

Step Three – An Agnostic Interpretation



By Andy F

A vulnerable newcomer

As an agnostic newcomer, step three of Alcoholics Anonymous was an insurmountable obstacle. Before I describe my experience with the third step, it feels important to tell you how unstable I was in early sobriety. Moreover, the negative conditioning of my early life had deeply distorted my perception of reality. I will demonstrate why I could not embrace any notion of God or a higher power.

An angry agnostic

When I put down the alcohol at the age of thirty, I was an angry young man. Why was I unable to believe in God or a higher power?

At a very young age, I was placed in foster care by my Mother. This abandonment affected me deeply. My foster Mother was a deeply religious woman. She saw it as her duty to instill in her foster children the values of the Catholic Church. Emotionally, she was cold and indifferent and frequently put me down. I was made the scapegoat of the family. Rather than God's love, all I learned from my foster Mother was guilt and shame.

As a young boy, I wondered where God's love was in all this rejection and abandonment. Not only did I resent my Mother for putting me in care, I blamed God for allowing this to happen. I began to view the world through the distorted lens of resentment. I projected her hypocrisy onto the church and resented going to Mass on Sundays.

At the age of eight, my Mother took me out of foster care. She sent me to a Catholic Boarding School run by a Polish order of priests. Here again, we pupils had to go to Mass daily. By the time I was ten years old, I wanted nothing to do with either God or religion.

Steps three – First Exposure

I almost got up and left the meeting when I saw that [the “God” word](#) is mentioned in five of the twelve steps. *“Why was God or a higher power involved in getting over addiction to alcohol?”* I only stayed in AA because I didn’t want to drink again and had nowhere else to go. As a newly sober alcoholic, I was too vulnerable to fit into normal society.

In hindsight, I couldn’t think of a less appropriate intervention to treat my alcoholism than the idea that some supernatural power was going to keep me sober. I was so angry and full of prejudice to God that I made a conscious decision not to get a sponsor and work the steps.

At the time, I didn’t know that AA was a spiritual and not religious program. To me, it was all the same nonsense. I was determined to prove to myself that I could succeed. The **Good Orderly Direction (GOD)** offered in AA was not for me. This attitude resulted in several close brushes with death.

David B

Eventually, after thirteen years of relapse in AA, I went down to Chelsea to find [David B](#). He had a reputation for being a rigid sponsor but someone who helped many alcoholics. Like me, many of them were *“last gaspers.”*

“Even these last gaspers often had difficulty in realizing how hopeless they actually were”* (12&12 Step one p.22)

Thank God for David! Even though he was a practicing Catholic, he never tried to shove God down my throat. David was about carrying the AA message to the alcoholic who still suffers. He never allowed his religion to interfere with his AA service work.

In my last blog, I explained how easy step two was with David using AA or the **Group Of Drunks (God)** as a higher power. Step three with David was also so simple that it was almost too good to be true.

An agnostic takes the third step

David invited me to his flat to take step three. The second step was so simple that I felt hopeful that David was the right man for me; I wasn’t wrong. He suggested we get on our knees together and say the third step prayer.

I immediately felt crestfallen. *“Don’t worry,”* said David. *“You confirm your surrender to step one by getting on your knees. Since the dawn of history, kneeling has demonstrated*

complete defeat; in your case, the enemy that has beaten you is alcohol. By getting on your knees, you are also humbly acknowledging that, drunk or sober, your life remains unmanageable. We both know that **“running the show”** (BB p.87) of your life since you came into AA has ended in one relapse after another.

The third step decision

David asked if I had the **“willingness”*** to go to any lengths.

***” When he acquires willingness, he is the only one who can make the decision to exert himself.”** (12&12 “Step three” p.40)

“At this stage of your recovery,” he said, “step three is merely a decision to work through the first nine steps.”

“We made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God (Good Orderly Direction), as we understood him.”

Wow! David didn't disappoint! Next, I received another gem.

“You are exactly where you are supposed to be. There is no promise of a God awakening when you get to step twelve. Relax; you are just at step three. There is still much work to do until you get to step twelve and the promise of a spiritual awakening.”

Having had a spiritual awakening* (not necessarily a God awakening) **as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics and to practice these principles in all our affairs.**

The step three decision in action

Next, David tested the sincerity of my step three “decision.” He showed me how to tackle step four and suggested I proceed immediately.

“Though our decision (Step Three) was a vital and crucial step, it could have little permanent effect unless at once followed by a strenuous effort to face, and be rid of, the things in ourselves which had been blocking us.” (BB “How it works,” p. 64)

I wish that, as an agnostic, I had received this type of guidance at the beginning of my AA journey. I will always be grateful for David. He told me not to get too hung up on the “God” word and to get on with the rest of the steps.

Looking back, before I met David, I would have been better off dealing with my resentments to God in step four before tackling the implications of step three, which David made so simple.

What are your thoughts? Isn't it high time that more AA conference-approved literature be made available to atheists, agnostics, and freethinkers? Should not AA make provision for every alcoholic coming into recovery, regardless of their spiritual beliefs*?

*Spiritual awakening for AA members who don't believe in the God of religion:

***Secular spirituality** is the adherence to a spiritual philosophy without adherence to a religion. Secular spirituality emphasizes the inner peace of the individual, rather than a relationship with the divine. Secular spirituality is made up of the search for meaning outside of a religious institution; it considers one's relationship with the self, others, nature, and whatever else one considers to be the ultimate. Often, the goal of secular spirituality is living happily and/or helping others.*

Wikipedia

*Andy F arrived in AA on May 15th, 1984, at the age of 30. He struggled for many years with poor mental health and relapsed back into drinking for over a decade in AA. He avoided getting a sponsor and working on the steps. As an agnostic, he rejected the steps because of reference to God and a higher power. He tried therapy to reduce his anger and inner turmoil. Nothing worked to keep him sober. Eventually, he met David B, an old-timer with a wealth of experience as a sponsor. He was happy to take Andy through the steps as an Agnostic. The results were spectacular! Andy underwent the "entire psychic change" mentioned in the Big Book. He still doesn't believe in the traditional idea of a monotheistic God. Since then, Andy has written "**The Twelve Steps for Agnostics**", hoping it may help other atheists and agnostics struggling to get well in AA. Recently, Andy wrote another book called "**You can't be a real alcoholic if you don't believe in God**". It's an account of his negative experiences with religious fundamentalism in AA. It is available for free PDF download on his website:*

<https://aaforagnostics.com/>
