

# Getting to Grips with a Higher Power



***By Andy F.***

I came to AA in 1984 after many years of very self-destructive drinking. My first thirteen years in the program were a disaster. I was going to meetings every day, frequently, twice a day. I was still incapable of staying sober. There were several reasons for my continuous relapses. Firstly, I was in complete denial of my powerlessness over alcohol. Secondly, I could not embrace any notion of a power greater than myself. Six of the twelve steps mention God and a higher power. As a newcomer and an agnostic, AA's twelve steps were an insurmountable obstacle.

## **A higher power; a bewildering idea for an agnostic**

The traditional view of AA is that alcoholics are powerless over alcohol. They need a higher power to stay sober and recreate their lives. I convinced myself that I couldn't use any conception of a higher power; I felt defeated before I even started. In my ignorance of the alcoholic illness, I decided not to bother doing the steps. This decision almost cost me my life. What followed was thirteen years of relapse. I almost died on several occasions. Eventually, I admitted that I was not a very effective higher power for my own life. If I wanted to save myself, I would need a greater power to overcome my powerlessness.

I made some limited progress with the other steps. Amazingly, I managed to get twelve years of abstinence from alcohol. I cannot say that my sobriety was a happy experience. It became increasingly clear that I would have to find a way of dealing with my

resentments. I was angry and undoubtedly a tortured soul as a dry alcoholic. My survival depended on finding a way to resolve my conflicted inner world. It was when I was twelve years away from my last relapse that I had the experience that I am about to share with you.

After twenty-five years in the program, I was invited to a social gathering of Polish AA members in London. Despite being born in England, I could speak and understand the language. My parents came to England from Poland after the war. A well-known Polish psychiatrist named **Dr Bohdan Woronowicz** attended this gathering of AA members. He is a pioneer in the treatment of alcoholism and drug addiction in Poland. This clinician favors the twelve-step approach to recovery. The meeting to which Dr Woronowicz was invited was not an AA meeting but a talk. People asked questions, and he offered answers regarding the successful treatment of alcoholics.

I remember that day like it was yesterday. It turned out that what **Dr Woronowicz** said that evening was the turning point in my recovery. He gave me a new understanding of AA's idea of a higher power. It may well have saved my life! After so many years of relapse in AA, I came to believe that I would have to find some kind of power greater than myself.

I sensed that this was the only way forward. A young and belligerent audience member asked the doctor: *"What's all this higher power nonsense about anyway?"* The good doctor turned to him and, with a half-smile, told the following story:

### **The doctor's interpretation of a higher power**

A housewife walks into her kitchen one morning, shocked to find the entire kitchen floor flooded with water. The water is rising fast. It's only a matter of time before it spills out into the rest of the house. It is sure to ruin the carpets and all the furniture. Understandably, she goes into total panic and despair. She acknowledges her powerlessness over the situation. Realizing that her home life will become unmanageable, she reaches for the phone and calls a plumber.

The plumber arrives quickly, finds the leak, and stops the water flow. He has saved a potentially disastrous situation. The psychiatrist then turns to the newcomer. *"Is not the plumber, in her desperation, a power greater than the housewife?"* His experience, knowledge, and skill were able to avert the crisis she found herself in. Authentically and practically, the plumber was, for the housewife, a power greater than herself. I was stunned!

### **A concept that made sense**

The psychiatrist said, *"Was it the plumber that was her higher power? Well, "no," he said. "His knowledge, skill, and experience were all powers greater than the housewife." I*

immediately wondered if Doctor Woronowicz was alluding to making an AA sponsor my higher power. He didn't elaborate anymore. I had to figure the rest out for myself. He said that the twelve-step program gets alcoholics sober when they are unable to do the job alone.

There and then, my understanding of what a higher power could mean changed forever. As an agnostic, a higher power could be the experience, strength, and hope of a member who had worked the steps and transformed their lives.

### **The message and not the messenger; a greater power**

I was always warned in AA never to turn another alcoholic into a higher power, but what about the message they carried? Their knowledge and experience of the AA program were a greater power. I was never the same again after that evening. I realized I didn't need to believe in God or depend on some mysterious, invisible higher power to get well.

With the doctor's practical analogy, I sailed through the rest of the steps using the AA group, the program, and the suggestions of a sponsor as powers greater than me! I have not found it necessary to pick up a drink for the last twenty-seven years. I came to AA in 1984 and was a serial relapser for more than a decade. If I wasn't drinking, I was running my life on self-will, which resulted in a painful, dry drunk.

There was no surrender or acceptance of steps one, two, and three.

I finally went through the program using the guidance offered by an agnostic-friendly sponsor. Much to my surprise and great joy, I began to recover from this **"hopeless condition of mind and body."** (BB p. 20). I am very grateful that I never allowed the "God" word to push me out of AA. I am now finally enjoying sobriety, happiness, and serenity as the result of going through AA's suggested program as an agnostic.

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*Andy F went to his first meeting on May 15th, 1984. Having had negative experiences with religion and religious people in childhood, he found it impossible to embrace the twelve steps. Frequent references to God and a higher power put him off completely. He decided to pursue his recovery through therapy. Unfortunately, it didn't keep him sober. He became a serial relapser and, several times, came close to losing his life. Eventually, he was lucky to find an experienced oldtimer happy to work with an agnostic. Andy was able to stay sober and recreate his life. It's now been twenty-seven years since his last relapse. He is committed to sponsorship and has become an avid blogger. Andy's blogs are about his experiences in recovery as an agnostic alcoholic.*