

Freethinkers Article



By Jabu K.

Though at the time I was drinking myself to death every day, I can still remember vividly that the month was September. As usual, I had woken up in the morning to go to my favourite shebeen (A drinking house). After a few hours of drinking, unlike other days, I could sense that alcohol was not doing what it normally does to me after a few drinks. No effect at all. I felt sober as though this booze was just coursing through my body and not doing its usual job. This was strange.

I decided to leave my drinking buddies and go home. This was also unusual because I never left a drinking hole until I was well plastered. Anyway, when I got home, which was just across the road, I had a very deep conversation with myself. For the first time in my boozing life, I was brutally honest with myself with the answers I came up with. After that soul-searching, which had lasted around 30 minutes or so, I came to the conclusion or conceded that alcohol had licked me. Booze had beaten me to my knees!

Just that admittance that booze had won the battle and the war, made me free. I felt a sense of liberation in every part of my being.

Thus, when I went back to rejoin my friends, I just felt out of place. I suddenly felt I did not belong to this circle of friends. I went back home and I called Alcoholics Anonymous. It was on a late Tuesday afternoon.

Someone came to fetch me to a meeting on Sunday. Though I arrived just before they did their “Serenity Prayer”, I had a feeling that I belonged here. I loved and embraced AA with my heart, soul and mind. Again, I felt the liberating sensation going through my body. I was free at last from the cruel shackles of King Alcohol! I truly and honestly loved this fellowship from the word go.

Then came an excruciating sting on the tail – “you have to believe in god or a higher power or else this program won’t work for you” – I was told. That dealt a heavy blow on my new-found high hope. I was crushed by the insistence when everyone around me kept on reminding me I had to find and believe in a “god of my understanding”.

Fortunately for me, when I arrived back home, that sense of freedom was still running through my veins. I told myself that I will be going back there because I had just tasted something amazing in my mingling with that truly happy, joyous and free crowd. I took a resolution that they can keep their god and I will do this without believing in any supernatural deity. I had stopped believing in God from a very early age and this was not about to change.

Unlike most of you fortunate guys, I live in South Africa and most of all in an African township. If you know well about the apartheid segregation in our country, you will understand me better if I say this was the only meeting available for the African community in the sprawling township of Soweto. This is a township, depending on who you talk to, that has a population of over two million souls.

I have been going to the traditional Alcoholics Anonymous meetings since that fateful day, 17 September 1989. I have never succumbed to the pressure of changing my beliefs. In a highly religious country like ours, one is frowned upon when they proclaim that they do not believe in God. Worse still, if you are an African! People would ask you several times if “are you really sure you do not believe in God?” Despite all the pressure put on me, I have stood steadfastly that I don’t have any feelings for God or any higher power for that matter. Many have said and done many things that could have pushed me out of AA. But I have stood my grounds. I have witnessed many suffering alcoholics being pushed out by this pressure. They choose to suffer outside the fellowship than to endure the preachy god-saturated meetings. They never complain. They just leave AA quietly.

I have pleaded with many who hold different views on the matter of God never to leave AA. I have told them it is better to suffer inside AA than out there in the cold. But unfortunately, many have left.

The straw that broke the camel’s back for me came at our meeting of 24 December 2017. On this day, I was chairing a meeting and as usual, made my views known about doing AA sans god. During comments from the floor, one long-term member led a chorus directed at me. They all said in unison: “In every man, woman and child there is a fundamental idea of God ...”

It is then that I truly and honestly felt the cruelty of religious alkie or Christians in Alcoholics Anonymous. They couldn't hide their disdain for me anymore. They were sick and tired of my so-called atheism, agnosticism, non-beliefs, heathenism or whatever they called it. Personally, I do not classify myself under any of those labels. All I know is that I don't believe in any deity. Can you believe it? I remember one long-term member coming to me after the meeting and saying: "I am personally offended by this thing of yours of not believing in God." My God!

This apparent anger against me set me on a path to search for an alternative in the internet. I quickly found out that in other parts of the world there were Secular AA meetings. To say I was truly excited is an understatement. I connected with AA Agnostica and they directed me to a group in my country that was doing AA without the emphasis on god. With my connection to this group, I was truly and honestly liberated beyond belief. The meetings were held in the so-called white suburbs. I attended the Wednesday meetings, as the cliché goes in my country, "religiously". I felt I was "reborn" again. I could not feel those 60 km to and from those meetings. Every Wednesday evening was like a beautiful new day. I had found my true home in AA at last. I was now 29 years and a few months sober.

A few months later, inspired by this group, I took an initiative to start a similar We Agnostic group in Soweto. It was on June 10 2018 that the group was launched. It goes by the name Freethinkers. There are few of us. Many newcomers are dissuaded from joining the group by those who believe that AA cannot be done Sans God of their understanding. Sometimes I am alone in the meetings, sometimes I am joined by one, two or four individuals. There was a time when the group had picked up after Covid-19, but somebody's malicious lies led to the numbers going down again. Before then, we had a steady crowd of about 15 members.

Unfortunately, the original We Agnostics group in the suburbs "relapsed" after Covid-19 and is still on recess. It was a great group that freed many real suffering alkie who came back when they heard about its existence.

I must emphasise though that I am still a regular traditional AA member. At more than 36 years and a few months of sobriety, I still attend meetings as regular as an excited newcomer. The pressure of conforming to the norms does not distract me from what I came for in AA. I am still passionate about Twelfth-stepping the suffering drunks out there. I am still passionate about carrying the message to areas and townships that have never heard about AA. My excitement about this programme makes it easier for me to support struggling new groups without feeling any burden. This, I do because despite its flaws, Alcoholics Anonymous has pulled me out of the gutter. It gave me hope where none existed. It gave me a completely new life when almost everyone had written me off.

When I discovered 12 Step meetings in Soweto, I attended them regularly every Saturday despite the fact that six of them are God-oriented. Unfortunately, those meetings were unceremoniously shut down due to pressure of petty stupid politics. I still don't understand

up to this day why those who believed in god were against these god-driven 12 Step classes. It still boggles my mind up to this day.

In closing, I am eternally grateful to traditional AA from pulling me out of the cesspit and still helps me maintain my sobriety.

Jabu stopped drinking alcohol on the very day he attended his first meeting in Soweto, South Africa. This was the only group in Soweto at the time. The day was 17 September 1989. He has never relapsed since then. 36 years and a few months sober now.

He has had the opportunity to hold almost all the group portfolios at this group and other new groups.

Jabu also had a hand in initiating and starting other groups in Soweto and surrounding townships. This was borne out of a frustration of having to wait for a Sunday morning to go to a meeting. All these were traditional AA meetings.

A new We Agnostics group was created in 2017 in the north of Johannesburg City. When he discovered this group by sheer luck in 2018, Jabu became a regular member. A few months later, June 10 2018, he took the initiative of starting a Freethinkers group running along the same lines as the We Agnostics groups. Unfortunately, it was and still is, boycotted by hard-core religious alcoholics in Soweto. They also discouraged, and still do, a lot of newcomers from attending this meeting.

Jabu have been sponsored by those who believe in God and have had no problem. He has also sponsored and still sponsors those who believe in a Higher Power without a problem. He still attend a lot of traditional AA meetings. It does not matter too much to him that sometimes they are too preachy like in church. They still keep him sober.

Unlike hard-core religionists, Jabu has the privilege of having the capacity of Twelfth Stepping both those who believe in god and those who don't, with ease. He holds no grudges against believers in AA and outside.
