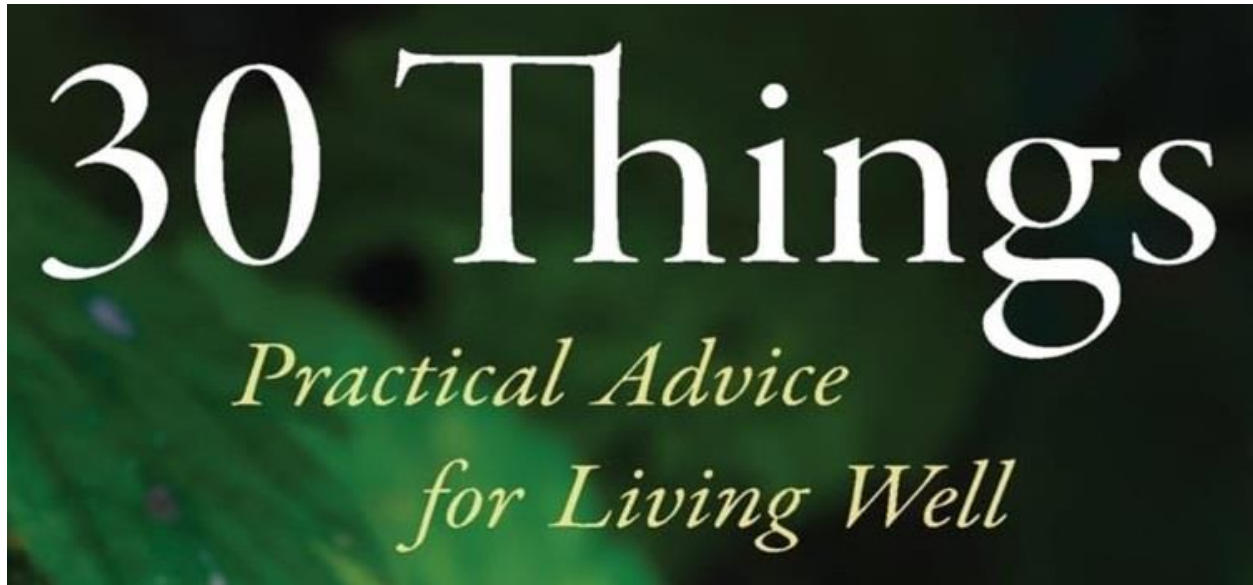


30 Things: Practical Advice for Living Well



By Joe C.

William Schaberg's *30 Things: Practical Advice for Living Well* is a very different kind of offering from this beloved author. Typically, Schaberg's writing points a spotlight on some compelling subject outside himself; building his case with primary document research, research that can frequently change our assumptions and our understanding.

[*Writing the Big Book: The Creation of AA*](#) (2019), was a myth-busting book; constantly challenging "urban legends," as Schaberg calls them, with the kind of penetrating second thoughts that come from a deep dive into archival documents and a profound respect for historical context. As the most important A.A. history book since *Not God: A History of Alcoholics Anonymous* (by Ernest Kurtz PhD 1979), *Writing the Big Book* pays tribute to our life-saving movement, while acknowledging that this noble work was often being done by flawed human beings doing flawed things.

But *30 Things* is completely different from that previous scholarly work. It is a vulnerable and revealing portrait of Schaberg's personal path in life – including many of his missteps; missteps that eventually led him to the adopt more sober practices – practices that were suggested to him by the extensive network of friends and advisors who so positively contributed to Bill's own life in recovery.

"Everything shared in this book, was learned during the second half of my life," Schaberg told me. "*30 Things* is a portrait of my journey for more than 40 years, and a candid accounting of what my life is like today as the result of trying to incorporate these 30 fabulous pieces of advice into my day-to-day life."

Unlike so many other sober memoirs, Bill doesn't even mention A.A. in this book, nor does he fall back on A.A. cliches or the "insider language," so well known to all of us in 12-Step programs. "*30 Things: Practical Advice for Living Well* is cast in a much more universal framework," Bill reflects. "Yes, it's all about me, but it is not about me in A.A."

Schaberg's outstanding Chapter 3 deals with exactly this topic, "No matter what you may think, it's always a communication problem." Chapter 3 hits this particular nail squarely on the head with several relatable stories. Whatever we think the problem is, talking to newcomers, other A.A.s or the public or professionals, greater efficacy can come from better communication.

This book is a lesson, an example of how to talk more effectively about recovery, about how we can talk to each other and how we can tell our story in meetings or to the outside world in a contemporary language – a language and presentation style that avoids 12-Step-talk, language that all too often unintentionally alienates people outside of that circle.



I would like to suggest that if you are completely comfortable with the language at you're A.A. meeting, maybe you have become desensitized to how alienating our insider language can be. Cliques language is an ineffective way to talk with new people. If we are going to "meet people where they are at", can we not try to communicate in their language?

30 Things: Practical Advice for Living Well is a boot-camp on how to talk-recovery in the town square, in plain and contemporary language.

Recently, Harry C. shared in AA Agnostica:

"The welcome was warm, the people inquisitive and accepting, but I was anything but forthcoming. I was scanning the set up and the scrolls. They announced they would focus on the First Step as 'Mr. Newcomer' was there. I cringed every time 'Mr. Newcomer' was referenced.

There was talk of God and the need for a Higher Power ... I was an alien in A.A. not knowing the language, the rituals and protocols, and not knowing if this A.A. could help me. But I felt the warmth of the intentions of those present towards helping me, I listened to the changed lives that A.A. had given those that spoke, and I realized that if Peter could stay sober and come along when he didn't believe in God then maybe it may be able to help me. I got hope."

Harry found cliches and insider language in the readings and from members isolating when he was new. It completely worked at cross purposes to the warmth and non-judgement and hope that A.A. members were trying to convey to him.

Now, there is, of course, an upside to insider language. People connect over it, join in and feel included. Lingo happens in every area of our lives: in my softball league, among stock and bond jockeys, members of a musical band. It happens within *every* clique.

While insiders follow this shorthand, it excludes those outside the ingroup, embarrassed because they can't follow along. In a more recent AA Agnostica essay, [*If it Ain't Broke Don't Fix It: Why AA Will Soon Be Dead*](#), Bobby Beach turns a humorous, but critical eye, as he watches our shrinking fellowship struggle to face its growing isolation – *the isolation of an aging insider's club*.

What is an example of talking recovery, without this 12-Step old-boys network parlance?

Here's just one example of self-inventory, overcoming poor coping mechanisms, and "practicing these principles" without cliches.

At the book launch for *30 Things*, Bill talked about his Chapter 19: "*First climb out of the cauldron...*"

He told about a couple that was close to him and his wife, Sara, "Really close: we were having dinner at each other's house weekly for 25 years." But then their friends split up and the wife eventually drifted away from their circle. In time, Bill and Sara learned their former friend was trash talking about the two of them, most especially about Sara, "which just made me absolutely furious," Bill recalled.

"I have a daily meditation practice, sitting 15 minutes in the morning and at night. I wasn't present at all. Man, I was arguing; I had smoke coming out of my ears; someone saying bad stuff about us – about my wife especially – was just not acceptable." After nights of interrupted sleep and his constantly recurring imaginary rebuttals with this lost friend, Bill brought the problem to Jane, the Zen-Buddhist priest, who ran the weekly guided practice Sara and Bill attended.

Her analysis of the problem and the offered solution was brilliant!

"You need to realize that this woman is obviously in a lot of pain", Jane explained. "Try visualizing her being trapped in a giant cauldron of boiling water. Then realize that your problem is that you are in the cauldron with her! The first thing you need to do is to climb out of the cauldron. Imagine yourself climbing out of the boiling water and walking away 20 paces and then looking back to see just how much pain your friend is in... and try to have some compassion for her."

This wasn't a one-and-done deal for Bill. Jane's little parable had caught his rapt attention, but it was a process and an ongoing practice of change – not an event.

“Resentment, anger, and those imaginary conversations continued to crop up with regularity, but every time I caught myself moving into that negative space, I would visualize the cauldron and then imagine climbing out, walking away, turning around and then trying to project some compassion back towards my suffering friend.

Gradually, this began to work for me. Every time I performed this exercise, I was able to generate just a little bit more compassion. The result was that, over time, these angry flare ups became less and less frequent and then, eventually, stopped altogether.”

At the 30 Things Zoom book launch, Rebellion Dogs friend, Dr. Joe Nowinski, was in the house. Regulars of Rebellion Dogs Radio know Dr. Joe is a repeat guest; we’ve discussed his books, *If You Work It – It Works: The Science Behind 12 Step Recovery* (2015) and *Recovery After Rehab: A Guide for the Newly Sober and Their Loved Ones* (2021). Episode 77 of Rebellion Dogs Radio was posted this week about Dr. Joe’s latest, *Sober Love: How to Quit Drinking as a Couple* (September 10, 2024).

I sent Dr. Joe a pre-launch copy of *30 Things*, and he confessed he was reluctant to review yet another advice book.

“Oh no, not another book of advice. Over the years, these *advice column* writers take such an authoritarian view, ‘Here’s what you should do.’ I find these boring if not offensive that these people presume to know everything. So that’s what I was half-expecting. But to my surprise, what I received was someone who came to this from a position of humility.

Bill shares, in large measure, what he’s learned from other people. Then he translates this into how it played a role in his life. So instead of having a negative reaction to being told what to do, I found myself contemplating what he was saying. More than a few *Things* I could relate to and how did I react to these challenges? A great deal was relevant to my own life. So that’s what I said in the review I gave *30 Things*: This is refreshing, not patronizing but empathetic. It’s the kind of book that people should keep on their shelves and pull it out and review it regularly.”

As Bill tells on himself throughout these 30 life-lessons – about his own emotional cowardice, about the importance of showing up, about his arduous journey of finding his own meditation practice – we are exposed to some great storytelling, a seeker’s journey in a self-effacing, relatable and generous manner.

Having read this book before the Zoom book launch, Mary C. added:

“You told a love story, about how Sara and you, both committed to your own growth but also both committed to your relationship. I loved all the chapters but ‘*NEVER tell someone, ‘You shouldn’t feel that way’,*’ and ‘*The conversation before the conversation,*’ demonstrates how you became a better husband and a better person.”

Again, I go back to the masterful use of plain language about the results of a process we all know so well: acceptance, self-examination, making amends, admitting when help is needed, giving back, a daily practice and discipline, with nary a cliché or book quote.

Here's an example. Last week, I Zoomed onto a meeting and the chair is sharing about Chapter 16: "Compassion can never coexist with Judgement." The chair reads:

"The Moral high ground is so seductive and enticing... I know the answer and I am ashamed admit it: being judgmental lets me feel superior... Understanding and admitting that crass motivation is embarrassing in the extreme and still I catch myself very righteously enjoying that high moral ground on regular occasion... Judgement is isolating. Compassion is inclusive. The choice is mine. One or the other. I can't have it both at the same time. Damn!"

No quoting Step this or Tradition that, or cliches about taking someone else's inventory, yet part of the recovery process is explained. This Wednesday A.A. Zoom meeting had a lively discussion; people identified and shared their experiences. Nothing is lost for insider A.A.s; and no one at their first meeting or a member of the public would have been alienated by coded language. This is one example speaking from the heart without pious platitudes or "Bill W-isms." This is a book I would gift to my son or my daughter, or anyone to whom I would want to say, "You matter to me."

30 Things: Practical Advice for Living Well is a legacy book – a memoir of one man wrestling with his personal foibles and his journey towards some newfound spiritual wellness. It is a glowing testimony to the "it takes a village" concept, to one person's wise friends and to why a supportive community so essential to a good life, presented in the brave sharing that we are familiar with and in a language that can include anyone we may wish to gift or recommend this book to.

30 Things: Practical Advice for Living Well ([Rebellion Dogs Publishing](https://30thingsthebook.com), August 2024) by William H Schaberg, available in hardcover, paperback and eBook directly from the publisher or from any bookseller you love or frequent. Read sample chapters free at <https://30thingsthebook.com>.
