

Father of We Agnostics Dies



***Fifty Chosen Articles:
Number Four.
Posted on AA Agnostica in March 2012.***

History. And an Historical Character.

Charlie Polacheck was the co-founder – in Los Angeles, California in 1980 – of the first AA meeting ever to be called “We Agnostics”. He achieved another first when, in 2001, he launched a “We Agnostics” meeting in Austin, Texas.

By Shawn M.

I learned tonight that my AA sponsor, Charlie P, passed away in Austin, Texas at the age of 98.

Within recovery communities, one hears much about sponsors. Charlie was both a son of a gun and a saint. Also, the most spiritual man I have ever encountered. That is really saying something about a guy who claimed to be a raging atheist (more on that later).

Many years ago I was “meeting shopping” and in the Los Angeles AA Directory I noticed a meeting called “We Agnostics.” There is a chapter in the AA Big Book titled “We Agnostics.” In essence, the chapter emphasizes that all drunks come into AA as agnostics and godless but, over time, they rid themselves of that ridiculous concept and see the path towards a Higher Power (code speak for the more commonly used word – God). I thought this “We Agnostics” meeting was

either one of two things, a Big Book thumpers meeting or – just maybe – something more interesting. It was indeed more interesting and was located on Barrington Avenue in a big old wood home which was part of the Unitarian Fellowship.

My first meeting there truly made me see the unique, complex components that make up the AA fellowship. This was a group of people that did not subscribe to any notion of canned theology or cultish adherence to anything besides this: “no matter what” one does not put alcohol anywhere near the lips or nostrils. Also, if craving or life itself made you feel like jumping out of your skin, you must pick up the phone and talk with another meeting member. We help each other “no matter what.” That was the guiding principle of the LA We Agnostics AA group. Simple concept.

At the end of this meeting an old guy, obviously from NYC, asked me if I was a real alcoholic. I answered in the affirmative. He handed me a piece of paper that looked like one of the slips from a fortune cookie. This guy, Charlie, told me to call him sometime and we’d chat about the Higher Power stuff or anything else about being an alcoholic in the rooms of AA. By the way, the piece of fortune cookie paper he handed me simply said “Charlie” and had a seven digit phone number (he assumed, even then, everyone still lived in the 213 area code). Charlie had brought the AA We Agnostics format to California.

I still have that little slip of paper.

I called Charlie. It was a journey speaking with Charlie. After a month I asked Charlie to sponsor me and he laid out his ground rules. The criteria were, for me, stern and disciplined. This man was not into holding my hand.

He was not an easy sponsor. Doing the Steps with Charlie was hardly a warm, pleasant experience. Brutal in fact. Much better than almost any shrink I had ever encountered and overwhelmingly wise. That was my first Steps go around. Subsequent redoing of the Steps work proved simply enlightening with Charlie. It helped keep me sober then and still does now.



As the years passed, I watched Charlie perform countless acts of real kindness – without an audience. For example: I was at meeting when a deeply disturbed schizophrenic whose personal hygiene was lacking raised his hand and asked for a meal and a ride to a shelter. Charlie quietly took the man and led him out the door – and then into his car. Nobody noticed but me. Not a word was spoken about it. The personal hygiene deficient man kept coming around and the same routine continued for well over a year. Once he (the lacking-hygiene man) showed up clean shaven with clean clothes and looking nourished and healthy. Charlie’s doing. This is but one small example. Charlie gave again and again – without looking for attention. To him, having acts of kindness witnessed or acknowledged somehow cheapened the act.

He was not merely about the 12th Step but adhering to a life of giving of oneself – always with unconditional love.

Charlie claimed to be a staunch atheist. His heritage was Jewish but unlike many atheistic Jews, Charlie did not observe the holidays or traditions. That would have been a treasonous act to Charlie. Yet, in later years, after endless hours discussing the definitions of God from the perspective of many belief systems and the nature of the universe from a philosophical stance, Charlie said to me that he had discovered a definition of “God” that he could tolerate. That power greater than himself was the “E” in the equation “ $E=mc^2$.”

That worked for Charlie and I can embrace his logic.

Charlie’s higher purpose and power was the act of loving and all the Energy (the “E” in “ $E=mc^2$ ” equation) contained throughout the universe (both known and unknown). Charlie gave unselfishly and saved countless lives. He did not care to keep score. He was a very devoted loving husband, father, grandfather and great-great-grandfather. Charlie was significant contributor. He saved lives and reinstalled the ability to experience joy into many hearts. He was a holy man.

Charlie had a good run. A life worth living and I am forever grateful to have known this man.

In honor of Charlie, let’s never forget the “no matter what” principle of the Los Angeles We Agnostics. My salute and love to Charlie P.

Charlie Polacheck, AA founder of “We Agnostics” in Los Angeles, California in 1980 and in Austin, Texas in 2001, passed away on February 27, 2012, after a year of failing health. He was 98 years old and had 41 years of sobriety in AA.

He had many sponsees and affected the lives of many people in AA. In response to Shawn’s post, others have shared their knowledge of Charlie:

An elder statesman (by Richard N): As an “elder statesman” of the fellowship, he was never demanding, always accepting. He got all teary-eyed when I told him about my estranged daughter’s phone call, after several years of not speaking to me, and then more years of my successful sobriety. She said, “I feel like I’ve got my Daddy back.” As a loving father himself, he really identified with that. Charlie was a Jew and definitely an atheist, so I don’t think the Vatican will canonize him any time soon. But in my loving memory he will always be Saint Charlie.

Candles and Charlie (by Sandra B.): I remember Charlie from my early days in sobriety and I knew he was an atheist. Started We Agnostics group and was one of the best AA members to ever have graced the earth. I call myself a Christian and I can’t hold a candle to Charlie. RIP Charlie P.

He made a difference (by Bruce K.): My life is infinitely richer having known and loved Charlie P. He made a huge difference in my life, and the lives of countless others. He taught us the true meaning of living rigorously honest, consistently responsible, and unconditionally loving lives. And this very public atheist was truly one of the happiest and most spiritual people I've ever known. Those of us fortunate enough to have known him will carry little bits of Charlie's message and love with us, and we'll pass it on to others so that they also can also benefit from Charlie's experience, strength and hope. Thank you Charlie P.

He was legit (by kakash): Charlie. My friend. He lived the richest life of anyone I have ever known. He was brilliant, always cheerful, adored by his family, admired by his friends. Charlie shared his secret to living well often and it was this: "To live well, practice these principles – rigorous honesty, unconditional love, and consistent responsibility." He was legit.

His legacy continues to help (Nick H.): I met Charlie when he moved to Austin in 2000. He also handed me one of his pieces of paper with his name and phone number. During his last 12 years in Austin he became an icon (as it were) of the AA community in Austin and was loved by many all along the belief continuum. Through his influence the number of freethinkers meetings in Austin went from 0 to 6 per week. He has directly and indirectly helped and his legacy continues to help many people who would normally have walked away from a less tolerant AA.

Charlie remained active in the program, holding AA meetings at his bedside and receiving AA visitors up to the last week of his life. Two memorial services were held for him, one in Austin, Texas and a second in Los Angeles, California.

Here is an article on AA Agnostica by the other co-founder of the first "We Agnostics" meeting: [Megan D.](#)
