Beyond Belief: Agnostic Musings for 12 Step Life

Review by Carol M.

Finally! A daily reflection book for nonbelievers, freethinkers and everyone, Beyond Belief: Agnostic Musings for 12 Step Life offers 365 quips for every alcoholic/addict. Drawing on quotes from writers, skeptics, entertainers, economists, religious leaders, philosophers, psychologists and varied recovery fellowship literature, Beyond Belief neither canonizes nor vilifies any school of recovery thought.

Where else would you find Sam Harris followed by Mother Teresa, Bill Wilson followed with Anais Nin, a doctor’s opinion by Dr. Seuss or a spiritual perspective from Albert Einstein? Beyond Belief takes a secular look at our recovery culture with help from the classic thinkers of the ages and the wisdom in and around the rooms.
“A funny thing happened to me on the way to the new Millennium,” writes author Joe C. “I realized I had been a closet Agnostic for most of my recovery.” Well a funny thing also happened to 12 Step Groups on the way to the year 2000. We were joined by thousands of people of different ethnic and religious backgrounds in numbers the fellowship had not seen before in North America. A few stayed, but many, if not most, leave because of the dominant theme which insists the alcoholic, addict, or codependent has to one day accept help that is always described in theistic terms.

Many members will say “Our fellowship is very diverse.” They have a friend from Africa, or India – or some anecdotal statistic to share from their own experience. But when we look around our community and assess its ethnic make-up – and then measure it against the meeting rooms – it never fails: the 12-Step basements are filled with mostly Caucasians and more men than women.

There’s a simple explanation which Joe C. says he thought about while putting these daily meditations together; the literature we depend on was created by white men in the 1930s. The book includes a historical reference to the struggle Bill W. recounts when the first two African-American men asked to attend a meeting. Those attending insisted on a group conscience and the result was a devastating, “No.”

Beyond Belief: Agnostic Musings for 12 Step Life is not just a great daily meditation tool. It’s also a gateway into a program that can still work for those who feel they don’t belong because they stand out at their regular meeting. Like agnostic meetings, the theme of this book is, “We don’t care what you believe we just want to welcome you and help you stay clean, abstinent, and sober – away from whatever substance or process that’s making your life unmanageable.”

The true spirit of the traditions is contained in the fact that the book is not Joe C’s thoughts on sobriety. It’s a mix of what he’s heard in meetings for more than 35 years, and that means it includes thoughts from those who have joined us on the road: Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, Jews – even feminists.

Despite the pitfalls of the Big Book and other literature around 12 Step rooms – the ubiquitous allegiance to Christian ideas – there are golden nuggets buried within the dogma. One is the suggestion to take a few moments of reflection before going out to tackle another abstinent day. This book opens the door for anyone and everyone to practice a ritual that has led to years of sobriety and abstinence. We’re told we should be leery of too much fear, anger and even excitement. Reflection is the key to knowing ourselves, and knowing when we’re getting closer to our drug or behaviour of choice. Beyond Belief can help you build this practice into your life without offending your religious/spiritual beliefs or your current rituals.

Finally, if you’re a woman who has experienced trauma you’ve no doubt been told that what happened to you is intertwined with your addiction. You’ve also probably been going to meetings and getting more and more confused as you go along. You may have relapsed and you are confused about why the program isn’t working for you. Your therapist or counsellor tells you being abused led to your addiction, and people in meetings tell you the opposite.
You really are no longer alone and this book can be a very useful tool. The old literature was written at a time when people didn’t understand the link between trauma and addiction. Even though it’s well documented these days, Twelve Step devotees sometimes show an aversion to new information. Imagine what would have happened to A.A. if Dr. Silkworth had a similarly closed mind.

One of the sub-titles of this book is “finally, daily reflections for nonbelievers, free-thinkers, and everyone.” For women who are re-traumatized by AA approved literature this could just as easily read, “Finally, a book of daily reflections you won’t have to throw at the wall.” I know there are a few dents in my drywall from books that carried the message I was responsible for being raped, molested, or abused. This book not only provides new ways to think about our rage and hurt, it also points out how platitudes are harmful. It doesn’t even tell you that God planned your demise to build your character. Now there’s a turgid little cliché that has sent many a survivor running for the closest exit...

I highly recommend this book to anyone who is struggling with finding their place in recovery, and in the spirit of our traditions – hopefully we’ll see you one day at one of our dogma-free gatherings.

Joe C, the author of Beyond Belief, is a founder of the now oldest secular AA meeting in Canada: Beyond Belief Agnostics and Freethinkers AA Group. Its first meeting was held on September 24, 2009.

You can purchase a copy of Beyond Belief: Agnostic Musings for 12 Step Life at Rebellion Dogs Publishing, at Amazon, or at your favorite online book retailer.