

# AA Then and Now



***By Mick S.***

I'm sure my experience with AA is not totally unique but it's probably a little unusual.

In short, I spent a decade sober in AA in the 60's and 70's, then drank for 22 years before returning to AA in 1999. So I have now enjoyed 25 years of continual sobriety.

By the benchmark of "Once having taken a drink, I cannot guarantee my consumption or my behaviour" I have been an alcoholic from my first drink at the age of 15. I am the son of alcoholics and if you shake my family tree bottles will fall from many branches. Whether my alcoholism stems from genetics or environment is an interesting topic for discussion but really quite irrelevant.

I made my first contact with AA in 1966, aged 19, and got sober at 20. This was in the Goulburn Valley area of Victoria, Australia. The first AA member I met was known to me, being the father of boys with whom I'd gone to a Catholic school. I had to stop myself from calling him "Mister".

The AA which I encountered was very big on fellowship, less so on program. The advice (and example) offered to the newcomer was simple and direct.

The FIRST step was in fact to accept unreservedly that one was an alcoholic and could not take the first drink. The “One day at a time” mantra was emphasized and stressed that if a day was too long one should break it down to shorter periods or simply get another member on the phone. (Early on there were simply no mobile phones and not every home had a landline).

The next step was to get to meetings. Our home city of Shepparton had one meeting a week and there were meetings most nights in surrounding country towns within an hour or so drive. Often a country town group consisted of one person who, on a designated night, would open up the church hall and wait for visitors to arrive, and usually they did. So a meeting could also consist of a meeting in the car on the way to the meeting and again on the way home. Often the “meeting after the meeting” would adjourn to the local member’s kitchen until the small hours of the morning.

One was further advised to make amends to those one had harmed, with family being a priority.

Initially I was by far the youngest but over the years other young people joined the group and we would make up a carload and drive the 2 ½ hours to Melbourne ( the state capital) to attend the young people’s group, drink coffee and talk in coffee lounges for hours and race back up the highway to be home for work in the morning. We were young, sober and enjoying life.

The religious views of the members seemed to represent a microcosm of the greater community. Some were believers, many were nominally Christians but non practising and a few were non theist though the term atheist was rarely used. Most meetings closed with The Serenity Prayer but I, and I suspect most others, regarded this as a commendable thought process rather than a plea for divine intervention. The “Lord’s Prayer” has never been a part of Australian AA culture. At meetings the Big Book was on the table and the banners on the wall but discussion was more about practical matters and strategies for a life without alcohol. A lot of the people were at best semi- literate so reading and philosophizing was of little interest.

After 10 years of this my life was good. Whilst an earlier (far too young) marriage had failed I had remarried to the woman who is my wife today, moved to Melbourne and had a small and successful business. The only problem was that I was busy. People to see, places to go, money to earn. Before too long I was thinking of myself simply as somebody who chose not to drink instead of an alcoholic who couldn’t drink, and I just didn’t have time for the AA meetings.

Of course, the inevitable happened and I did drink. I think there was something in the back of my mind telling me that if this was a major problem, I could always head back to AA. Predictably and spectacularly, it was a problem and, yes, I did make my way back to AA. The flaw in my plan was that it took 22 years to find my way back to AA in 1999.

I do not propose to deal with those 22 years here other than to say that I am very fortunate to still be here and that my survival is largely due to the support of my wife with whom I celebrated 48 years of marriage this year. This is the woman who met and married me as a sober person in AA with no alcoholism in her family background or experience and when I drank she found herself married to a man she'd never met.

At about 3:00 AM on February 24<sup>th</sup>, 1999, I awoke from a fitful sleep with an overpowering sense of impending doom and a moment of total clarity that my life was at a crossroads like none I had experienced before. Everything that I held dear was balancing on a knife edge: marriage, sanity, finances, health, even life itself. Later that morning I contacted each of my 6 children to seek their forgiveness and support in the action I was about to take which was to re-engage with AA and again seek sobriety.

I started attending meetings and bit by bit the fog lifted. I really don't think I took too much notice of what was actually happening or being said in the meetings and simply maintained my resolve to refrain from drinking one day at a time. However, I soon became aware of an emphasis on spiritual matters which was foreign to me. When I examined my attitudes to this, I realized that I had over the years moved from a general dislike of my Catholic school years to what I realized was atheism. I could find not one trace of evidence, let alone proof, of the existence of a deity. Not all, but many of the meetings I attended preached a doctrine of "Believe or Begone" and would quote the egregious Chapter 4 of the Big Book to those who would resist their religiosity. I was also counselled to "Fake it till I Make it", usually right after being told that this was a program of rigorous honesty. (And I seemed to be the only one in the room who saw the irony in this.)

As time passed, I became more open about my atheism and more likely to confront those who harangued the newcomer with their "You'll never get sober without God" nonsense. And I was now angry because of the number of people I saw being driven away from AA by the cultish and dogmatic attitudes of the fundamentalists. Going to meetings was becoming a chore for which I had less and less appetite.

At about this time I began to hear about something called “Secular AA” in the USA and even of a couple of meetings in Australia. In 2018 my wife and I holidayed in North America and I attended the International Secular AA Convention in Toronto.

“Life Changing experience” is a cliché, but that’s what it was. From feeling marginalized in Australia to agreeing with several hundred like-minded people at the International Conference of Secular AA (ICSAA) in Toronto was incredible. Shortly before my Toronto visit, I had met Helen M who’d started a secular meeting at Kawana, on Queensland’s Sunshine Coast. Helen had encountered a lot of push backs trying to get her meeting listed and even when she did open her meeting the harassment from local AA traditionalists forced her to close the meeting due to fears for her safety. Upon my return from North America we joined forces and started the Bulimba Freethinkers Secular Meeting. Helen’s tormentors paid us a visit but upon finding a male (a 71 year old male) they slunk back and left us alone. Covid drove our meeting to online and post Covid we have continued as both and in person and zoom meetings and we host participants from all round the world. We lost Helen to cancer in 2022.

Today Secular meetings are listed under their own heading in Australia and the last several National Conventions have featured secular meetings. On the surface it almost looks like inclusiveness is the order of the day. I was naive enough to start to believe that was the case until I became involved in AA politics and realized that it is there is little more than reluctant tolerance of secular AA. It doesn’t really matter what the hierarchy (and yes there is a hierarchy) tries to pretend, little has changed in AA. Secular newcomers are still being turned away in droves.

In Australia in recent years a pamphlet created by secular people for secular people was created and distributed around secular groups. It was resolved that that pamphlet be presented to the AA Conference to become “Conference Approved”. I attended when our local area met to consider this proposal. As a co-author I felt I could answer any questions about the pamphlet. Instead, I found myself under attack and defending the very right of secular AA groups to exist at all, a battle which I was naive enough to believe had been fought and won.

The motion was defeated at the conference, but it was decided that there should be such a pamphlet but it should be written and designed by people appointed of the Conference. The process is ongoing and I’ve heard that a secular member has managed to have some say in the finished product and it may not be a total loss. Given the pace with which AA moves and the fact that I’m now 77 I have little confidence in living to see the outcome.

Given the speed with which AA is inevitably moving towards the precipice of total irrelevance by insisting on imposing 1930's thinking in the 21st century I doubt if it can continue in its present form for more than another decade or so.

I had long been a proponent of the school of thought that secular AA should exist under the umbrella of AA. I was a secular member of a secular AA group (secular being an adjective not a title). I now think that the best way we can be of service to the non-theist who seeks our help is to shake off the shackles of an organization which has lost its way and forge our own path.

The difficulty of course with this is that traditional AA owns the "brand" and so long as the fundamentalists hold sway I can't see this happening.

I think Bill Wilson deserves the last word on this from his speech at the General Service Conference 1965.

*"Our very first concern should be with those sufferers that we are still unable to reach... Newcomers are approaching us at the rate of tens of thousands yearly. They represent almost every belief and attitude imaginable. We have atheists and agnostics. We have people of nearly every race, culture and religion. How much and how often did we fail them?"*

I think Bill would be turning in his grave.

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*Mick was born in rural Victoria, Australia in 1947. At an early age he resolved never to work where he couldn't see the sun for most of the day and a life spent largely behind the wheel of a long haul truck was the outcome. He did manage to spend some time at home as is evidenced by his 6 children, 11 grandchildren and 4 great grandchildren. Today he is retired in subtropical Brisbane Queensland with his wife, Joan, and two Cocker Spaniels, Joe and Charlie, and most of his family live within an hour's drive. His experience of 2 introductions to AA 40 odd years apart qualifies him to draw comparisons between AA "then" and "now" and he's no fan of the modern iteration.*

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