



Rebellion Dogs Radio

Say Yes to Everything

October 2016 Episode 26

This is the transcript to Episode 26, the Say YES to EVERYTHING show.

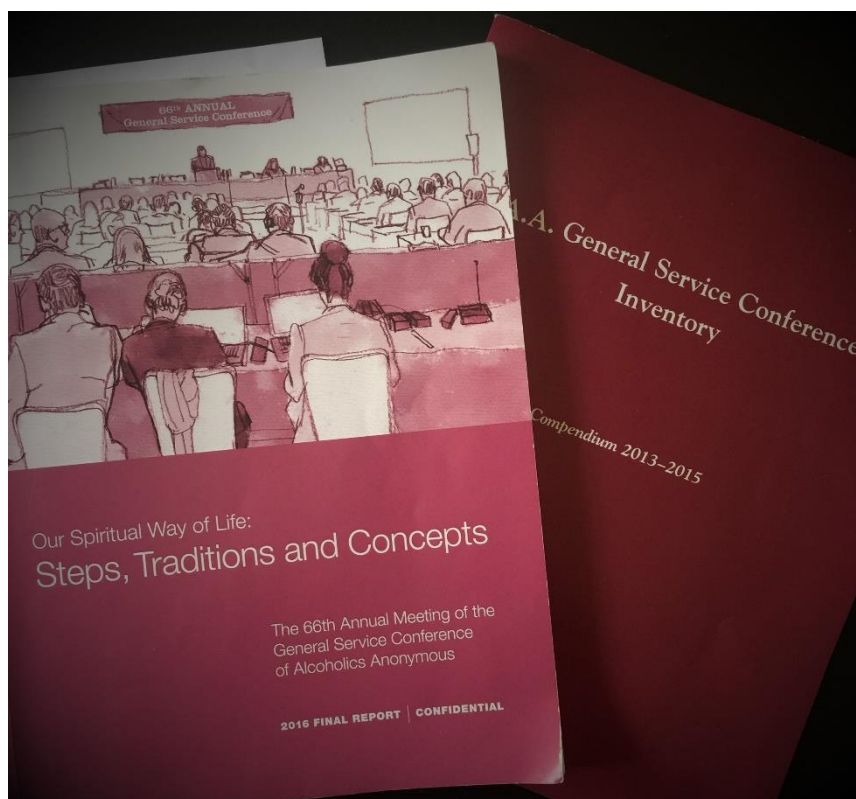
There are some upcoming events to share with you, AA's General Service Conference is in the 67th conference cycle. The *Final Conference Report* for 2016 is out, I've read it; we'll talk about challenges for GSO, and what's on the mind of AAs as we look to the future.

We'll look at the identity politics of inclusivity. Are underrepresented minorities in AA best to state their needs separately and alone or is there value in thinking about inclusivity for all? Say YES to everything!

Maybe AA will enter the era of **Radical Accommodation**. That's going to be the theme of what you and I are going to discuss today. It will be a commonality among today's stories. This is going to be

controversial because this idea I want to share with challenge current orthodoxy. Currently, AA—the service structure—works on the substantial unanimity policy, which isn't as amenable as radical accommodation. Substantial unanimity, I am going to argue, by year 2016 standards, is unfortunately susceptible to what we call in our *AA Service Manual*, “**tyranny of the majority**”, an enemy that we've been charged by our founders, with the task of defending AA against. Voting of any kind pits winners against losers, the persecutor and the vanquished. That's no good and it's not necessary.

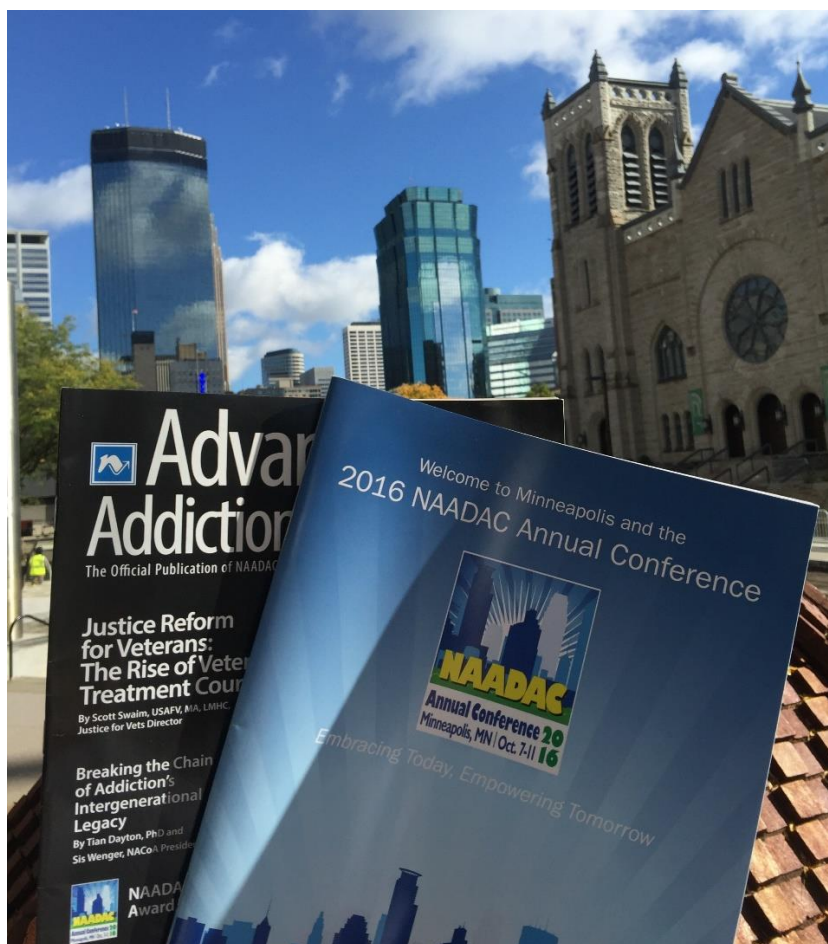
We need a slight adjustment—an attitude adjustment—and I contend that radical accommodation is just a slight adjustment and not a wholesale change. In our own language, “When anyone, anywhere, reaches



out for help, I want the hand of AA always to be there.” We don’t vote on it first; we eliminate barriers and we reach out.

The problem we have in AA is that the inflow of diversity which we welcome into the top of our 2016 hourglass is too much to fit through the 1950s-designed neck of the hourglass (the process). We are bottle-necked. We continued to widen our gateway but we can’t meet everyone’s need through our out-of-date process. Think of AA’s service structure as our bridge to the future. Every bridge needs repairs and replacement parts through the decades to meet new demand. Yes, is the answer; say yes to everything.

The problem sound obscure now and the solution sounds simplistic but I’ll offer some real-life examples of challenges confronting us at our General Service Conference right now. We can smooth relations, relieve stress and backlog with, what I think is, a slight adjustment that can clear up some backlog and make us more effective at carrying the message.



Like every year, the current annual General Service Conference cycle which runs from April to April has, a theme. That theme is, **“Securing our future.”** To secure our future, we have to upgrade our infrastructure. That’s happening in AA already but there are signs of resistance to change, too. I’ll tell you why I think evolution is natural, inevitable and in what areas we are visibly moving in a good direction.

At the time of recording, it is October 2016—a great day to be living sober, or clean, or clean and sober, or living in long-term recovery, if you like. I would call 2016 a great time to be part of the recovery community and especially great to be a part of the 12-Step community. Change is afoot and we are part of it.

Oct 7th—11th, I was in Minneapolis for the [NAADAC national conference](#). That’s the **Association for Addiction Professionals**. Not too far off AA’s “Secure the Future” theme, NAADAC was **“Embrace Today, Empower Tomorrow.”** Catchy...

[We Agnostics, Atheists & Freethinkers International AA Conference](#) is — or was, depending on when you are reading this — November 11th – 13th in Austin TX. More on that shortly.

I've got some hold-the-date notices for you: Details will be on the Rebellion Dogs Publishing site.

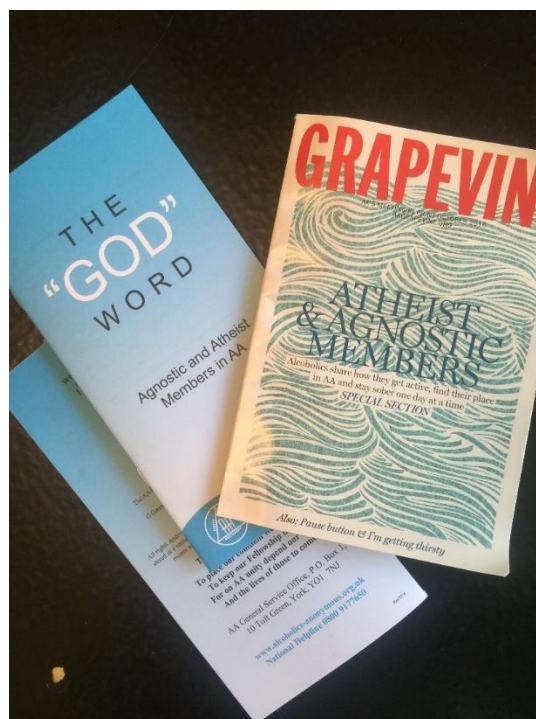
JUST ANNOUNCED; there's a new Toronto AA conference announced for 2017. Save the date for **SOAAR – Secular Ontario AA Roundup – September 17th, 2017** at the Steelworkers Hall in downtown Toronto. This AA roundup will be hosted by members of several atheist/agnostic AA groups from Ottawa to Hamilton.

If you like retreats **October 27th to 29th, 2017**, I'll be working with the [Sedona Mago Retreat Recovery Series](#) on a workshop about **Steps and Tradition** with or without a theistic worldview. **No God? No Problem.** It's an all-inclusive weekend at Sedona Mago for \$340 to \$440 depending if you want your own room or a twin room. Having been there a couple of times, it's worth it without the workshop. But the workshop will be as awesome as I can make it.

If you go to a lot of work conferences, these Twelve Step things are pretty reasonably priced. NAADAC was over \$1,000 for registration and hotel, Book America Expo and Canadian Music Week are another \$1,000 each. It's amazing how cheap staying sober is, comparatively speaking.

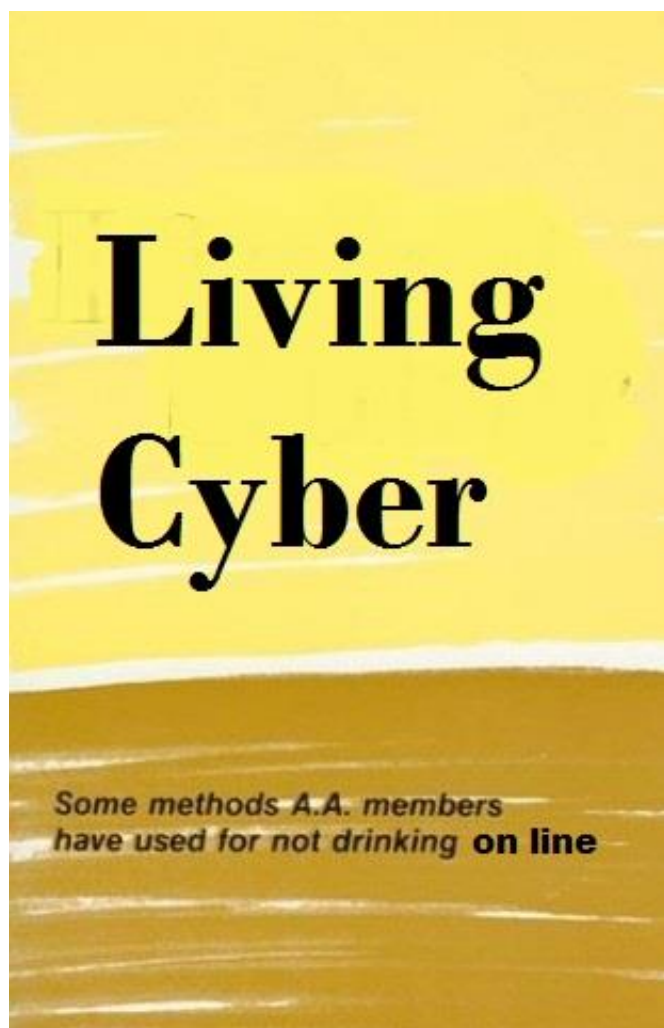
Let's get up to date with what's already happened so far this year as of the Fall of 2016. Gather around and listen up. The evolution of our AA society starts in the United Kingdom.

The General Service Conference in the UK started an initiative to reach out to underrepresented populations in AA and they have two new pamphlets — an LGBTQ pamphlet coming soon and now available to members and groups, *The "God" Word: Atheists and Agnostics in AA*. This is a collection of AAs telling their stories — what it was like, finding AA and what life's like, today. None of these AA's telling their stories believe in a prayer-answering, sobriety granting deity.



Also, **October 2016's AA Grapevine** features several stories of atheists and agnostics. In September, Young People, another under-represented population in AA were highlighted in Grapevine. Earlier this year Grapevine's features AA members who are incarcerated. So, Grapevine is securing our future by making marginalized populations feel more at home.

LIVING CYBER @ WAAFTIAAC



You may have seen in the Fall *Box 4-5-9: News & Notes from GSO* that [We Agnostics, Atheists & Freethinkers International AA Conference](#) will be in Austin Texas November 11th – 13th. Looking forward to WAAFTIAAC in Austin. How 'bout you?

Saturday at 2 PM, I have the honor of moderating a workshop on online recovery: LIVING CYBER, a play on words from Barry L's conference approved, *Living Sober*, we will talk about 21st century recovery including podcasting, blogging, social media, chat groups, YouTube and you. Have you ever thought about writing or producing a show about recovery/addiction? Come talk to us about your creative project or your sober/cyber life.

Later we'll talk about the General Service Conference voting "No" to having AA on Youtube and Google. Maybe they should review their rule about having everyone turn off their smartphones before they enter the Conference room and reach "informed group consciences" on the issues of the day. If they had their phones and tablets on they would have seen that we AAs are already on YouTube

and Google. It's just GSO that's on a luddite revival.

We're online and doing fine. More on that shortly...

Back the WAAFTIAAC Living Cyber panel: One of my favorite hubs for great blogs, art, music, writing, community and podcasting is [Since Right Now, home of Recovery Revolution](#). Chris is co-host of [KLĒN + SÖBR podcast](#) and also on our panel is Tammi S whose blog, [My Life Is A Work In Progress](#), chronicles her ongoing sobriety. So Tammi, Chris and I will be conversing, with anyone who wants to join in, about f2f recovery vs. online sobriety. Or if you're thinking about writing a book or submitting an article to Grapevine or The Fix or aa-Beyond Belief, come share your ideas.

Any time you have time, see what fun Chris Matt and Jeff are up to; KLĒN + SÖBR podcast is one of the best in the community, they are constantly trying new things like live radio, inter-continental episodes

©Rebellion Dogs Publishing, <http://rebelliondogspublishing.com>

and recently, pairing a couple of past guests together to be guest hosts. Don't tell me that an alcoholic/addict can't find or nurture recovery online. It's happening.

SinceRightNow.com did a September feature on Rebellion Dogs Publishing which was playful and witty. And there are lots of features of sober artists and writers and interesting recovery stories.

Inspiration from Psychology Today

I started writing *Beyond Belief* the secular daily reflection book back around 2005, 2008. Rebellion Dogs Publishing started in 2012. Great strides are being made for nonbelievers in AA since then. As much as I am celebrating UK's GSO and AA Grapevine for their brining marginalized skeptics/freethinkers into AA's mainstream, being an atheist alcoholic continues to runs the risk of facing the hostility of a double stigma.

All AA's still run the risk of the stigmatization of addiction. I understand. We addicts steal, lie and pose a threat when we're behind the wheel of a car and in any position where others rely on us. Addicts can be careless, hostile, self-destructive people who do threaten the peace and safety of both loved ones and strangers. AA is supposed to be a refuge where we aren't shamed for the affliction of alcohol addiction. But for the Transcending Human Nature and Other Liberal Myths segment of the show, "News Flash: Some of us AAs still shame each other for words, actions, outside issues." We are not saints, indeed.



But there's a second stigma that a nonbeliever may or may not be subject to inside AA. For people who treat "*God as we understand Him*" as superstition, one may feel marginalized for holding an unpopular view and that hostility could be felt either in AA as in society at large. For the most part, AA is a microcosm of society as a whole.

So let's see what an expert, Phil Zuckerman, PhD (pictured) professor of sociology and secular studies at Pitzer College, has to say on the subject. He is also a regular adjunct professor at Claremont Graduate University. He is the author of several books, including *Living the Secular Life* (Penguin, 2014), *Faith No More* (Oxford, 2011), and *Society Without God* (NYU, 2008). What I am quoting from is *Psychology Today* in an article called, "**Why Americans Hate Atheists: Understanding secularphobia**".ⁱ

"While about 10 percent of Americans said they'd be unhappy if a family member married someone of a different political persuasion, and about 30 percent of Americans said they'd be unhappy if a family member married a gun owner, nearly 50 percent of Americans said that they'd be unhappy if a family member married an atheist.

This finding comes as no surprise. Social science has long revealed high rates of secularphobia – the irrational dislike, distrust, fear or hatred of nonreligious people – within American society.”

So, how does secularphobia reveal itself in AA? There is the fear that by dismissing the AA Steps or using/reading/sharing a Godless interpretation of AA’s Steps will water down the AA program. Co-founder Bill W was trying to assuage **this irrational fear** in 1955 in defense of Buddhist AA members who replaced AA’s “*God as we understand Him*” with the word, “Good”. Imagine there was a god. Now imagine one that needed AA members to protect him? That’s part of what I mean by irrational. An impotent god is no god at all.

Zuckerman points out that atheists are considered un-patriotic; Atheist AA groups are considered un-AA (or OA, CA, NA, MA, SLAA, etc) in a few small and not-small-at-all pockets of AA. In some cases, AA members interpret, read and share agnostic or secular variations of AA’s original Twelve Steps. “You can’t do that; they’re copywritten!” some secularphobes will retort. I’m not an intellectual property lawyer and either was Bill W. He says in the Foreword to *AA Comes of Age* that “A.A. was not invented,” and he elaborates in his St. Louis 1955 talk on page 231:

“As a society we must never become so vain as to suppose that we are authors and inventors of a new religion. We will humbly reflect that everyone of A.A.’s principles, *every one of them*, has bene borrowed from ancient sources. We shall remember that we are laymen, holding ourselves in readiness to co-operate with all men of good will, whatever their creed or nationality.”ⁱⁱ

Zuckerman also identifies that for theists, immorality is associated with secularism. Many in AA would view a secular AA meeting or member as not sharing the same values (morality) that any other God-obeying AA would share.

The *Psychology Today* story shines a light on the discriminatory practices and stigma associate with being a nonbeliever. They are born of fear and articulated in a flawed logic (the non-theist is presumed guilty until proven innocent). The onus is on the accuser; call someone a law or rule breaker or immoral, then present the evidence to back it up. Of course AA has no rules and no theology to disobey. The problem of discrimination is compounded when the majority members are in denial of their hostility towards minorities.

We looked at what Zuckerberg calls “secularaphobia.” Fear of the unknown or the unfamiliar is something *we all* have – there’s no need to point the finger at others who suffer from biases just like I do or you do. There is secularphobia in AA but there’s also back-to-basics-phobia and Christian-doctrine-phobia.” I know I have my own list of what I think is good for the future of AA and what I think is harmful for the future of AA. I have biases. Some rituals and practices I favor and some make me cringe; who doesn’t have any bias? These are my opinions, you have your opinions, but they aren’t facts. AA folk-wisdom: Our fear is sometimes an acronym for False Evidence Appearing Real.

Radical accommodation can render these differing opinions mute. Radical accommodation is alive and well in AA, in one way already...

If you don't want prayer in your AA, you'll like my home group. Join us in Toronto any Thursday, Saturday or Monday for Beyond Belief Agnostics & Freethinkers AA Group. If you get a buzz from everyone reciting the serenity prayer at the top of the meeting and holding hands and saying the Lord's Prayer out loud together at the end of the meeting, there's another Toronto meeting just minutes away from mine that I know will make you feel right at home. Isn't radical accommodation an extension to our slogan, "Live and Let Live"?

Let's take a moment to look at great past social justice success stories. "Equality for all," was the bragging mantra even when America offered no freedom for non-whites. They didn't allow women to vote. Equity. Liberty. The meaning of words changes over time. It's worth noting that the privileged class and the persecuted both had roles to play in broadening equality.

CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT THEN & RADICLE ACCOMODATION TODAY

You might ask, "Joe, you stick up for nonbelievers in 12-Step recovery. Are you a special-interest lobbyist or are you an all-for-one-one-for-all-ist?" Well, I try to keep my own narcissism of small differences at bay and defend the rights of all AAs and all AA groups to do as they wish, be they literalists, anarchists, or something in the middle. But on the theme of "What are we all fighting for," I look back in time to the early civil rights movement for clues. This is where we find the motivation, encouragement and method for today's radical inclusion buzz-phrase or buzz hyphenated word if you like — radical-inclusion.



Civil rights key players, Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Rosa Parks and Andy Goodman

agitator. The movement needed disobedience and it also needed love and tolerance and peaceful diplomacy.

The Civil Rights movement... advertisers will tell you that this movement has great branding. "The Negro Rights movement" wouldn't have had the same ability to open the hearts of the majority of Americans. Still, they mean the same thing but civil rights vs. negro rights is a broader, liberal ideal.

Let's look at four of the folk-heroes of the Civil Rights movement: Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks and Andrew Goodman. Every social movement needs a team—a team of players who bring various skills and attributes. You need agitators. You need diplomats. Martin Luther King Jr. was a diplomat. Malcom X was an

Andrew Goodman was white; an educated guess would be that he was Jewish, too. “Civil Rights” wasn’t a race-relations issue, only. It was a humanitarian issue for many. Segregation and other racially motivated discrimination were symbols of a flawed democracy that wasn’t living up to its potential.

Rosa Parks was the only one of the four who wasn’t killed for what she believed in by the change-resistant. Hostility to the idea of Caucasian/African American equality was such that Americans killing Americans was justified in this “one nation under God” at that space and that time. Malcolm X (1965), Martin Luther King Jr. (1968) and Andy Goodman (1964) were all murdered. More people were murdered for this cause, whites and blacks. Rosa Parks was also persecuted from all sides. Remember how sexist society was in her day? Even in her own African American community she was not treated with equality because she was a woman. I expect she was shamed and ridiculed by many of the people she was standing up for by confronting the long-arm-of-the-law; “Don’t be braiding the beard of the Lion”. Her life and her reputation were both in danger.

Today many of the same lines are being drawn by groups like Black Lives Matter. But the Civil Rights Movement was a success. Systemic discrimination continues to maintain a class of privilege and a series of others on the outside looking in. But at least, in a meaningful, if not a complete or perfect way, the dismantling of segregation based on skin color was a symbol we look back on today as a way that society can change for the better.

I suggest that the framing of this issue as a civil rights issue – bigger than a race issue – contributed to the eventual majority view inside of the USA. Anyone can make a stand for the protection and assurance of civil rights for all.

Back in AA, I borrow “radical accommodation” approach as an extension to the popularized “radical inclusion” which was a theme in Bill W writings and AA ideology. Here’s the thing; here’s the question: Can we invite minorities to join as welcome equals without accommodating their differences? We invite newcomers to join without conditions. We tell them that open-mindedness was a key for us to both the learned and unlearned that brought about change in our lives. But we never insist that they obey our individual or collective view or insist that they deny their own views. Therefore, if we’re true to our word, we must accommodate different individuals and groups; say yes – to everything.

I’m no history major but I think when I look back at the civil rights movement, it’s posture and language made it easy for anyone of any race or socio-economic status to say, “If one groups civil liberties can be suspended, then who’s to say that some other group isn’t next? I won’t stand to see anyone’s civil liberties compromised – civil liberty for all!”

I mentioned how it seems to me that at one end of the AA structure, radical accommodation is alive and well. We have two ends of our inverted AA pyramid. The groups and members at one end, the big end, and the service structure at the smaller end, funneling down to our General Service Conference, our to operating entities, AA World Services and *Grapevine* and our General Service Board of trustees. Like a bicycle, both legs have to be peddling. If one’s working efficiently and the other leg is rigid or bogged down, there’s a problem. So this radical accommodation practice has to be part of thought and action coming from both sides at the same time to work out right.

Like two pedals on a bicycle, both ends of the AA Service Structure

Let's look at how we're doing at the skinny bottom of the AA service structure along with the fat, flat end of our service triangle where the groups and members are. Here's the assessment of Ernie Kurtz and William White from 2014 on the group end (top of the inverted triangle):

A.A. has stretched the boundaries of its inclusion via the growth of A.A. meetings within diverse cultural settings, by the growth in specialty meetings of people with AOD [and other drugs] problems who share another defining characteristic, e.g., age, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religious orientation (or its absence), primary language, problem severity (low-bottom versus high bottom groups), co-occurring disorders, occupation, etc. The varieties of A.A. groups and varieties of A.A. experience suggest that A.A. has made substantial progress in meeting this criterion.ⁱⁱⁱ

That sounds pretty harmonious. At the group and member level, this is the most important leg of AA (to borrow the bicycle metaphor again). Meetings are where AA and newcomers have that critical contact. Meetings and one-to-one contact make the seemingly impossible to become possible.

But to keep going efficiently, both legs have to work harmoniously. How are we doing at the service structure level with radical accommodation?

Me, My Group and General Service: At the time of recording this show, I am the secretary of the **Greater Toronto Area Accessibility Committee**. It's made up of eight district accessibility chairs (General Service Reps) that make up the General Service Areas that spans Toronto. Like the service structure as a whole, we're in our own inventory process, reviewing our mission statement and our effectiveness, where we are succeeding and where we are failing. We are looking on how this year's General Service Conference theme, "supporting our future" ought to influence our practices as a committee going forward. We see in the 66th General Service Conference Report (2016) this question is being asked in Treatment and Accessibility all through the service structure:

"At the core the purpose of [our committees] remains the same. That purpose is to carry the A.A. message to the alcoholic who still suffers regardless of what challenges may stand as barriers between the alcoholic and the A.A. message."

This I think is great and inclusive language – carry the AA message to the alcoholic who still suffers regardless of what challenges may stand as barriers between the alcoholic and the AA message. Say yes to everything.

One mental trap that flies contrary to this accommodating idea is something we hear all the time, "But we've always done things *this* way." Making rituals sacred can give us a warm, secure feeling and we may see our way of doing things as having stability and staying power. However, at the heart of our rituals we find principle. Rigidity of method can crush the vitality out of the principle. Firm on principle but flexible on method may cause a mild discomfort that comes with change but we avoid getting so stiff that we crack and crumble. Rigidity impedes fluidity; fluidity improves longevity. In the 66th Conference Report we see that all of AA is thinking about this:

"We can get caught up in A.A. rigidity, but if motivated by the spirit of listening, our group conscience can result in good decisions... It is suggested that the Conference, and delegates in

particular, find ways to reach out to underrepresented populations of all kinds. Diversity begins with us, one-on-one."

I think that's a good point; it starts with us, one-on-one. "Be the change you want to see." "I am responsible..."

Before I go to my Accessibility Committee meeting, why not check to see if my own home group is wheelchair accessible? Does the building we meet in have automatic doors in the front, elevators and accessible washrooms? Does our literature table have information on audio or brail AA literature formats for people with specific sensory deprivation? If not, do our members know it's available should a newcomer arrive with a guide dog or cane? Pamphlet P-83 is called, "A.A. for the Alcoholic with Special Needs." If I read stories by members who are living with mental and physical handicaps, wouldn't that help to feel more comfortable and less awkward about not wanting to do or say the wrong thing? In our meeting room is there room for someone in a scooter or with a walker to make their way anywhere I can go in the room? So, while it's so easy for me to shake my fist in the direction of AA's General Service Office in New York City and say, "You shoulda', coulda' if ya' woulda'", I'm a hypocrite if I'm not acting locally first. But it's a two-way street, too. My committee work has made me more sensitive and better informed. I have GSO to thank for much of the information I've learned from.

But there is information everywhere. Here's some regional information that our committee is taking to heart and trying to take to the groups and membership. Since the Conference Report brought up "underrepresented" populations, we all wanted to know more about who they are. According to Ontario March of Dimes (an advocacy group for people with physical disabilities):

"Today, over 15% of (Canada's) population has a disability, including more than 40% of people over age 65. About 1.85 million people in Ontario have a disability. That's one in seven people."

One in seven people? Presumably that's true for most of North America (one in seven have a disability), when we look at AA in our community, we wonder why aren't one in seven members of AA disabled? Why aren't one in seven of our home-group or General Service committees disabled? This is visibly an underrepresented population in AA.

Locally for me, The Ontario Human Rights Code reminds us that being thoughtful of such things isn't being a good sport or being spiritual — it's the law. At the group, district and Area level we need to understand what and where our "duty to accommodate" applies to AA gatherings. Making AA, like any other services, barrier free is the way of the world, now. "Duty to accommodate" — their language means the same thing as our language, "When anyone, anywhere reaches out for help, I want the hand of A.A. always to be there. For that, I am responsible." We assure the hand of AA will be there, barrier free and ready to accommodate.

Our triennial survey shows that Accessibility isn't AA's only issue. We have talked about our 2007, 2011 and 2014 member surveys and how they show that people of color are declining and Caucasian/white AA is on the rise. AA is converse to the North American demographics just outside our meeting doors. We've discussed race, creed, age and gender in AA here at Rebellion Dogs, before. This is what is motivating a lot of the discussion we see in AA's overall Conference inventory of where we succeed and where we fail at carrying the message — anywhere for anyone.

But where underrepresented populations are concerned, how do we best accommodate or help everyone feel more welcome?

Here's our most recent attempt to widen AA's gateway: People with scent-allergies (perfume, cologne, scented hair and body products) aren't individuals that we read about in the AA literature yet. Based on local demand and local news, our committee is paying attention to a new potential barrier to AA by accommodating members with allergies. Scent free or scent controlled AA gatherings (meetings, assemblies, conferences) eliminate barriers to carrying the message.

I remember my local AA transitioning in the 1980s—90s from smoking to non-smoking meetings. It wasn't Divine inspiration or our spiritual wellness that moved AA's into healthier environments. It was the law and societal demands that made us change. In most communities today, smoking in an AA meeting is unthinkable. It could be that, in five years, wearing cologne or a perfumed body spray will be just as unheard of in AA or any other public gathering.

This little Accessibility committee side trip in my story isn't completely off track. Sometimes we can learn things in one activity give us a unique look at another area where we carry the message. For instance, I read in the 2013-2015 *A.A. General Service Conference Inventory Compendium* something about language:

“Language Equity – An overriding concern expressed throughout a number of different workshop reports was the issue of language equality and the need to reach a level of parity in terms of the preparation and distribution of Conference agenda items and background information in all three languages represented at the Conference to ensure full participation throughout the Fellowship and to make certain that the Conference is not giving the impression that there are second class members.”

What we are referring to in this report is that English, Spanish and French are the three major mother-tongues of delegates and other decision makers at the Conference and it's only fair that all material is available in all languages, all at the same time. For a period of time, English speaking Conference members got their report first and Spanish and French copies lagged behind. A privileged and non-privileged class of member were created by the process. We can think of the languages of AA more globally and say yes to gender, sexual orientation, creed and an age-neutral language.

It's also true that pamphlets available in three languages are all priced the same. Even though doing smaller print runs of French or Spanish pamphlets increases the per-item cost, all of AA absorbs this cost so that all members (speaking all languages) are treated equitably.

On the topic of more secular AA language, this language equity idea made me feel even better about how our members and our groups are right to express AA language verbally, digitally or in print in our own authentic language. There is nothing un-AA about a secular interpretation of “How It Works” or the Twelve Steps or preamble for our meeting. The same would be true about feminist, polytheist, pro-LGBT interpretations of our literature.

Opposition to such things is born of that secularphobia idea that Zuckerman introduced into the lexicon. Or, depending on the material in question, the discrimination could be homophobic, patriarchal, or insensitive to various cultural differences. Small factions of AA who feel that the integrity of the AA message is a literal obedience to original wording are a phenomenon that is hard to ignore. But also alive

and well in AA is a desire to go to any lengths to eliminate barriers. If the barrier is a word, even if the word is God, change the word – the word won't mind. Fear that such liberty is detrimental to AA while sincerely felt is a feeling – not an irrefutable fact.

When substantial unanimity crosses into tyranny of the majority.

Systemic discrimination is a human resource, human relations word that I've borrowed. Applying these ideas to AA rituals and practices, feel free to use AA's own language. Instead of "systemic discrimination," how about "complacency"? Regardless of how we frame it, we're talking about how normal ways of doing things benefit the privileged class – be it large or small – and marginalize another group.

An example I used in the past regarding the General Service Conference is the way in which no teenager in AA can have a say in the pamphlet "[A Message to Teenagers](#)" (F-9). We have a very limited teen population in AA to begin with. The regular way of doing things dictates how someone ever gets to the General Service Conference which takes years and almost guarantees that no one could come to AA in their teens and advance to a position on the Conference's Literature Committee before they reached the age of 20.

In a society like AA, while there is no blatant intent on creating a privileged class vs. "others," rituals and practices (be they intentional or innocent) favor the majority from a specific cultural background and marginalize or exclude other (minority) culture(s). Praying to higher power by the name of God with the pronoun "He" doesn't only marginalize atheists; devotees to an intervening deity whose higher power goes by a different name or, in the case of Islam, is never referred to by gender (He or She). These rituals in an AA meeting make some people feel comfortable and empowered. Others feel unwelcome or marginalized.

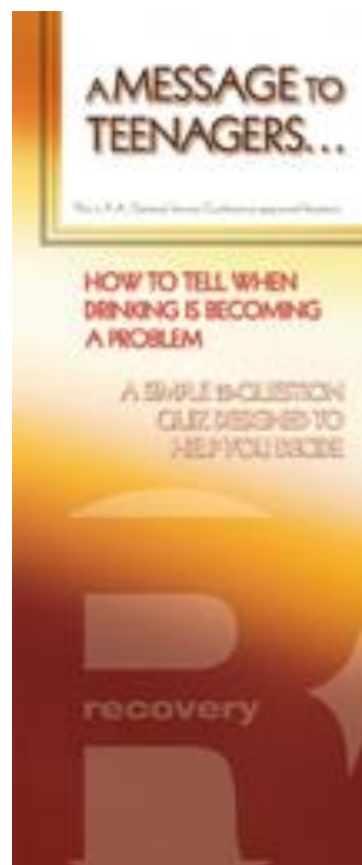
Unintentional cultural favoritism is a form of *tyranny of the majority*. It is controversial to criticize our decision-making process. Bill Wilson left us this 1950 ways of deciding things and I'm sure it's somewhat sacrosanct. But the question is:

"Do you think Bill would have any problem with us considering the flaws in the system or a better way of doing things?" I'm not saying – I'm just asking.

When I talk about the General Service Conference I try to think in terms of us, not them; this is us, discussing our business, not them (GSO) vs us (members and groups). So in this regard I'm question how we are doing things and how could we do it better.

Let's look at four items under advisory actions brought to the General Service Conference in 2016:

1. The 2017 Conference theme will be "Supporting Our Future." This was approved by the conference; (fantastic!)



2. There is movement on updating our Women's and Gay & Lesbian pamphlet, presumably both to be modernized and support our future; (fantastic!)
3. A request from PI to start a not-for-profit YouTube and Google page was disapproved. PI wants to disseminate information and outreach in a cost-effective "location, location, location" way of putting AA in the right place at the right time. Why would AA members who don't use YouTube or Google *not want* those who do use the internet to find the AA message? Is there a concern that AA, searchable on the internet doesn't "support our future"? (I think this resistance is cause for concern.)
4. A request for Literature to print a plain-language *Big Book* was turned down. (but why?)

For background on # 4, in some communities, literacy is below the national norms, English is a second language (for aboriginal/native North Americans for instance) and it was felt that this plain-language literature would "go to any lengths" to carry the AA message to anyone, anywhere. That's my limited understanding of that proposal.

Now, let's stop a moment and say it would be easy to be critical of me. "Joe, you cherry picked four items for discussion." I agreed with the two where advisory actions were ratified and I raise the alarm for two items where the Conference said, "No, not at this time." Understandably, you might wonder if I'm just not a bad sport when I don't get my way and ready to sing General Service's praises when they do what I wanted.

"What's outdated about substantial unanimity?" you might ask. The 2/3 majority method of going forward with AA business breathes life into a proposed advisory action. I'm not saying this is an evil or corrupt system. I'm just asking, "What do we gain and what do we lose by continuing in this manner?"

On the plus side, AA has limited resources of time and talent. This process assures that GSO devotes it's time only to those things that are supported by the majority of AA members in the USA and Canada. But this makes each issue a popularity contest and when the majority decides for the minority, that is still, albeit 51% in favor or 99% in favor, *tyranny of the majority*. That's a strong statement and I stand by it. Minorities have rights. Maybe we AA's have a duty – a duty to accommodate.

So what makes this substantial unanimity process outdated is that it does not consider our duty as a fellowship to accommodate the needs of even the few. Substantial unanimity comes from an autocratic era and our inverted triangle was quite a novel approach at the time. Being survivors of the trauma of the Great Depression, our founders shared a scarcity mentality. Living through poverty, the idea that resources were limited would make voting on this course of action vs that one, seem like a reasonable method and I'm sure it was for the time.

But really, is there a scarcity of imagination?

Is there really a finite pool of human resources in AA; we have two-million people from which to ask for help and ideas? Isn't that plenty?

Voting to conserve resources isn't the only prudent stewardship. Getting away from binary thinking that divide the winners from losers and moving towards an attitude of accommodation is very possible in this day and age.

Here's an oversimplified example. Someone wants a new easy-reading *Big Book* – we can print-on-demand – no risk, no cost. The say-yes-to-everything mentality assures that people get what they want, that when a hand reaches out, AA is there.

This positive approach can inspire solutions to the only remaining issue of who will write it and design it? Again by saying yes, we still have to answer, who, when? where? If resources at GSO are tight, maybe AA at large can respond to a call to action.

We live in a less autocratic, more democratic world in 2016. We live in a more digital world which offers advantages over the resources at the time the Traditions and Concepts were crafted.

To each their own is more of how the 21st century is shaking out. We don't have to all get onboard with the same, uniformed way of doing things. The few should decide for themselves what they need and maybe the service structure ought to, instead of voting yes-or-no, might go to any lengths to meet the need presented by our fellows.

If you think the say yes to everything, radical accommodation approach is crazy, let's go back to the formation of Tradition Three. When we read the Twelve & Twelve we see how we came to accept everyone in AA. To many, it sounded reckless, naïve, fatal to say, "Yes, everyone is a member if they say they are." But that worked out didn't it?

Someone who was an example and inspiration:



Louis Brandeis was the first Jewish U.S. Supreme Court Judge. He was nominated by President Woodrow Wilson in 1916. Brandeis's decisions affirmed individual liberty and privacy and opposed unchecked governmental or corporate power.

In *Beyond Belief*, I quote Brandeis who said:

"The greatest dangers to liberty lurk in the insidious encroachment by men of zeal, well-meaning but without understanding."

For the record, the first person of zeal I confront is the image looking back at me in the mirror, each day. I know my understanding is limited and I remind myself that good intentions do not make me right. What I learned in the rooms is to check every new idea. I check my head and my heart – metaphorically speaking – and then I check in with others that I trust. If I have a lot of zeal, that's not an indicator that I am on the right track. I may be half-cocked and off-base. Neither being for nor against – isn't that the key to "seeing the

truth clearly before us? I have plenty of experience with being absolutely sure and completely wrong, all at the same time.

“The Perfect Way is only difficult for those who pick and choose;
Do not like, do not dislike; all will then be clear.
Make a hairbreadth difference, and Heaven and Earth are set apart;
If you want the truth to stand clear before you, never be for or against.
The struggle between ‘for’ and ‘against’ is the mind's worst disease...”

Attributed to Sent-ts'an - the third Patriarch of the Dhyana Sect^{iv}

But accommodation doesn't require everybody else to change what they're doing and do what the minority members want. Accommodation facilities individual needs. It removes barriers. A tolerant, pluralist society means that others will do and say things that we find objectionable. The accommodation requested doesn't have to be proven to be needed; it simply needs to be asked for. The accommodation doesn't have to work out in the long-run. AA is self-correcting and somewhere along the way we'll accommodate a member and it won't solve the problem in the way they hoped. So, we'll try again; we'll keep an open mind and hope they do the same.

Voting is a modality for fairness and equity. So is accommodation. In an autocracy voting works best. We live in a more democratic world; accommodation is becoming the social norm. It fits with the view to the future that our founders shared. Here is how AA was handed down to as stated in Concept XII, Warranty Six. Let's read it again and think about how accommodation can help us deliver this guarantee that AA stands by for every member:

Much attention has been drawn to the extraordinary liberties with A.A. Traditions accord to the individual member and to his group: no penalties to be inflicted for nonconformity to A.A. principles... It is probable that we A.A.'s possess more and greater freedom than any fellowship in the world today... Because we set such a high value on our great liberties, and cannot conceive a time when they will need to be limited, we here specially enjoin our General Service Conference to abstain completely from any and all acts of authoritative government which could in any way curtail A.A.'s freedom ...

Therefore we expect that our Conference will always try to act in the spirit of mutual respect and love—one member for another. In turn this sign signifies that mutual respect and love—one member for another. In turn, this sign signifies that mutual trust should prevail; that no action ought to be taken in anger, haste, or recklessness; that care will be observed to respect and protect all minorities; that no action should ever be personally punitive; that whenever possible, important actions will be taken in substantial unanimity; and that our Conference will ever be prudently on guard against tyrannies, great or small, whether these be found in the majority or in the minority.^v

So how do we guard against both tyrannies from the majority and of the minority? Do we have to meet every request just because it is asked of us? No.

In Canadian law for instance, an organization only has to accommodate based on named grounds under the Human Rights Code. Someone with a disability, sexual identity or orientation, or religion or race would all have to be treated equally and this might mean accommodation from the regular way of doing things. A religious person may have a holy day that falls outside of the named holidays in our *Christian* calendar. An employer, for instance, would have to give the non-Christian religious adherent their sacred day off, just as the employer might give everyone Christmas and Good Friday off. Our holidays are a form of systemic discrimination.

Under the law and the Human Rights code, certain groups are exempted from being able to claim discrimination and certain groups are permitted to discriminate, within limits. A religious school can choose a teacher from their faith over a more qualified teacher who doesn't share the faith. Clearly discrimination was practiced but it's allowable under the circumstances. Often competing needs arise and each case needs to be handled individually.

There is a second limit to accommodation under the law: undue hardship. As an example an old church or community building might not have a wheelchair ramp or elevator everywhere that there are stairs. It might be an undue hardship for the owners of a building with limited means to secure financing to build a ramp for only one person will use. But if that community center or church was to sell their building and build another one, the new building would have to be accessible; every new public building does.

In AA, who would we accommodate? I would say, from our own Conference-wide inventory, the underrepresented minorities would be an obvious example. Maybe it could be broader than that—accommodation as the rule instead of the exception.

Using the advisor action of a region asking for a simple-language Big Book, maybe we would accommodate their request but say "Not at this time," to another group of academics in AA who wanted a more scientific/less religious book.

Assuming college educated AAs aren't an underrepresented minority and academically challenged AAs are, there could—in this example—be a rational that supported one request and denied the other.

Here's another quote from a panel of judges, speaking to how society views accommodation as a means of leveling the playing field, ensuring that rights and dignity are maintained for the minorities and the majority:



“When we ask people to be tolerant of others, we do not ask them to abandon their personal convictions. We merely ask them to respect the rights, values and ways of being of those who may not share those convictions. The belief that others are entitled to equal respect depends, not on the belief that their values are right, but on the belief that they have a claim to equal respect regardless of whether they are right.”^{vi}

This isn't a new idea; accommodation vs. substantial unanimity is the same end by a different means.

There's lots more but you've been oh-so-kind with your time. I don't think a transition from substantial majority action to duty to accommodate action is insignificant. I don't think it would be a seamless transition. I can't say that it will work. But why not try it. We've identified that we are falling short in our effort to carry the AA message. Maybe next time PI asks for a YouTube sight we'll say, "Your wish is our command." Maybe the next time some minority says they need a new literature offering, we will say, "That would be our pleasure."

I'm ready for feedback: news@rebelliondogspublishing.com by email or I'll see you in the rooms or catch you online. Twitter, Facebook, we are where you are.

ⁱ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-secular-life/201406/why-americans-hate-atheists>

ⁱⁱ Alcoholics Anonymous, *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age: A Brief History of A.A.*, New York: A.A. World Services, 1985

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.williamwhitepapers.com/blog/2014/05/the-resilience-of-alcoholics-anonymous-by-william-white-and-ernie-kurtz.html>

^{iv} Translated by Arthur Waley, <http://www.mendosa.com/way4.htm>

^v W., Bill, *The A.A. Service Manual Combined With Twelve Concepts for World Service* / 2011-2012 Edition, New York: A.A. World Services, 2011

^{vi} A Canadian Supreme Court judge in a 2002 ruling, <http://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/policy-preventing-discrimination-based-creed>