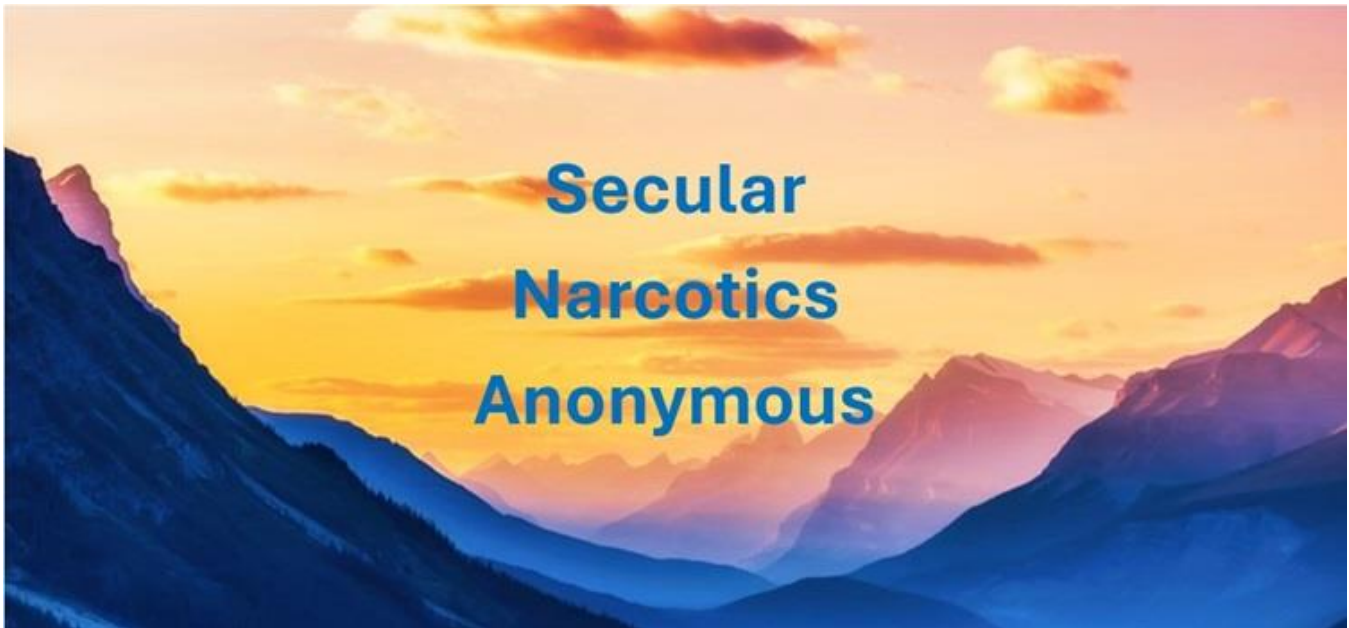


The Freedom To Be Myself In Secular NA



By Kris J.

I've never been a follower of any religion. I grew up in an atheist/agnostic household, only ever having gone to church when it was right across the street from my home as a kindergartener. I was a child who enjoyed making tie-dyes, friendship bracelets, and other crafts with the preacher's wife during Bible camp. I witnessed other things in that church that I craved to have in my life, such as friendship and community. Despite this brief foray into the world of religion, I've never been a religious person. I've never had a belief in any deity of any kind; the closest I've ever come as an adult was a period of what I called "militant agnosticism" in my 20s. "I don't know, and neither do you" read the bumper sticker I proudly slapped on my car.

Knowing this, it rather caught me by surprise when one day my adult daughter said to me, while reminiscing over her own childhood, "Remember that time when you were a Christian?"

"Well, absolutely not," I said instantly. I was baffled. How could she have gotten this impression? She began to describe a period during her childhood, according to her memory. "You were packing up from that small apartment over the bar, about to move to Texas to go back to college."

Oh. *That* time I was a Christian.

She was describing a period in my life just before one of my most difficult rock bottoms, one of the many I put myself through during my active addiction. In this particular one,

I'd find myself with a wrecked car, criminal and civil charges, and an eviction notice. If I didn't move from West Virginia to Texas, I'd be homeless within days. She remembered only that I was about to leave her and her brother, that I'd be attending college, and she remembered, unexpectedly, that I was a Christian.

How did a decided atheist become a Christian in my daughter's eyes? I'd become desperate enough to walk into a Narcotics Anonymous meeting. NA was a last ditch effort before giving up and leaving my children, moving over 2000 miles away. I had tried quitting drugs on my own, repeatedly, to no avail. When at long last the pain of using became so great it was breaking me, I found the rooms of NA. "Our disease always resurfaced or continued to progress until in desperation we sought help from each other in Narcotics Anonymous."

A full two months before I almost lost everything, I tried the one thing I had not yet tried, the fellowship of Narcotics Anonymous. I was defeated and broken. I hoped this would be a place for me to get better. After all, I had no other options. I wasn't ready to have my family know what I was going through, but I knew I needed help. I could see the destruction closing in on me. I had nowhere else to turn.

My first few meetings were extremely foreign to me; not so much the idea of not using, as I deduced that these people had found some magic formula to put down the drugs. Instead, it was the language, the prayers all over the walls. Higher Power was a capitalized euphemism for the Capital G-God. I didn't escape a single meeting without a prayer I didn't know the words to, the holding of hands in a circle, invoking "God". The fact that every single meeting was held within a church's walls didn't help me believe that this was anything except for a very religious program, despite the occasional claim it wasn't. I never attended a single meeting that didn't feature this sort of religiosity.

I listened to everything attentively. I didn't share much during those weeks; I related to the using, but the solution wasn't something that made any sense to me. I knew they'd figured out something, and it was made clear to me that something was supposed to be God. It was also the one thing everybody seemed to have in common, outside of being an addict. I was told many things: "We will love you until you can love yourself." "Don't worry about what your God looks like, eventually you'll come to know him." And I did what I was told. "Come to 90 meetings in 90 days. Get a sponsor. Listen for the similarities."

I was also told, "You cannot get clean without a Higher Power. It will be a God of your own understanding." But what was implicit was, "but of course, it should be a Capital H-He and you should pray to him in the style of Christianity, like we all do here." After all, I lived in an area where Christianity was the most familiar and obvious path.

I wanted so badly to find a way to live without using, I even bought a Bible. I went to a Bible study class on top of attending a meeting every day. Whatever it was that worked for them, it wasn't being done without religion. Even if I ignored the things unsaid, those words were spoken explicitly to me. I'd been told that if I didn't find God, I'd die. I believed death was knocking at my door on a regular basis, so that part of the equation seemed

real enough. "I must make the other half my reality," I thought, and in doing so, I dove head first down the rabbit hole.

I tried so hard to buy into this that I left my children with the impression that I was a Christian, and they then carried this belief with them for a decade. They remember the Bible, they remember me trying to read it and explain it to them. They didn't know I was an addict, nor a member of Narcotics Anonymous, but they saw I was trying to become a believer. It was all a lie. I never felt the faith I was told I needed in order to live, but I wanted recovery bad enough to give it everything I had.

What I could not reconcile, however, was being told repeatedly that I must be honest, both with myself and everybody else, and that I must believe in God to recover. I wanted to recover, and I wanted to be honest about it. I was trying to do more than fake it. "How do you find faith if it doesn't want to find you?" Nobody seemed to have the answer to that question.

"How sad," I thought, "that this recovery they've found isn't for me." I gave it everything I had, in an effort to be honest, open-minded, and willing. I shared the problem with these addicts, but the solution they'd found wasn't for me. I could not stay in a program where I couldn't even be myself without failing the basic tenet of honesty.

Shortly after I left the rooms feeling defeated and hopeless, I lost everything that mattered to me. I left my children behind for 8 months, and although I didn't realize it at the time, they'd go on to believe their mother had converted to Christianity. It hadn't worked out for me and- I'd expected them to see that, but they didn't. They were as blind to me giving up my attempt at religion as they were to my addiction. I managed to hide the truth of myself so easily from them.

This was in 2009, and I stayed out of the rooms for nearly 12 years after that. Each time I considered trying the fellowship again, it was the "God stuff" that kept me away. Over those 12 years, I'd reach 4 more serious rock bottoms that I'd just barely crawl out of again, and each one affected everyone in my life in consequential ways. I overdosed 4 times, and buried over a dozen friends.

My final rock bottom came in 2021, when I had my youngest child removed from my home. This was the worst of all, and would be impossible to recover from alone. I dismissed Narcotics Anonymous yet again, because I knew I couldn't force myself to believe, but soon found out it was one of the conditions I'd have to meet in order to restore custody. I'd have to figure out NA, as I was court-ordered to go.

Thankfully by this point, I could at least attend virtual meetings. At the third "traditional meeting", the host began the familiar proselytizing. "Go talk to your sponsor if you don't like me saying 'Jesus.' It's your problem, not mine." While I truly didn't have a problem with anybody else's faith, it felt like I'd been set up, and I'd never be allowed to express my own disbelief without instantly being one of those people he seethingly referred to. Now I knew, I couldn't be myself. I'd have to fake it just to survive.

That moment inspired me enough to google “secular meetings” and I stumbled across my first, a meeting on Zoom being held out of Seattle, Washington. Within 5 minutes, I knew that I’d found my home. By the end of the meeting, I realized I could finally be myself within this program, and I cried for nearly an hour. It was that much of a revelation to me. I could attend a meeting without having to fear that my disbelief would make me an outcast among outcasts.

Nowadays, I’m involved in Secular NA behind the scenes, in service. A friend and I recently started a new secular meeting on Wednesdays, which is now one of 26 online secular meetings one can find on the secularna.org website. One of the best feelings in my recovery has come from seeing the relief and joy from newcomers whose story is not unlike mine. It’s what inspires me to be of service. Had I had this community back in 2009, I can only imagine how different life would’ve been for me. It’s with that knowledge that I’ll continue to help this community grow and thrive, to reach those who need to feel free to be themselves too. I know there are others out there like me, who walked in and right back out of the rooms because they couldn’t force a faith they don’t have. The still sick and suffering addict is my inspiration. I’m so proud of this community I’ve become a part of. We’ve been having regular gatherings of our meeting representatives, working as a community on things such as service, formats, security, and attraction (rather than promotion). This year we have a representative speaking at a “Friends of Secular AA” workshop at the International Conference of Secular AA, which will be held on September 20-22, 2024. We’ve been told there will be a workshop based on secular NA at the 38th World Convention of Narcotics Anonymous. That’s coming up the last weekend of August, and I’ll be in attendance. This is my first convention of its kind. I’m giddy with excitement.

And I never have to pretend to be anyone but myself to recover again. I’ve found my community in secular NA. (For information about meetings and other resources, please go to [Secular Narcotics Anonymous](#).)

Kris J. is a grateful recovering addict living in the Eastern Panhandle of West Virginia. She first came into the rooms of Narcotics Anonymous in 2009, and she “stuck and stayed” after finding secular NA in 2021. Kris recently opened a new secular meeting and is a secretary for two others. She’s the mother of 3 and considers herself an atheist humanist. In her spare time she formulates natural perfumes and incense. Her clean date is November 18, 2022.
