shared honestly and without reservation what we had learned about ourselves with another person, and became willing to change whatever was necessary in our lives. We also took a look at who we had harmed and who had harmed us, and made amends for what we had done, so long as it did not cause further harm to anyone involved, and we sought to forgive others for wrongs done to us.

We realized that quitting drinking was not enough. It would be necessary to keep working on all these changes, so we continued looking honestly at ourselves, and our relations to those around us, and whenever we did something wrong, we promptly admitted it and did what we could to remedy it, so we wouldn’t have it gnawing at our newfound serenity.

We found that a broader awareness of life and our place in it was important to our recovery, and that meditation or other work such as what is often called spiritual practice would be helpful to our recovery. We also realized that working with other alcoholics would be essential to our own continued recovery, both to help us keep our focus, and because when other alcoholics in recovery took it upon themselves to work with us, it had given us a place to go to seek recovery for ourselves. We needed to pay it forward, both for our own sake, and for the next suffering alcoholic. So we tried to carry the AA message as we had experienced it to other alcoholics.

**About this Meeting**

This meeting is first of all meant to be a safe place for freethinkers, agnostics, atheists, and other un-believers, but it is open to all who wish to recover. If you profess to have a higher power we welcome you, but we ask you to just for this one hour please focus on other aspects of your recovery out of respect for those who have a hard time with the higher power concept, and find a refuge here.

This meeting is not here to oppose anyone’s religion or to take anyone’s god or higher power away from them, but some of us may need to come here to talk about our troubles with the higher power concept often promoted in AA, or about the rejection or patronizing we have felt for saying we did not have a god, and couldn’t make any sense of the idea.

Some of us may come here to find a safe place to work past religious abuse we may have suffered during our upbringings, so that it does not get in the way of our recovery anymore. Some of us have simply never been believers, and think religion is a bunch of nonsense, even though we would rather not go antagonize anyone in regular AA meetings with our views. Whatever it is, we take the slogan “Live and let Live” seriously. In time we hope to move beyond feeling antagonized by the religiosity of regular AA and work with a recovery format which shows that it is simply all about one alcoholic helping another.

A word to newcomers: Since this is only a once a week meeting we strongly encourage newcomers to go to other AA meetings too, because more meetings typically increase our chance of lasting sobriety and a saner, healthier way of life. If this is your first meeting, please be aware that other AA meetings are run a bit differently, have other readings, and present the goals of sobriety somewhat differently. If you are a non-believer, you may find the talk about higher power or god in those meetings disagreable or personally offensive, but please do not argue with those meetings right now, but just try to learn all you can from them so that they may help your sobriety. Remember, you’re not alone anymore. Some of us, who went to other meetings that promote a higher power concept found that it was still possible to get and stay sober with the help of those meetings, even if we heard things we didn’t like, but we’re grateful that we now also have a freethinkers and agnostic community within AA. Occasionally all the god talk in the other
A couple of weeks later, on November 8, 2013 she posed the following question to us:

What if you are a hopeless drunk and learn of a group of people who have found an answer to your dire dilemma? It happens to be a program with worldwide meetings and support available 24/7. So you go to some meetings and find that you must be an atheist/agnostic to be accepted and you happen to believe in a personal, benevolent god. What do you do?

Jessie lived from February 26, 1931 until September 8, 2016

In Memory of Jessie

A couple of years ago we had a real controversy at our local AA Intergroup, which nearly tore it apart. Hopefully we have put all that behind us now, and can focus on what we are here for: To help the next suffering alcoholic. Jessie was chair of Intergroup at the time, and I think she would have preferred to just live her later years in peace, and hadn’t imagined she would have to deal with everything that came down the pike back then. But it helped her get honest in a way she had never been in her 42 years of sobriety. October 18, 2013 she wrote an e-mail to about a dozen of us. I’d like to honor her by sharing it with you:

Collected by life-j 2016

For a printable copy of this and other pamphlets, please email lifej@mcn.org
Dear fellow members of AA,

I am going to address the current debate by expressing my very personal experience.

I feel that I am being required to avow a belief in an "interventionist god" each time I recite the 12 Steps and in other parts of our literature whether I believe that or not. Doesn't that violate the "rigorous honesty" also required to achieve a comfortable sobriety? I have practiced "acting as if" for 42 years and have cringed inwardly each time I did so. I feel I am charged with violating the very foundation of the Steps by not believing in your god.

But I think the foundation of each of our Steps are the principles that inform them, and the final goal of working them – spirituality. Is a belief in God more important than the practicing of the fundamental basis of the Steps? I believe spirituality does not require a belief in god. It is the very essence of living a life of honesty, empathy, compassion, love, and more of the character of the morals that mark our society.

I will continue to honor and support those of you who have a deep belief in the God of your choice with gratitude, maybe even a bit of envy, at times, for you who have found that faith.

I hope you know that AA has given me life and, more importantly, a life I want to live. I have devoted a large part of my life to service eagerly and with joy to a program I love deeply, for over 42 years and now I've been told I don't belong here. Yes, I was told that; I need to find another program. Does our 3rd Tradition really mean what it says?

I want to share some empiric knowledge. My ex-husband who died the grotesque alcoholic's death was a member of AA for one year. He stopped attending and 6 months later was drinking. A mutual friend of ours saw him some years later and asked him why he gave up on AA. His answer, "I couldn't get the god thing." A recent attendee of a meeting I was at who, again, announced himself as having his first 24 hours was asked why he drank after 3 years of sobriety said, "I began to feel like I was going to church." If there is any chance, any chance at all, that if these two alcoholics had been given a choice of belief or non-belief that they would have stayed sober, is it worth that choice? And how many more of these tragically unfortunate drunks are we not aware of?

My husband and I visited England in 1975 and attended meetings there. In their schedules were listed atheists/agnostic groups. As far as I know AA is still alive and healthy in Britain.

I do so wish we could stop trying to figure out how many angels can stand on the head of a pin (that's the way I'm beginning to feel) and remember our Primary Purpose.

I plead with you to practice the HOW of our program,

Jessie
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.

Posted Nov. 17 on aaagnostica.org

“Roger” is the one who started and maintains aaagnostica.

For a printable copy of this and other pamphlets, please email lifej@mcn.org

The Secular AA
2016 Convention
in Austin

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 Hotel 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.
people, especially those who seem to come in wanting to be told what to do, and who are of a religious frame of mind. It works poorly for many who come in in a rebellious frame of mind, but even many of those will eventually adopt the steps. But having a mind of your own is not a character defect to be belittled as Bill Wilson did it in the Big Book. Especially when it comes to the religious aspect of the program. We have to say to Bill’s credit that as his sobriety matured he did a lot to moderate his earlier stance. Here are a couple of things he said later on:

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

The Dilemma of No Faith AA Grapevine, April 1961

Agnostics, atheists and freethinkers can in most cases no more be convinced to change their ways than anyone else that the fundamentalists pass judgment on and try to make them change. We seem to have been born that way, with a sceptical mind. “Once you see it, you can’t unsee it”.

And while most of us are rather average human beings just like most of the religious crowd, it is among the sceptics that we find those who will step forward and change the world for the better. Nothing in this world ever changed for the better by people placidly going along. Throughout history there are many examples of how going along made the world change for the worse. Let us encourage diversity! Encourage dissent! And always encourage respect and love for one another.

Even though Dr. Bob said he felt sorry for me, I still like at least one thing he said:

Let’s keep it simple.

(1) These facts are from the following sources:
(I have not been able to verify them further, but Jim Burwell was a member almost from the very beginning)

Talk by Jim Burwell 1957:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZzZYvALy52o
Most of his talk is about putting the Big Book together.

Silkworth.net:
http://silkworth.net/timelines/timelines_public/appendix1.html

For further reading on being a non-believer in AA, have a look at the following websites:

aaagnostica.org
aabeyondbelief.org
secularaa.org

You can also find schedules of secular meetings worldwide for agnostics, atheists, freethinkers, and other non-believers at those sites.

For a printable copy of this and other pamphlets please e-mail lifej@mcn.org

AA and the Art of Automobile Maintenance

It has probably happened to most of us during the times when we hadn’t put our lives back together yet, or back in our drinking days, that we’d be nursing an old vehicle along and there would be days we’d say “Dear god, please let it start”. And that’s about as religious as most of us got about automobile maintenance. I had this old van and I did a lot of work on it during the 20 years I had it. But I never once saw in the manuals “You can’t fix your truck without god’s help, so before adjusting the valves pray to god for guidance, and after you have completed the task give thanks for god’s help fixing your truck.”.
I imagine even the most devout Christian would think that an automobile manual which includes prayer should hardly be relied on. We want plain common sense instructions. So why do we have to get a god involved in our recovery?

Don’t get me wrong: Anyone who is of a religious mindset, if they feel a need or an inclination for a god in their life, and thus also in their recovery, that’s fine by me, it’s not my business to tell them what to do or not do, or what to believe. Let them do with their program what they want. I’m only talking about my program and about our program – the one we work together. The stuff we read, and how we talk to each other. I can not see why the rest of us should be admonished to get a god involved.

Bill Wilson and Hank Parkhurst were salesmen. I imagine these guys as telling half-truths, exaggerations, embellishments and the occasional outright lie to their clients, and then having to go drink to forget about it. Salesmanship is about making a sale. And while there are many honest salesmen who want their clients to be happy, it would be odd if these guys belonged to that category, when you consider how much they talked about making amends. And all their salesmanship and half-truths carried over into the big book.

I can see why Bill invoked a god – it lent some weight and authority to his book. I do believe that Bill really had those religious visions (by which I’m not saying that he indeed did make contact with a god - or that he didn't) only that I do concede he was probably honest about that part.

I of course also concede that he did have some great ideas. Whether they were indeed his own, or whether he just managed to pull some of the right things together from various other sources, I don’t think we need to be overly concerned about. Obviously he had discovered some principles which worked. I just wish he could have kept it simple:

- An alcoholic will trust another alcoholic more than they will trust just about anyone else, and so as alcoholics we’re in a unique position to help each other in recovery.
- Helping other alcoholics is one of the best ways to increase our own chances of staying sober ourselves.
- Most of us need a tribe to belong to, and we greatly increase our chance of staying sober by going to meetings and by associating with other recovering alcoholics.
- If the tribe is defined in such a manner that we are made to feel that we belong, then most of us will indeed feel that we belong, and we are more likely to stay.
- Don’t take that first drink, that’s the one that leads to a drunk.
- For most of us it is not enough to merely stop drinking. We need to make some real changes in our lives. It also helps our recovery if we can contribute to making this a better world, especially for alcoholics and their kin. Having a plan or a program of some sort can make it much easier to do. But however we do it, our recovery will most likely include working with such general principles as honesty openmindedness, willingness, humility, service, living by the golden rule, acceptance, and living one day at a time.
- Take it one day at a time, one hour at a time, even 5 minutes at a time if that’s all you can do. You can postpone that drink 5 minutes, or the argument, or whatever other stupid shit you’re thinking about getting yourself into.
- Doing the right thing helps keep you sober, because you will have no reason to feel bad about yourself. At least you won’t be adding to the reasons for feeling bad that you showed up here with, and even those will slowly fade away if you keep working on really changing your life.

Our program really did not need to be much more complicated than that.

Of course it helps many of us to have a program with specific instructions on what to do. The steps work quite well for many
throughout their childhoods, I wouldn’t be a bit surprised if they feel so beaten down already that it only feels like AA is beating them down further.

Of course, they don’t stick around. They can’t stand 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 of them we will not be able to help much, if at all.

Still, 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, most 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 many 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 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.

This pamphlet was adapted from an online article by life-j at aabeyondbelief.org: https://aabeyondbelief.org/2017/04/09/dont-fix-it-if-it-aint-broke/

Art by life-j: “Be Gentle”, 1976, oil painting. For a printable copy of this and other pamphlets email lifej@mcn.org

You can find a book with my complete AA articles at aaagnostica.org

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 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
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 often wielded at least some power in their community. 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. 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. 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.

Me on the other hand — I’d been brushing teeth and showering with some regularity for 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 the confidence for it. Some people are driven, upbeat. I never was. I was held back by low self-esteem and general fear of just about everything. Certainly in no shape to go about selling real estate.

The point is that while some of us alcoholics indeed may 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. How well does it really help someone with low self-esteem to look at their shortcomings?

Of course I got to grow emotionally in AA anyway. After a decade or more 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 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
**Books I Have Made**

I can't do a lot of building anymore, so instead I have been writing, making books, like this one. You may not find them all interesting, but here's a list of them, so you know what there is. Just seemed like a good thing to document my life here when it looks like it is coming to an end a bit sooner than otherwise expected, so I have made all this both for Melina, and for anyone else who might be interested. And of course: I had a lot of fun doing it. Maybe the most fun I have had making stuff.

All told, as of March 2018 there's more than 700 pages here. By far the biggest project was making the Photo Albums: Scanning and repairing photos, then sorting through thousands and whittling it down to a size where someone may actually read it. Of my great grandparents there exist only a few pictures. Nowadays we document our lives to an unprecedented degree, what with people running around with their I-phones taking pictures of everything and putting it on Facebook. I have really tried to restrain myself here.

I started several years ago by making an art catalog, which was actually something I needed, so I could show potential exhibitors my work.

There are two versions:
A full version, which has most of the work I would care to show, with chronology (a sort of CV), artist's statement, a section with photos, and a complete list of my work with all the information available.

There is also a "lite" version, a shorter "safe" one which can be used to show to people who are too easily scandalized by some of the work. Mostly safe from sex, politics, religion, and anything else of real importance.
This is a book with memoirs and essays, some of the latter quite opinionated.

I got into this after Bo Østlund had approached me to include me in his book with stories about Danish immigrants to the US "For enden af regnbuen?" (publishing house: Forlaget mellemgaard, Denmark, 2001) where I had to write an account of my life.

This set in motion a whole lot of things, including a renewed hope to get out of Oakland.

And it got me started writing.

I got sober in 1988. Just a few days ago, as I’m writing this, that was 30 years ago. While I am grateful AA helped me stay sober, and build a whole new life for myself where I was finally comfortable in my own skin, and in the world around me, I never bought into the religious philosophy.

Then around 2012 I discovered aaagnostica.org. It was relatively new then, but there were articles by other non-believers like myself, and I knew that once again, I had come home. Since then a couple of other sites have opened up, including aabeyondbelief.org. So I started participating, and have since written many articles which Roger and John were kind enough to publish.

I had a few careers in my life: My first couple of years in the US I was a house cleaner. Then I became a building contractor, and in the late 90s I started translating for a living. I have also been a farmer.

But even as the body was beginning to break down I have never lost my love of building things.

And while I enjoyed many of the jobs which I primarily took on in order to pay the bills, here are some projects I worked on for myself that I genyinely had fun doing.

Enjoy!