

# Out of the Closet



**By Lisa F.**

When I first came to AA in 2008, I was much too sick and scared to mind the God idea. Looking back, the AA in my small central California city was quite progressive: there weren't many God references in the meetings or in people's shares, and the meetings usually ended with the Serenity Prayer, not the Our Father.

When I finally got serious about getting sober in 2009, I fully expected to develop a "God-consciousness" as THE result of working the Steps, as this was promised to me repeatedly in the meetings. I wasn't anti-God. I got a sponsor and "worked" the Steps with her, although I mainly answered with what I thought I was supposed to say. This approach seemed to work OK, but I definitely remember feeling disappointed when nothing changed on the God front: no white light or overwhelming sense of the presence of God. Deep down, I was worried I was doing something wrong, but I shrugged and kept going.

At two years sober, my husband's job transfer moved us from Central California to Sugar Land, Texas. I jumped in to the local AA, but I immediately noticed a difference: everyone around me was a proclaimed Christian, and they talked about God – a LOT about God – in their shares. Most went to the same suburban mega-church. I immediately felt "off," although I was warmly welcomed into the local fellowship. I couldn't seem to work up the nerve to say to anyone that the God thing had never worked for me.

Instead, I jumped into a new career (which I loved), and I started an advanced degree. My life got super-busy (kids in high school), and my meeting count dropped to one meeting every week or two. The insanity to drink returned, and I relapsed in 2012.

What followed: several painful years of “slipping,” in and out of AA. I could only get sober and stay sober for anywhere from three to eight months. Each time I went to the same large Houston treatment facility. I was quite compliant, but I repeated my bad habit of telling people what I thought they wanted to hear. Instead of saying what I was really feeling, I would only share what I THOUGHT I should say. I freely acknowledged that AA worked great (for Christians), but I suspected, deep down, that it wasn’t meant for me. I remember trying with all my might to get on the “God bus,” but it never worked.

At the third rehab stint, in 2015, I was utterly broken – lost marriage, lost custody, lost career. However, I was FINALLY willing to ‘fess up about the God issue. I could barely bring myself to say the word “atheist.” In fact, I had a harder time describing myself as an “atheist” than I did as an “alcoholic” or “addict.”

My roommate in the Detox unit was a very sweet, older Christian lady. I could see that her faith meant a lot to her. She read her Bible every morning, and she talked to God throughout the day. It seemed to me that she would be a natural for AA-style recovery. I mentioned this to the Detox counselor. He looked at me and shook his head. He said, “She’s right where you are, too – in a rehab DETOX UNIT. We get devout believers in here all the time. I don’t think it’s a matter of faith.” (He knew I was an atheist.) He said something I’ve never forgotten: “Maybe it doesn’t matter what you believe. Maybe it only matters what you DO.”

Sitting in the main meeting room, I felt something change, in the pit of my stomach. I thought, “I’ve GOT to make this work.” I asked my counselor, “Is there anyone here on staff, or in the Alumni group, who I could talk to about being a non-believer in recovery?” In a treatment center with hundreds of patients, with thousands of patient Alumni, she couldn’t think of anyone – at all – that identified as an atheist or agnostic. The stigma is that strong. Thankfully, I picked up a book in the Treatment Center’s little bookstore called *Waiting: A Non-Believer’s Higher Power* by Marya Hornbacher. I cannot overstate how finding that book transformed my recovery and gave me hope for the first time. It was an absolute revelation, and I was nearly weeping in relief upon reading the author’s experience.

Because I am a non-believer, they asked at the rehab if I would like a counselling session with the Spirituality Program Administrator, a Christian minister. He was a kind and helpful man, and he told me, “Atheists and agnostics have been part of A.A. from the very beginning. They helped to get it off the ground. They found an authentic recovery, and it worked for them. I think authenticity is at the heart of how we recover. I myself have had to seek out local meetings that are more inclusive and open, because a lot of them are NOT – but you can find them if you look.” He also mentioned that there were “secular” Houston AA meetings as well as information about organizations such as SOS, LifeRing, Refuge Recovery, and some others that I can’t remember anymore. I will always appreciate his kindness.

Although my voice still shook and cracked with nerves when I spoke, I finally started sharing at meetings about being an atheist. Of course, there were some condescending follow-up shares and comments, but I found that I could let those pass. I knew that other people, like me, were

making this stuff work. When we had computer lab at the rehab, I Googled phrases like “Atheist agnostics in AA” and “Atheist recovery.” I found several helpful websites (aaagnostica.org was the first) and Facebook groups. Finding these gave me even more hope. I made a vow (again, that deep feeling in the pit of my stomach) that I was going to make this work. I promised myself that I would be the secular voice that I didn’t hear when I was new and struggling.

This time, too, I paid attention to the WHOLE treatment plan, which included things like individual therapy, prescription medication, a three-month stint in a sober living house, and yoga/exercise – all in addition to 12-step activities. I decided that I was going to try it all, and then I would see what stuck. I also got involved in the Alumni Association at the rehab, which is a large and active organization.

Over time, I went back to grad school and finally finished that damned degree. I was able to repair my relationships with my (now young adult) kids, and I even repaired my marriage. I’ve also managed to achieve a good career, but I keep recovery the priority. Today, I think of recovery like the gas tank of a car: I must keep filling the tank with what I call “recovery stuff.” When I stop filling the tank, I will be vulnerable. As long as I remember to fill my tank, I’ll be OK.

After some time, I started getting requests to lead meetings and to serve as the “go-to” person whenever a patient or a newcomer was wrestling with the “God stuff.” When COVID hit, I started leading an hour-long information group with the patients at the rehab center. Part of my talk, which I always say very clearly, is this: “Belief in God is NOT a requirement to having a happy, healthy, full, and active recovery. If no one has told you this, yet, I am telling you now. It doesn’t matter what you believe. It only matters what you do.”

I know some secular recovery purists don’t care for the sponsorship idea, but I view it as just another beneficial recovery relationship. The rehab’s medical director told me, “Even if you take the 12 Steps and meetings as behavior modification combined with peer support, you will find them to be effective.” I’ve found the Steps to be somewhat helpful, of course with adapted wording. Doing Fourth, Fifth, and Ninth Steps provide a helpful foundation for continued growth and friendship. Many of my most meaningful recovery relationships have come from sponsorship. My sponsees are about 50/50 believers and non-believers.

Today, I go to at least one “secular” recovery meeting each week, as well as three or four in-person “traditional” 12-Step meetings. I remain active in the rehab’s Alumni association, making sure patients hear about my experience as a successfully sober atheist/agnostic. I’ve found that it is enough – it is more than enough – and I am very grateful. I know the 12-Step purists and the dogmatic theists will always be present, and they will always be “Loud and Proud” in the Rooms, but I finally feel comfortable being “Loud and Proud” right back about my secular recovery. My voice doesn’t shake and quake when I share about it, anymore.

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*Lisa F. was born in Cincinnati, Ohio, and raised as a devout Catholic, going to parochial school and receiving Confirmation from the archbishop as a teen – although she was frequently in trouble for asking questions based on her personal reading. In college years, she majored in Ancient Greek and Roman history, as well as a good amount of philosophy and comparative religions. Lisa became an “in-the-closet” non-believer over this time, but it didn’t become an urgent issue until trying to get sober in 2012, in Houston, Texas. After several painful years, in and out of AA, she fully embraced her agnosticism in 2015 and has been sober ever since. She remains active in Houston-area recovery in both secular and traditional AA, and her mostly tolerant traditional AA home groups now steer new non-believers her way. Lisa shares a PDF – [Secular Recovery Resources](#) – at her local rehab’s Alumni association, where she also remains active, lending a helpful hand to those in early recovery.*

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