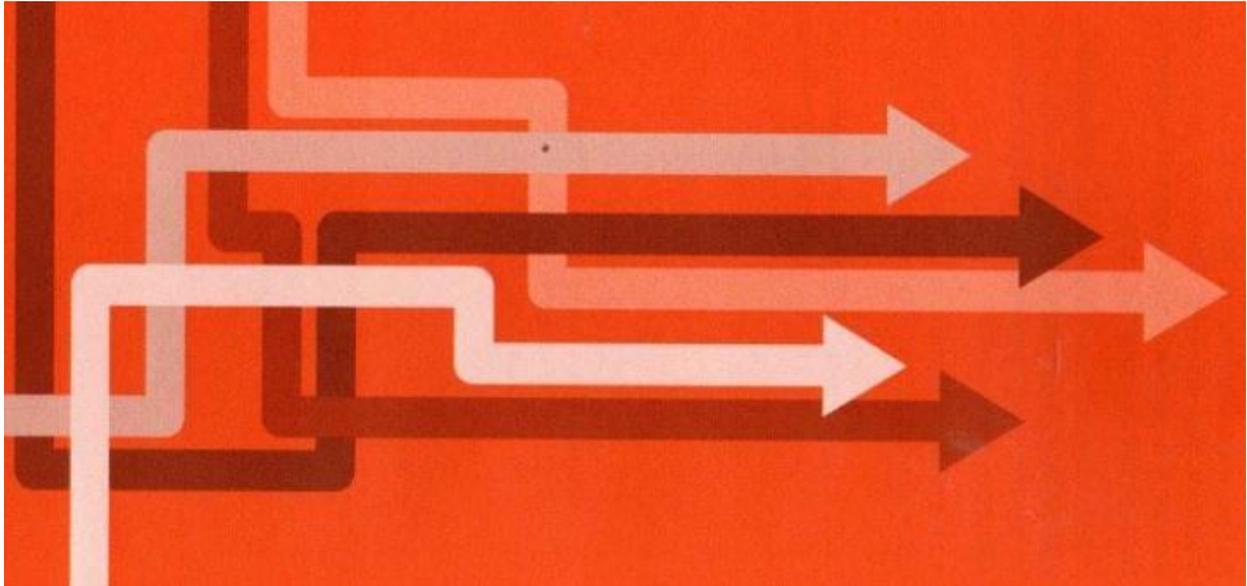


Evolution of a Secular Meeting



By Ralph B.

History

The Many Paths to Spirituality meeting was started on Sunday August 28, 2016 in Langley, British Columbia. It was launched by me and Lorrie K.

I had picked up a resentment when I heard another long-time AA member say “If the talk of god drives a person out of AA, John Barleycorn will drive him back.” Another member told me “If you don’t get the god bit you won’t have good sobriety” which made me believe that I needed to find an alternative to traditional AA meetings.

Lorrie and her husband were alcoholics but her husband didn’t want anyone preaching to him, and would not go to AA. Lorrie volunteered at the Langley Intergroup office and was also the district chair for the Grapevine magazine. She wanted someplace to refer newcomers that did not want traditional AA and its god talk. She has her own beliefs, and is a comfortable member of many different groups, including SMART Recovery. However, she wanted a place within AA for alcoholics like her deceased husband, who had hung himself in their home.

Two other AA friends joined to make the first meeting happen. Initially, the pamphlet “Many Paths to Spirituality” and the meeting format from the [AA Beyond Belief](#) website were used.

An Al-Anon member joined the meeting in August 2017 and the meeting format was changed to “with Al-Anon participation”. The four Al-Anon members have recently started their own

secular Al-Anon group, and this may be a first. We wish them success and they are still welcome at Many Paths.

In January 2018 the group had several members in early sobriety, so a Step series was started on Wednesday evenings using two books, [*The Alternate 12 Steps – A Secular Guide to Recovery*](#) and the AA *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* book. After the first pass through the steps, the AA *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* book was found to be hard for some members to accept and was dropped. The meeting continues to this day as a step meeting using only *The Alternate 12 Steps*. A one year cake, a two year cake and several others have been celebrated at the Many Paths meeting.

As of June 2019, there are 16 members of Many Paths with sobriety ranging from a few days to 32 years for a total of 158 years of continuous sobriety. Many Paths has an average attendance of 15 with a high of 27 and the Secular Step meeting averages 10 participants. We get frequent visitors looking for a secular alternative or just to check us out.

Meeting Vibe

The first few months of Many Paths were spent discussing why we needed a secular meeting and our motives, getting listed and accepted by our local AA Intergroup and AA District. We read stories from the pamphlets “Many Paths to Spirituality” and “Do You Think You’re Different” and the October 2016 *Grapevine*. This resulted in a deep feeling of commitment and affirmed that we were doing the right thing. Unfortunately, there was quite a bit of “god bashing” which we jokingly referred to as “god detox.” Like many AA meetings, Many Paths has evolved and now uses the book *Beyond Belief* as a discussion topic. The meeting does get intellectual at times, and is frequented by an addictions doctor, an entomologist, a priest, a professor of philosophy, a lawyer, a journalist, a couple of nurses, a few of us truck drivers, and others.

We do try to focus on the primary purpose especially when we have visitors or members with newer sobriety. The fact that we have a priest as a member indicates that we have reduced “god bashing” incidents, and it also shows that he has respect for us and we have respect of him; inclusivity is our goal. Before and after the meeting, chatter is alive and loud with laughter and friendship which we try to contain so as not to disrupt the traditional AA meeting held in the same building. Most of us attend traditional AA meetings as well and express our beliefs/nonbeliefs as we feel appropriate. One of our members migrates to Ontario for the summer months but calls in by speakerphone to stay connected to the Many Paths meeting. This call-in method works well and could be used by other secular groups to include those that have no easy access to a live meeting or are travelling members of the group.

One of our members has encouraged us to also improve our physical health by going to the gym, swimming, canoeing and bike riding. There have been a few remarkable successes but alas it has not caught on with everyone.

Business Meetings

We have occasional business meetings to get participation and understanding from all members and take a regular group mini-inventory. Newer members are encouraged to chair the meeting which has the format suggested on the Beyond Belief website with several slight variations; we read the daily reading from the book *Beyond Belief* and share around the room. Most of the time, everyone gets a chance to share their experience as it relates to recovery. We have a GSR and Intergroup representative.

We are listed in the local Langley directory, Vancouver directory, vancouveraaaa.ca and secularaa.org websites. Our members collaborated with the local gratitude day, the regional convention in Tacoma, Washington, and the international convention in Toronto. Two of our early members attended the Austin, Texas, secular conference and were sold on the secular idea; they are now leading members of Many Paths.



We have visited other secular meetings in Vancouver, Nanaimo, and Bellingham. Many Paths is a registered group with AA. We have contributed financially to Secular AA, AA District and AA Intergroup. We had plans that fell through to visit Life-j's meeting in Northern California but that is still on our bucket list.

Appreciation

None of this would have happened without the courage of Larry K. and the Toronto Secular groups to confront the controversy and create the awareness of the need for secular AA. The websites AA Agnostica and Beyond Belief provide information and encouragement. The website vancouveraaaa.ca allowed us to discover and collaborate with other groups in British Columbia. Some of our members follow and contribute to Secular AA Coffeeshop Page on Facebook.

Personal story

I owe my life to AA and would never talk badly about it, even though I never felt that I quite lived up to the standards set out by some members throughout 28 years of sobriety. Now that I have experienced secular AA and met the wonderful people in Many Paths and the secular community at large, I feel complete and satisfied with my sobriety.

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