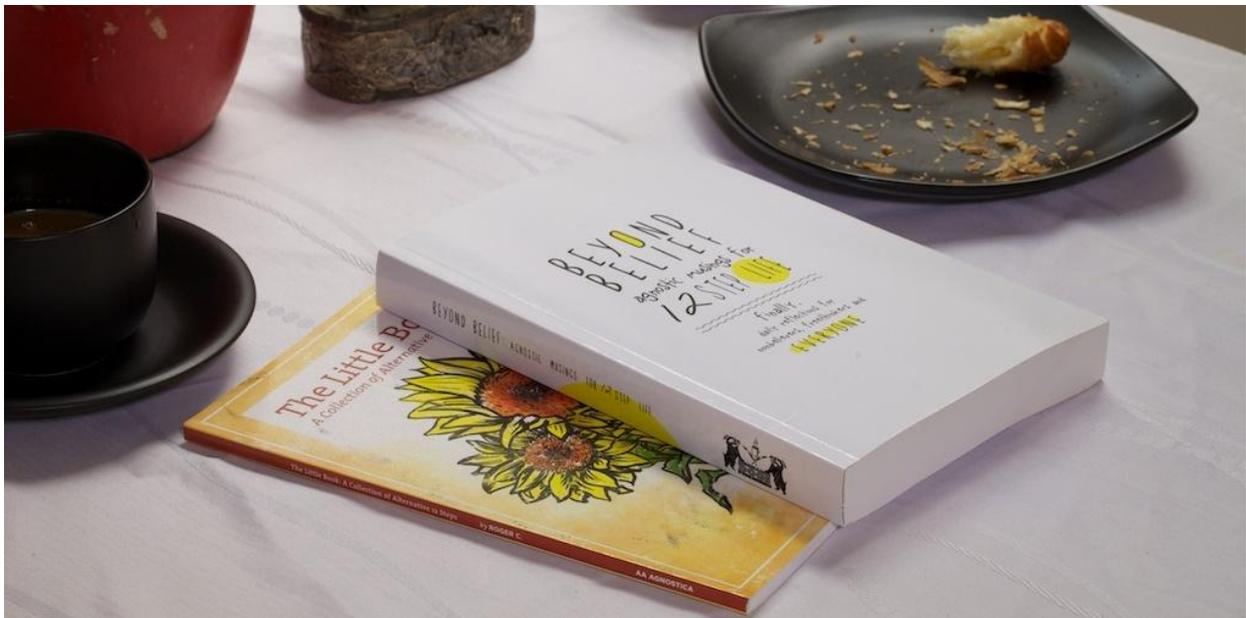




See Rebellion Dog, See Rebellion Dog Blog August 2014

Get your reading spectacles
on – It's Book Club time!
Podcast #6 looks at great recovery
books that widen our gateway

On www.RebellionDogsPublishing.com you will find a bookstore. We're talking about reading on this blog-post (and podcast). Not only is planet Earth's first secular daily reflection book, *Beyond Belief: Agnostic Musings for 12 Step Life* available in our book store but many eBooks and hardcopy books by and for addicts/alcoholics/codependents are available.



Visit RebellionDogs web site for links to these books. I hope if you've read them or you're going to, you will offer us some feedback. Maybe that will appear on a future Rebellion Dogs Radio post.

As 12-Steppers, we are all readers/listeners and we are all storytellers or writers. It was flattering and fascinating for us to read *Not God: A History of Alcoholics Anonymous* because Ernie Kurtz isn't one of us. He is observing us and telling us and the whole world what he sees.

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"Rebellion dogs our every step at first." *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* p. 73

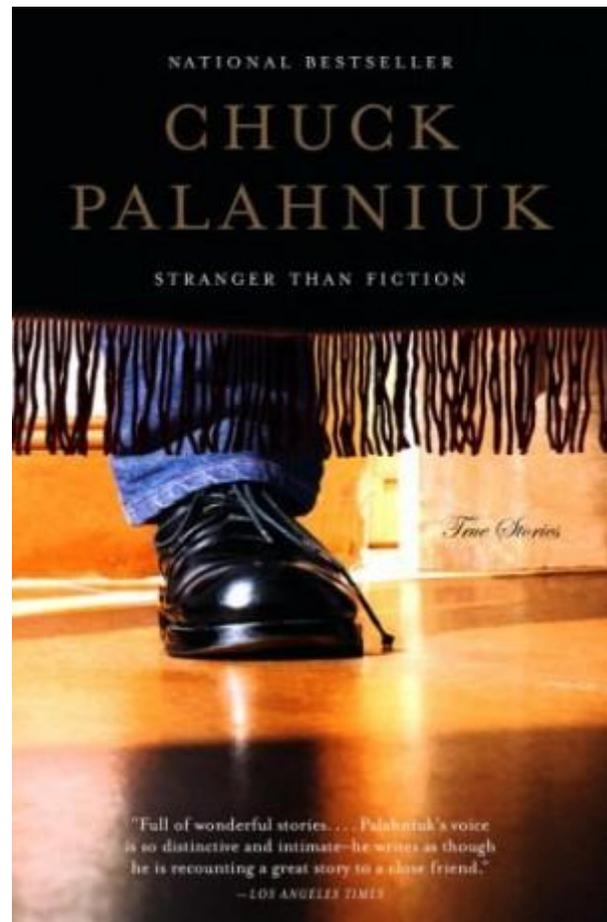
Chuck Palahniuk is an author we associate with fiction. He wrote *Fight Club*. He has a 2004 book called *Stranger than Fiction: True Stories*. In his introduction he talks about the similarities of crafting a true story and a fictional story. He studied us, too. Palahniuk attended self-help groups for those who suffered from various sicknesses and addictions. When we think about the relevance of reading about our stories or about telling our stories, there is value in hearing what outsiders say about our oral tradition of carrying the message. Chuck Palahniuk describes twelve-step groups (or other support groups) in this way:

“...they’ve come to serve the role that organized religion used to. We used to go to church to reveal the worst aspects of ourselves, our sins. To tell our stories. To be recognized. To be forgiven. And to be redeemed, accepted back in to our community. This ritual was our way to stay connected to people, and to resolve our anxiety before it could take us so far from humanity that we would be lost.

“In these places I found the truest stories. In support groups. In hospitals. Anywhere people had nothing left to lose, that’s where they told the most truth...

“While researching my fourth book, *Choke*, I sat in on sex-addicts talk therapy sessions, twice each week for six months. Wednesday and Friday nights.

“In so many ways, these rap sessions weren’t much different than the Thursday-night writers’ workshop I attended. Both groups were just people telling their stories. The sexaholics might’ve been a little less concerned about “craft,” but they still told their stories of anonymous bathroom sex and prostitutes with enough skill to get a good reaction from their audience. Many of these people had talked in



meetings for so many years that hearing them, you heard a great soliloquy. A brilliant actor paying him- or herself. A one-person monologue that showed an instinct for slowly revealing key information, creating dramatic tension, setting up payoffs and completely enrolling the listener.

“Telephone sex lines, illness support groups, twelve-step groups, all these places are schools for learning how to tell a story effectively. Out loud. To people. Not just to look for ideas, but how to *perform*.

“We live our lives according to stories. About being Irish or being black. About working hard or shooting heroin. Being male or female. And we spend our lives looking for evidence—facts and proof—that supports our story. As a writer, you just recognize that part of human nature.”

One of the things we notice when we look at AA’s new pamphlet, “Many Paths to Spirituality,” the publication doesn’t try to define spirituality. It draws from the experience of spirituality expressed from a few very varied storytellers of different creedal and cultural backgrounds and it expresses that not only is there no wrong way to do AA, but that there isn’t even a preferred way to get and stay sober a la Alcoholics Anonymous. It talks about many paths to experiencing spirituality without feeling obligated to defining it. Ours is an oral (or written) tradition of sharing our experiences. AA has been either lucky or wise in never hand-cuffing ourselves to a definition of addiction nor a definition of recovery. We describe how it looks and feels to each other. And that is good enough. Certainly, it’s as good as it gets in the rooms of 12-Step recovery.

Available as a paperback or eBook, *My Name is Lillian and I’m an Alcoholic (and an Atheist): How I got and stayed sober in AA without all that God stuff* spans three years of what she calls “one side of a conversation about sobriety.” As a New York City AA member by the pen-name Lillian, she participates in an email (online) AA meeting from Monday February 6, 2006 to Monday October 18th, 2008. This is life in recovery from substance and process addiction. The book is like going to meetings for three years with Lillian. You can marathon through in a weekend or savor it over a few pages a week until completed. We get an invited into real life sobriety with loss, illness, relationships, career highs and lows and a

trip through the Twelve Steps and other AA customs in real-time, as the author is processing these experiences.



In About This Book, the author writes:

“Supposedly, belief in God is not required to join AA, and one might even get sober, but according to the Big Book, finding belief in “God as we understood Him” is essential to staying off the bottle. I know that when I read the chapter, I wanted to toss the book into the nearest bonfire. There’s nothing quite like being patted on the head and sagely told “Hang in there; you’ll get it, stupid.” Okay, it doesn’t literally say that, but I took it that way. I’m here to say that profound, lasting sobriety is within your grasp. No bait and switch. You can believe in God, but it’s not required. You can use the concept of a Higher Power or not bother. There is no wrong way to get

sober and stay sober. Doing this is a challenge, but as generations of hard-core alcoholics have shown, it can be done

Later the author writes in Chapter 8:

“I’m a great believer in the buffet philosophy: ‘Take what you need and leave the rest.’ But what I need changes over time. So I keep both the baby and the bathwater (and the Steps) around just in case. Thanks.”

There is a candor about multiple addictions and therapy, unapologetic about “outside issues.” Chapter 11 says:

“When I got sober, I felt no shame. I could have sung from the rooftops about my love of sobriety, but recovery from obsessive eating? I’d rather keep it a secret. Of course, If you could see me you might be able to guess that there is something happening in the food/eating department.

“Recently, I’ve had some weight loss or as we say in OA (Overeaters Anonymous) ‘physical recovery.’ I’ve lost about half of the amount I’d like to lose. It can all devolve into a numbers game with me. What I weigh, how many calories I eat, my goals, blah, blah, blah.

“What I didn’t understand was that once I reach a comfortable weight, I don’t have to fail, throw in the towel and start to gain it all back. Instead, I could let go of the food obsession and allow my feelings to come forward. One of the sayings in OS is ‘It’s not what you’re eating. It’s what’s eating you.’

“When I repress my emotions, often something else, like the ability to recognize when I’m full and don’t need an ice cream sandwich, goes haywire.

“Talking with my therapist opened the door for me to be healthy in recovery both emotionally and physically.”

Lillian’s book is like having a 12 Step buddy as you hear her out through the ups and downs of these three years of her recovery. She ends the book by expanding on topics she thought she should discuss more—sex and relationships, anger, overcoming compulsion. She makes up for it at the end and offers some scripts for starting one’s own agnostic AA group.

You can’t go wrong with this book. It’s 100% personal journey so there’s nothing to disagree with, just a few things that any open-minded reader could learn from to enrich their own life.

The second book I want to talk about is from a member who also got his start in New York City AA. *A Freethinker in Alcoholics Anonymous* is by author, John Lauritsen, who got sober in Manhattan in 1968. He was among many New York AA members who were donating blood to help keep Bill W alive. John’s book is the cream of the “take what you like and leave the rest” crop. Many AA books written by nonbelievers challenge the need for obedience or dependence on a supernatural power. John is even more critical of the Twelve Steps and he makes arguments worth hearing. Before we even get to God, *A Freethinker in Alcoholics Anonymous* takes issue with the idea of powerlessness. Learned dependency or inadequacy is, as John sees it, counter-productive. He talks about what was good about the Washingtonian movement which preceded AA. In researching their way

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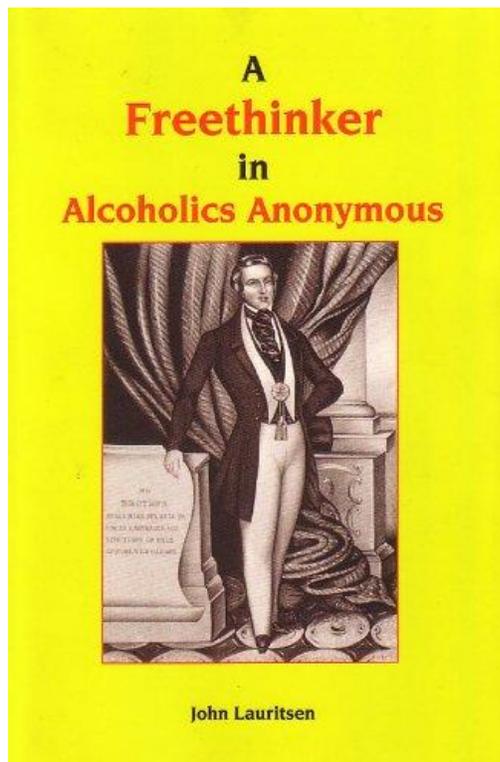
“Rebellion dogs our every step at first.” *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* p. 73

of helping alcoholics, John found that empowering the alcoholic—not reinforcing dependency—creates a better state of mind for recovery and a productive life.

What John Lauritsen likes about AA, what he considers the AA Program, is two main themes: 1) The one-day-at-a-time program and 2) Fellowship.

“Whether the Steps are helpful, harmful or both, it is intolerable that they should become sacred dogma. Everyone should be free to criticize or reject the Steps—openly, and without risk of ostracism. Every A.A. member and every A.A. group

should be free to reinterpret and re-write the Steps, in line with the principles of the A.A. Preamble and the Twelve Traditions. The True A.A., the Fellowship, belongs to us freethinkers as much as it does to the god-people.”



So he sees AA as a Fellowship, not a program and the Twelve Steps as suggested or even optional.

I am a fan of the Twelve Steps. Of course I think that everyone ought to word the Steps in accordance to their own worldview, how much we each feel outside forces control our lives vs. internal freedom of choice. So, I don't agree with John L on everything, I make different choices for myself than he does. Nevertheless, his views continue to open my mind to the

varieties of recovery available inside the AA framework.

Furthermore, under “A general critique of the Steps,” John goes on to challenge some of the assumed morality and causality of alcoholism and how to arrest it.

“The fundamental flaw with the Steps is to posit that ‘character defects’ cause alcoholism, rather than the other way around. While promoting the ‘spiritual’ at the expense of the physical, the Steps don’t even mention the real heart of recovery: The 24-Hour Plan. The Steps fail to mention physical recovery, social recovery,

financial recovery, or intellectual recovery—or abstinence from other mind-altering drugs.

“From my own experience, physical recovery is of crucial importance. Step 8 in my own ‘Freethinker’s Steps for Recovery From Alcoholism’ reads: We strive to be in good health: We stopped smoking, exercised, got enough rest, and ate nutritious food. It is sadly significant that Bill W., author of the Steps, was unable to stop smoking, even when he was dying from emphysema.”

So if, for a moment, you were thinking John L’s AA was the lazy alcoholic’s recovery plan, it’s not. John’s definition of meaningful sobriety means to be free from any unhealthy agents. Sugar, caffeine, nicotine and becoming a couch potato are all off-limits for John’s sobriety. He talks about an important meeting he had with a doctor in his early recovery who showed how sugar and other stimulants prevent alcoholics from overcoming craving and living the best of sober life. It turns out John is hypoglycemic. Rest, moderate eating and exercise make John’s recovery more demanding than that of some *Big Book* thumpers.

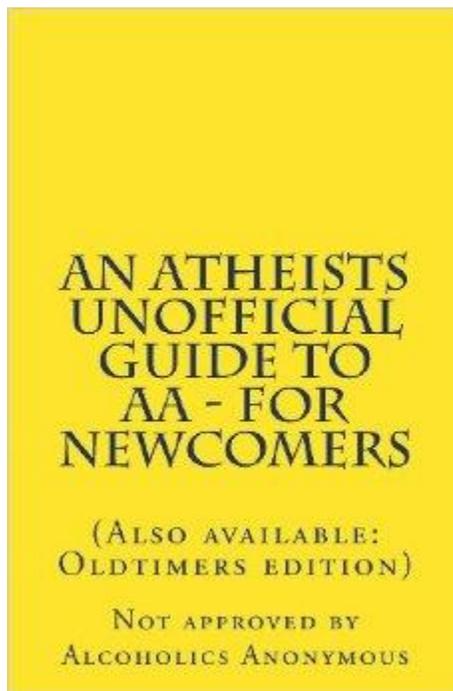
John and I probably have several overlaps in our library. We might both own books by Katherine Ketcham (who co-authored *Experiencing Spirituality* with Ernie Kurtz). Ketcham wrote a book with James R. Milam, PhD called, *Under the Influence: A Guide to the Myths and Realities of Alcoholism* confirm that the great majority of alcoholics suffer from chronic low blood sugar. Anxiety, depression and impulse, such as drinking or other forms of acting out can all be triggered by sugar imbalance.

A Freethinker in Alcoholics Anonymous is under 120 pages so it’s not a huge time commitment but it’s a rational and experience-based look at what really gets us clean and sober.

Under the pen-name Vince Hawkings you can find a series of books that are worth a read. There are two versions of *An Atheist’s Unofficial Guide to AA*; one is the Oldtimers Edition and one is for Newcomers. He also penned a 100 page workbook called *An Atheist’s Twelve Steps to Self-Improvement – To Accompany Any Program*.

So, the Guide book is for AA members and the Twelve Step book is for all 12-Steppers. Pick one of the Vince Hawking books and try it out. If you treat it like taking a 12-Step member out for coffee after a meeting and asking how they see this AA-thing, that's what this reading experience will be.

Vince talks about how he came to AA an agnostic and through the careful investigation that the Big Book demands, he became an atheist. Vince was sober over 10 years when he started writing about what he learned in AA. He offers an atheists version of the Twelve Steps and says this:



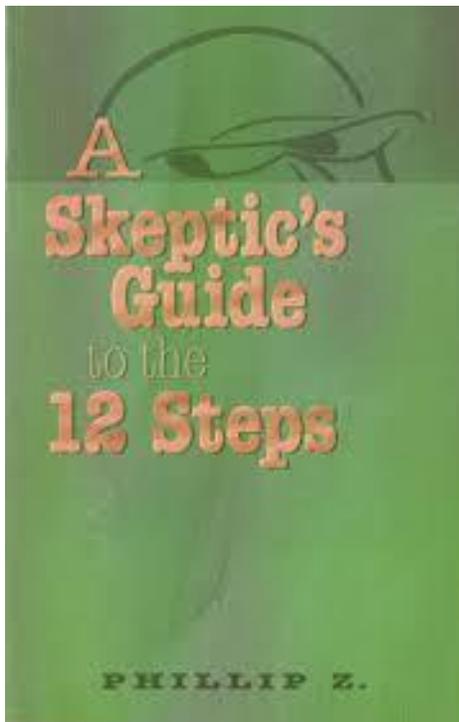
“These atheist version first three steps suggest that we were alcoholic and could not manage our own lives; therefore we needed the help of A.A.; and that we should practice humility by letting go of self-will. For the third step you will need to judge how tiny you are in the scale of things by realizing there are much bigger things than yourself. (This is not the same as low self-worth which AA will help to raise.)”

Vince talks about finding one's own concept of greater powers and suggests that this isn't difficult, regardless of how helpless or self-sufficient we each feel. The oldtimers' version gives advice to help the newcomer and the newcomer version

offers advice about how to relate to the seemingly archaic ideas in the Big Book. In this regard, Hawkings books are more like after-meeting chatter where we are more inclined to find advice-givers than in meetings that are more a sharing of experience. If you find advice-giving tantamount to lecturing and thus, un-12 Step, think of these books as a temporary sponsor. Sponsors tend to suggest this or advise or challenge us in a way that doesn't tend to happen in meetings. Hawkings is a big fan of *Living Sober* (the book), as I am. He writes his book in a similar style, including anecdotal stories—some of his, some from stories he's heard in the rooms.

Here's a book that in some ways opened the floodgates of freethinker 12 step writing:

Philip Z. became a state-licensed family, marriage and child therapist in 1975. In 1985 he started confronting his body image and relationship with food. He joined AA. I would call Philip Z a secular Jew; he is clearly an atheist. Hazelden published his book *A Skeptic's Guide to the 12 Steps* in October of 1990. In many ways I see this book as ahead of the curve of great freethinking 12 Step literature



available to curious addicts, alcoholics and codependents today.

I quote this book in my book, *Beyond Belief: Agnostic Musings for 12 Step Life*. Like much of the alternative views to the Steps, this is an apologist view. The reason is that universal truths underlie each of the Steps. Just because we find the religiosity or Judeo/Christian morality of the Steps off-putting, the wording need-not be a road block. Our man Zee or Zed, let's stick to Philip, draws upon transpersonal psychology. Eastern philosophy and his personal Twelve Step process to give a *there are no excuses, just challenges* approach to working—not analyzing—the Twelve Steps. Here are three great excerpts from Philip

Z's *A Skeptic's Guide to the 12 Steps*:

1) “Unfortunately, we have come to depend on this quick solution, rather than experiencing and integrating many of the life’s difficult challenges. As a consequence, we never fully matured. Abstinence is necessary for us, not just because of an allergy to alcohol or sugar, but because only when we begin experiencing life without having to resort to quick fixes are we able to grow psychologically and spiritually. This is why coming to terms with my addiction must eventually involve spiritual work, the essence of which is the willingness to face, rather than avoid, pain and suffering”

2) “One of the fundamental psychological principles on which the Twelve Step process rests, as I understand it, is the idea that emotions and behaviors are expressions of thoughts and attitudes. As we have seen, particularly in our examination of character defects, how and what we think dictates how we respond to events and people”

3) “A common characteristic of people with compulsive behaviors is our tendency to get ahead of ourselves. We want all things to happen on our timetable and are terribly impatient with ourselves, with little or no regard for our internal rhythms. Our minds seem to refuse to take things one at a time.”

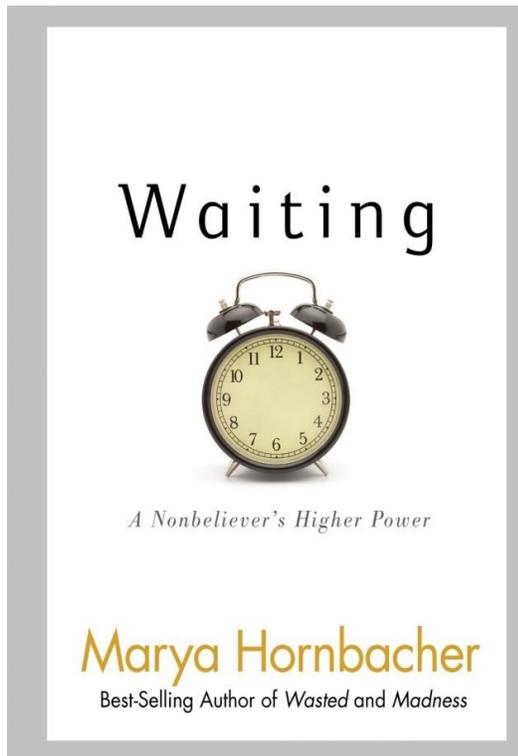
So if that sounds palatable, order the book and have a read. I first got my own copy of *A Skeptics Guide to the 12-Steps* from Roger C of my home group in Toronto Canada who wrote, *The Little Book: A Collection of Alternative 12 Steps*. This booklet contains 20 variations of AA’s original 12 Steps that have and are being used around the world. They include a Cognitive Behavioral Therapy view of the Steps, Aboriginal, Islamic, Humanist, Atheist, Buddhist and Agnostic variations. There are essays on the Steps by fellow writers, Stephanie Covington (*A Woman’s Way through the Twelve Steps*), Allen Berger (*The Therapeutic Value of the Twelve Steps*), Theresa Jacobs-Stewart (*Mindfulness and the 12 Steps*) and Gabor Mate (*In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts*).

We will likely sit down with Roger and talk about his workbook on a separate show But it is an indispensable tool in the 21st century recovery arsenal. You can buy it directly from www.RebellionDogsPublishing.com bookstore.

Waiting: A Nonbeliever’s Higher Power is one of the great books by Marya Hornbacher. She has very successful books on Bulimia (*Wasted*) and Mental Health (*Sane*), too.

Marya H. will be one of the speakers at the first ever We Agnostics and Freethinkers International Conference of AA in Santa Monica November 6 to 8. I interviewed Marya about her book back in 2011 for The Fix. She had some great insights that I will share but first, here are a half a dozen gems from her book:

1) “The spiritual healing I’ve sought has only been found by beginning to heal how I have related to the world. Until I do all I can to heal those I’ve harmed, to repair the place where I have done damage, I won’t have any way of knowing how to avoid doing damage again. Until I face how my relationship to the world has really



been, I will never know the truth of who I was, nor will I know who I am now. And until I know those things—who I was, who I am—I will never become the person I want to be.”

2) “When we shut down in this way—by addiction, by fighting, by attempts to control, by what the Big Book aptly calls ‘self-will run riot’—we have no space in ourselves for spiritual growth or awareness. And we need that space. Without it, our spirits wither... Our hearts become rigid and cannot love. We have no ability to really experience the life we are living.”

3) “It is a regrettable habit we have of thinking we are entitled to have all that we want.”

4) “I fight. I resist. It doesn’t even matter what I resist; there is simply something in me that tends to resist things as they are. I have been fighting since I was very small. And I believe that my addiction was a response, in some measure, to the fact that the fight was futile, and I could not tolerate that fact. I couldn’t tolerate the fact that I did not control the worlds.”

5) “Doubt is at the very heart of spiritual experience. Without it, we would never ask the hard questions about the nature of our existence: Why are we here: How did we get here? What are our origins? What is our purpose and what are our ends? These are spiritual questions asked by spiritual people and they lead to growth... When we doubt, we learn to accept that we may not ever know. When we question, we learn to accept that there may be no answer. We shout our doubt out into the universe, we learn to accept that we may be met with a silence we do not know

how to read... to accept doubt, a lack of certainty, is to accept the very nature of life as it is.”

6) “...the Twelve Step program isn’t actually an attempt at religious conversion. Really, it just tries to bring us to a place of new spiritual understanding that allows us to live differently in this world. The Steps are not intended to get us to heaven or save us from hell. This is not about life in another world, above or below. This is about how we live here.”

Waiting: A Nonbeliever’s Higher Power addresses the issue in depth. Hornbacher’s spiritual life is not a series of Hollywood “Ah ha!” moments of peace and clarity. Instead, spiritual connection is the doubt, the asking without a sense of entitlement, the humility, the waiting. Versed in the religious literature of a number of traditions, Hornbacher saw doubt portrayed as suffering—but that was not her experience. To her, doubt is an opportunity. Sometimes the answers come and sometimes they don’t, but the exercise of waiting teaches patience, humility and willingness. Now *that* is adapting to life on life’s terms. Who better to talk with about the challenges Twelve Step groups face in adapting an age-old message to the scrutiny of the modern world? She shared her thoughts with *The Fix*.

Why stick to the word “Nonbeliever?” Your writing clearly shows that you believe a lot.

I get asked, “Are you an atheist or are you an agnostic?” I don’t like the common definition of either word. People’s experience differs from this popular understanding. The assumption is that nothing spiritual exists for atheists. I know many atheists who do believe a spiritual life exists within us and between us. And many agnostics would not say, “Yes I believe there is something out there.”

“Nonbeliever” for me is a very specific term meaning that I do not believe in a theistic or deistic world or universe. I was frustrated. I was talking to a friend and I said, “You know I feel like I am required to know an upwardly located deity or power. I searched and I didn’t find one.”

When you say the word “atheist” you hear or feel or imagine a ripple; or maybe that’s just my perception. Maybe people don’t bat an eye. But my

perception is that as I speak, you can hear people thinking, “Oh God, how is she going to do this if she can’t recognize God as she understands Him?” Some people suggest the group as your higher power, a door knob, whatever you need, but I struggle with the very idea of a higher power. My experience has been that I don’t require one in order to find spiritual growth in recovery. I find these things in the rooms, in actions, reflections, the work I do with people and the work they do with me.

Could the language of the *Big Book* be altered to be more inclusive?

Ah... Yes, but I come from two positions on this; I am torn. Firstly, all the Twelve Step fellowships work from a language which is quite old. Step Six “separated the men from the boys,” for instance. I have come to believe that they meant me too. When the movement started it was assumed that you were religious. Since then, membership has changed. Women, young people and people of various faiths have found a place here. I think the last people to feel that they do not have a place would be non-theists.

If you can find the spiritual principles to work in your life, you have a hell of a good shot at making it.

Secondly—and this will sound a little old-fashioned, but just as true for me—is that these “first 164 pages” [of the *Big Book*] contain a great deal of inspiration and have kept a great many millions of people sober. So I believe there is such enormous value in this literature. This is where we learn, in a general way, how AA members have gotten and stayed sober over time. “How it Works” is a critical chapter. That’s where the Steps are explained. The Steps are essential to me; they cover so much of how we redefine ourselves, how we come to be of service to others.

We can work with this literature but I felt I had to worm my way in by saying, “OK, they meant women, they meant atheists and they meant me too.” I am not sure they did, but I do feel a place for me in the rooms. I see the personal stories in new *Big Book* editions reflecting the diversity of the groups and the ways different people find sobriety and serenity. We have “token” diversity right now; there are a couple of gay stories, some women, a few ethnic varieties and an agnostic. The

personal stories mean a great deal to us because we hear our own stories told through them.

So there's a glimpse into what's on my bookshelf. Feel free to stockpile or order one-a-moth from <http://rebelliondogspublishing.com/bookstore> or, if you have a favorite bookstore, they can order any of these. Let us know what we're missing and/or should be talking up.

There have been some books that I have read and wouldn't recommend. I stick to the, "If you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all" motto. That's a rule I will break, but you really have to inspire me with stupidity for me to dismiss you.

Thanks for reading. Enjoy the (Rebellion) Dog Days of summer.