

The Secular AA 2016 Austin Convention



***Fifty Chosen Articles:
Number Twenty-Nine.
The second of the three international secular AA conferences.
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“Our secular movement has... given me a new life, a new group of people with whom I can relate with honesty. That new life was reinforced dramatically at the 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 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.

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.

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 was involved in service work of every kind all along, but eventually decided the most important work was to help atheists and agnostics feel safe and welcome in AA.

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

life-j passed away on December 14, 2019... peacefully and at home, as he had wished.

As part of his mission, life-j wrote a total of eighteen articles posted on AA Agnostica over eight years and these are:

- [*Eight Principles of AA*](#) (shared on January 12, 2020)
 - [*Humanly Possible – Stories of Secular Recovery*](#) (September 25, 2019)
 - [*Dr Wilson and Mr Hide*](#) (August 11, 2019)
 - [*Higher Powers*](#) (May 19, 2019)
 - [*Moments of Clarity*](#) (October 21, 2018)
 - [*Logical Fallacies of the Big Book*](#) (February 22, 2018)
 - [*Standing on the Shoulders of Giants*](#) (November 23, 2017)
 - [*Back to Basics and Other Religionists*](#) (July 6, 2017. Another chapter in the book, A History of Agnostics in AA.)
 - [*The Daily Reflections*](#) (January 19, 2017)
 - [*The Secular AA 2016 Austin Convention*](#) (November 17, 2016. This is also a chapter in the book, A History of Agnostics in AA.)
 - [*Open-Minded*](#) (September 22, 2016. This is a reprint of the article published in the October 2016 issue of AA Grapevine.)
 - [*Science may one day accomplish this...*](#) (May 12, 2016)
 - [*The Jellinek Curve*](#) (August 22, 2015)
 - [*Wounded Warriors*](#) (August 5, 2015)
 - [*A Grapevine Book for Atheists and Agnostics*](#) (September 7, 2014)
 - [*Yet Another Intergroup Fight*](#) (March 2, 2014)
 - [*Our new chat room!*](#) (February 2, 2014. This chat room was closed after several months.)
 - [*My Path in Alcoholics Anonymous*](#) (June 30, 2013. Also published, mildly edited, on January 12, 2016, as a chapter in the book, *Do Tell!*)
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