A Rewrite of Chapter 4 of the Big Book

Here is a modern version of the fourth chapter of the Big Book, originally called We Agnostics.

By Dale K

Commentary: It’s difficult to articulate my feelings about the original Chapter 4. The chapter’s deceptive nature is quite repugnant. I could rant and rave, on and on. That might make me feel better, but my feelings are so negative that it would bring me down and you with me. Reading this chapter is the textual equivalent of watching “Reefer Madness.” One thing I’ve come to understand is this: When religious people read this, they believe it is spot on. Their opinion is the result of prejudice towards, and ignorance of, what it is to be agnostic or atheistic. Many of them, truly, believe they have the corner on righteousness all to themselves.

This chapter is, at best, a condescending charade. I find it to be very insulting and incompatible with any secular thinking. By using “We” in the title, it is insinuated that the authors are agnostic. That is so obviously untrue. The author is a Christian trying to save and convert agnostics. This is the part of the Big Book where their blatant proselytizing for god happens. Isn’t it odd that they
would pretend to be agnostic for god? Attempting a conversion may be understandable, but their duplicity is detestable. I recommend that, if you read the original text, you read it with love in your heart, if possible. You must understand that it is a minefield for resentments.

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For The Agnostic

IN THE PRECEDING chapters you have learned something of alcoholism. It is hoped the authors have made clear the distinction between the alcoholic and non-alcoholic. If, when you honestly want to, you find you cannot quit entirely, or if when drinking, you have little control over the amount you take, you are probably alcoholic. If that be the case, you may be suffering from an illness which only a spiritual or life-changing experience will conquer.

To one who is an atheist or agnostic such an experience is quite possible. To continue as you are would mean disaster. There is no such thing as a hopeless alcoholic. To be doomed to an alcoholic death or to live on a spiritual basis are not always easy alternatives to face.

But it isn’t so difficult. About half our original fellowship were of the secular type. At first some of us tried to avoid the issue, hoping against hope we were not true alcoholics. But after a while we had to face the fact that we must find a more loving basis of life—or else. Perhaps it is going to be that way with you. But cheer up, something like half of us were atheists or agnostics. Our experience shows that you need not be disconcerted.

If a mere code of ethics or a better philosophy of life were sufficient to overcome alcoholism, many of us would have recovered long ago. Merely intellectualizing such codes and philosophies is insufficient. The practical application of these principles is the key to success. By realigning your will to be more loving, and practicing this day by day, you will see how much nicer life and sobriety can be.

Lack of power, that was our dilemma. We had to find a power by which we could live, and it had to be a power greater than ourselves. This was obvious, but where and how were we to find this power?

Well, that’s exactly what this book is about. Its main object is to enable you to find a power greater than yourself which will help solve your problem. That means we have written a book which we believe to be spiritual, virtuous, principled and ethical. And it means, of course, that we are going to talk about god. This should not be a difficulty for agnostics. Accept that most people are religious and find their spirituality through a belief in gods. We should not be prejudiced about how anyone comes to this wonderful way of living. For atheists or agnostics, this power could be as simple as the person you would like to become or the fellowship within AA. Our only concern is the results.
We know how secular people may feel. We have shared an honest doubt and prejudice. Some of us have been violently anti-religious. To others, the word “god” brought up a particular idea with which someone had tried to impress upon them during childhood. We rejected this particular conception because it seemed inadequate. With that rejection we had abandoned the god idea entirely. We were bothered with the thought that dependence upon a supernatural power beyond ourselves was somewhat weak, even cowardly. We looked upon this world of warring individuals, warring theological systems, and inexplicable calamity, with deep skepticism. We looked askance at many individuals who claimed to be godly. How could a supernatural being have anything to do with it all? And who could comprehend a supreme being anyhow? Yet, at other moments, we found ourselves thinking, when enchanted by a starlit night, “The cosmos are so amazing!” There was a feeling of awe and wonder. We held on to that, knowing that we needed no god to be humbled by the immense power and enormous complexity of it all.

Yes, we of agnostic and religious temperaments have had negative thoughts, prejudices and experiences regarding one another. Let us make haste to reassure you. We found that as soon as both were able to lay aside prejudice and express even a willingness to believe in a power greater than ourselves, we commenced to get results, even though it was impossible for any of us, atheist or theist, to fully define or comprehend that power, which could be god, love, fellowship or whatever works for you.

Much to our relief, we discovered we did not need to consider another’s conception of a higher power. Our own conception was sufficient to make the approach and to effect a change in our thinking. As soon as we admitted the possible existence of a power greater than ourselves, we began to feel a new sense of power and direction, provided we took other simple steps. We found that these were not difficult terms. To us, the realm of love and selflessness is broad, roomy, all inclusive; never exclusive or forbidding to those who earnestly seek. It is open, we believe, to all persons.

When, therefore, this book uses the term “god” it means your own conception of a higher power. This also applies to other spiritual expressions which you find in this book. Do not let any prejudice you may have against spiritual terms deter you from honestly asking yourself what they mean to you. This was all we needed to commence spiritual growth, to effect our first conscious relation with a higher power as we understood it. Afterward, we found ourselves accepting many things which then seemed entirely out of reach. That was growth, but if we wished to grow we had to begin somewhere. So we used our own conception which may be unlimited.

We needed to ask ourselves but one short question. “Do I now believe, or am I even willing to believe, that there is a power greater than myself?” As soon as a person can say that they do believe, or is willing to believe, we emphatically assure them that they are on their way. It has been repeatedly proven among us that upon this simple cornerstone a wonderfully effective spiritual structure can be built. (Please be sure to read Appendix II on “Spiritual Experience.”)

That was great news for us if we thought spiritual principles were only for religious people. When people presented us with spiritual approaches, how frequently did we say, “That’s for religious
people. It won’t work for me because I don’t believe in gods.” So it was comforting to learn that we could commence without religious beliefs.

Because of a misunderstanding of how spirituality could apply to secular people, we often found ourselves handicapped by obstinacy, sensitiveness, and unreasoning prejudice. Many of us have been so touchy that even casual reference to spiritual things made us bristle with antagonism. This sort of thinking had to be abandoned. Realizing that spirituality means nothing more than a profound new way of thinking about ourselves and others, we found no great difficulty in casting aside such feelings. Faced with alcoholic destruction, we soon became as open minded on these matters as we had tried to be on other questions. In this respect alcohol was a great persuader. It finally beat us into a state of reasonableness. Sometimes this was a tedious process; we hope no one else will be prejudiced for as long as some of us were.

The reader may still ask why they should believe in a power greater than themselves. We think there are good reasons. Let us have a look at some of them.

The practical individual of today is a stickler for facts and results. The twentieth century readily accepts scientific theories of all kinds, provided they are firmly grounded in fact. We have numerous theories, for example, about electricity. Everyone believes them without a murmur of doubt. Why this ready acceptance? Simply because, with the scientific method, it is possible to explain what we see, feel, direct, and use, because we have a reasonable assumption as a starting point.

Everybody nowadays, believes in scores of scientific ideas for which there is good evidence, but no perfect visual proof. Quite often, science demonstrates that visual evidence may not tell a complete story. It is being constantly revealed, as we study the material world, that outward appearances are not always inward reality. To illustrate:

The prosaic steel girder is a mass of electrons whirling around each other at incredible speed. These tiny bodies are governed by precise laws, and these laws hold true throughout the material world. Science tells us so. We have no reason to doubt it. Therefore, when the illogical assumption is suggested that underneath the material world and life as we see it, there is an all powerful, guiding, creative intelligence, right there our scientific understanding comes to the surface and we simply reaffirm to ourselves that there is no scientific evidence of it. We read wordy books and indulge in windy arguments, knowing this universe needs no god to explain it. For some who believe in god, these contentions that life originated out of nothing would indicate that life means nothing and proceeds nowhere. We agnostics understand that this explanation of the origins of life “means nothing” of the sort. There is much meaning in life and where it proceeds depends on the behavior we choose today.

We agnostics and atheists chose to believe our human intelligence is never the last word, the alpha and omega, the beginning and end of all. It is merely a tool we use to discover new truths.
We, who have traveled the path of sobriety, beg you to lay aside prejudice, even against organized religion. We have learned that whatever the human frailties of various faiths may be, those faiths have given purpose and direction to millions. All people, believers and non-believers, feel they have a logical idea of what life is all about. Just as we wish to be accepted, we should accept others personal ideas regarding spirituality. All people seek a degree of stability, happiness and usefulness. The path we may choose is not the important thing. The most important thing is our mutual goal of sobriety.

Sometimes we looked at the human defects of people and used their shortcomings as a basis of wholesale condemnation. We talked of intolerance, while we were intolerant ourselves. We missed the reality and the beauty of the forest because we were diverted by the ugliness of some of the trees. It is time to give the loving side of life a fair hearing.

In our personal stories you will find a wide variation in the way each teller approaches and conceives of the power which is greater than themselves. Whether we agree with a particular approach or conception seems to make little difference. Experience has taught us that these are matters about which, for our purpose, we need not be worried. They are questions for each individual to settle for themselves.

On one proposition, however, these men and women are strikingly agreed. Every one of them has gained access to, and believes in, a power greater than themselves. This power has in each case accomplished the seemingly impossible. As a celebrated American figure put it, “Let’s look at the record.”

Here are thousands of men and women, worldly indeed. They flatly declare that since they have come to believe in a power greater than themselves, to take a certain attitude towards that power, and to do certain simple things, there has been a revolutionary change in their way of living and thinking. In the face of collapse and despair, they found that a new power, peace, happiness, and sense of direction flowed into them. This happened soon after they wholeheartedly met a few simple requirements. Once confused and baffled by the seeming futility of existence, they show the underlying reasons why they were making heavy going of life. Leaving aside the drink question, they tell why living was so unsatisfactory. They show how change came over them. When many hundreds of people are able to say that the consciousness of the presence of a power greater than themselves is today the most important fact of their lives, they present a powerful reason why one should consider a power greater than themselves.

This world of ours has made more progress in the last century than in all the millenniums which went before. Almost everyone knows the reason. Students of ancient history tell us that the intellect of people in those days was equal to the best of today. Yet in ancient times progress was painfully slow. The spirit of modern scientific inquiry, research and invention was almost unknown. People’s minds were fettered by superstition, tradition, and all sorts of fixed ideas. Some of the contemporaries of Columbus thought a round earth preposterous. Others came near putting Galileo to death for his astronomical heresies.
Today, it is unnecessary to burden ourselves with fixed ideas like the ancients did. Nonetheless, even in the present century, American newspapers were afraid to print an account of the Wright brothers’ first successful flight at Kitty Hawk. Had not all efforts at flight failed before? Did not Professor Langley’s flying machine go to the bottom of the Potomac River? Was it not true that the best mathematical minds had proved people could never fly? Had not religious people said god had reserved this privilege to the birds? Only thirty years later the conquest of the air was almost an old story and airplane travel was in full swing.

But in most fields our generation has witnessed complete liberation of our thinking. Show any longshoreman a Sunday supplement describing a proposal to explore the moon by means of a rocket and he will say, “I bet they do it – maybe not so long either.” Is not our age characterized by the ease with which we discard old ideas for new, by the complete readiness with which we throw away the theory or gadget which does not work for something new which does?

We had to ask ourselves why we shouldn’t apply to our problems this same readiness to change our point of view. We were having trouble with personal relationships, we couldn’t control our emotional natures, we were a prey to misery and depression, we couldn’t make a living, we had a feeling of uselessness, we were full of fear, we were unhappy, we couldn’t seem to be of real help to other people – was not a basic solution of these bedevilsments more important than whether we should see newsreels of lunar flight? Of course it was.

When we saw others solve their problems by a simple reliance upon spiritual principles, we had to stop doubting the power of love. Our ideas did not work. But the higher power idea did.

The Wright brothers’ faith that they could build a machine which would fly was the mainspring of their accomplishment. Without that, nothing could have happened. We agnostics and atheists were sticking to the idea that self-sufficiency would solve our problems. When others showed us that “group-sufficiency” worked with them, we began to understand why it took both of the Wright brothers to succeed in their accomplishment.

Logic is great stuff. We liked it. We still like it. We have the power to reason, to examine the evidence of our senses, and to draw conclusions. That is one of humankind’s magnificent attributes. We agnostically inclined would not feel satisfied with a proposal which does not lend itself to reasonable approach and interpretation. Hence we are at pains to tell why we think our ideas are reasonable, why we think it sane and logical, why we say our former thinking was soft and mushy when we tried to figure everything out by ourselves. It takes teamwork and fellowship to come up with all these wonderful new ideas for living a good and sober life.

When we became alcoholics, crushed by a self-imposed crisis we could not postpone or evade, we didn’t have to decide the issue of god. There is no need to debate the distinctions of theism and atheism. Whatever your beliefs are regarding this matter, they are sufficient starting points to build a good, strong sobriety.
Arrived at this point, we were squarely confronted with the question of whether the fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous would work for us. We couldn’t duck the issue. Some of us had already walked far over the bridge of reason toward the desired shore of sobriety. The outlines and promises of a new way of living had brought lustre to tired eyes and fresh courage to flagging spirits. Friendly hands had stretched out in welcome. We were grateful that reason had brought us so far. With an open mind, we could easily step ashore. As agnostics, atheists and freethinkers, we lean heavily on reason for support. Combining our ability to reason with the serenity that accompanies love and peace, we receive great support in this last mile.

That was natural, but let us think a little more closely. Without knowing it, we may have been brought to where we stand by a certain kind of faith. For did we not believe in our own reasoning? Did we not have confidence in our ability to think? What was that but a sort of faith in ourselves? Yes, we had been faithful, abjectly faithful to our own ability to reason. So, in a small way, we have the common ground of faith with religious people. We discovered that faith in reason had been involved all the time!

We found that, although we were not worshippers, we were admirers. What a state of mental goose-flesh the word “worship” can bring on! Had we not, variously, admired people, sentiment, things, money, and ourselves? And then, with a better motive, had we not admirably beheld the sunset, the sea, or a flower? Who of us had not loved something or somebody? How much of these feelings, these loves, these admirations, have to do with pure reason? Sometimes, little or nothing, we saw at last. Were not these things the tissue out of which our lives were constructed? Did not these feelings, after all, determine the course of our existence? It was impossible to say we had no capacity for faith, or love, or admiration. In one form or another we had been living by these things often and, sometimes, by little else.

Imagine life without some kind of faith! Were nothing left but pure reason, it wouldn’t be much of a life. But we believed in life – of course we did. We can prove life just as we can prove a straight line is the shortest distance between two points. Could we still say the whole thing was nothing but a mass of electrons, created out of nothing, meaning nothing, whirling on to a destiny of nothingness? Of course we could. But, even the electrons themselves seemed more intelligent than that. At least, so the chemist said.

Hence, we see that reason isn’t everything. Neither is reason, as some of us use it, entirely dependable. Having said that, there is still no reason (pun intended) to throw it out. Reason emanates from our best minds. The people that proved people could never fly were wrong. At the time, they just didn’t understand all the physical science.

Yet we had been seeing another kind of flight, a spiritual liberation in this world, people who rose above their problems. They said love made these things possible, and we only smiled. We had seen spiritual release, but liked to tell ourselves it wasn’t true.

Actually we were fooling ourselves, for deep down in every man, woman, and child, is the fundamental idea of love. It may be obscured by calamity, by pomp, by admiration of other
things, but in some form or other it is there. For love is a power greater than ourselves, and
demonstrations of that power in human lives, are facts as old as human existence itself.

We finally saw that faith in some kind of goodwill was a part of our make-up, just as much as the
feelings we have for a friend. Sometimes we had to search fearlessly, but it was there. It was as
much a fact as we were. We found this great reality deep down within us. In the last analysis it is
only there that love may be found. It was so with us.

We can only clear the ground a bit. If our testimony helps sweep away prejudice, enables you to
think honestly, encourages you to search diligently within yourself, then, if you wish, you can join
us on this broad journey of sobriety. With this attitude you cannot fail. The consciousness of your
beliefs are sure to come to you.

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Commentary: The last two pages of the original version of this chapter describe one alcoholic’s
conversion to a belief in god. I believe it is, completely, irrelevant for secular people. I will not be
including it here. I have no desire to change his story, but it has no place in a chapter entitled “We
Agnostics.” I congratulate him for finding sobriety. We should be grateful for all that find sobriety.
Each person must find their own way. Regardless of the fact that a deity doesn’t fit into an
atheist’s life, we should understand and appreciate all paths to sobriety. My big hope is that
religious people, as well, will congratulate us and be understanding and grateful for our sobriety.

Dale K. has lived in North Carolina since 2018. He grew up in Michigan and attended 12 years of Catholic school, but it didn’t “take.” He decided he was an atheist at the age of 13. He moved to South Florida in 1974. He first came to AA in 1980 and had his last drink in 1981. In the mid ’80s a secular meeting was started in his home town of Boca Raton. He attended that meeting exclusively until he moved up the coast in 2010.

There he found traditional AA to be just like he had left it. In 2013 he discovered that AA had published a new edition of the Big Book in 2001. He was quick to read it and see the changes. Realizing there were none made to the “first 164 pages,” he decided it was time to make the changes himself. With that, he began writing his book, A Secular Sobriety. It was first published in June 2017 and has surpassed 1500 sales. It can be purchased on Amazon. A Secular Sobriety: Including a secular version of the first 164 pages of the Big Book.