



Rebellion Dogs Blog What was early AA really like? What are we like today? "Physician, Heal Thyself!" author (1955) & Young People, September (2020)

What was AA really like and what's AA like today? Dr. Earle, a 1955 Second Edition of *Alcoholics Anonymous* author reflects back, 40 years later, in the 1995 *AA Grapevine*. When his story first appeared in print, he was a "youngster." "Physician Heal Thyself" from the "They Stopped In Time" section along with a third of stories from women aimed at making AA a more inclusive brand. If that's so last century for you, it is *back to* (virtual) *school* in our September *Grapevine*. Today's AA youth speak out.

Earle, from AA's first quarter-century, a friend to Bill W., came in young and outlived the co-founders. *Grapevine* ask him what AA was like? This month's *AA Grapevine* reflects AA today through young people in our fellowship. But first, before comparing what AA was like, a primary question that isn't always agreed upon is "What is AA?" Are you a 1, a 2, or a 3?

1. AA is what they wrote in that 1939 book, the be all... and end all. AA is the *Big Book*.
2. AA is The Traditions, not a book (although we have a book that bears our name and contains a *suggested* program). Traditions—not rules—form our collective experience. To understand AA, read the Twelve Traditions.
3. The group (my group) is AA. Big "T" and small "t" traditions are not binding on groups, the only "rules" an AA group has to follow are the ones they impose on themselves as a group. Our first Tradition is about "unity," clearly different than "uniformity."

What do we think? Here is a shout-out to Door #3. If AA were *the* book, our anniversary would be April 1939, when our first book was written; but it is June 1935, marking the time that two alcoholics stayed sober, together: no program, no book. AA continued to sober up alcoholics, pre-book. Today, some groups—the *real* back to basics—channel that *basic* one-alcoholic-talking-to-another brand of AA. The *Big Book* is popular, but not scripture. While many swear by it, lots of us enjoy AA sobriety, without it. Most towns have more than their fair share of *Big Book* meetings—AA, and Cocaine Anonymous, even more so; do love them some *Big Book*. But in our last blog, a 20:20 look at the year & century to date, we see in more secular countries like The UK or Canada, show declining AA membership since Y2K. Is this connected to a lack of variety in AA approaches?

Twelve Traditions do not describe or defend any program, assign an authoritative body or literature to dictate to members or groups. Traditions help the AA members in their groups and each group of AA cooperating with AA as a whole. Traditions guide us; they do not govern. In any informed explanation of AA, the group is our highest and only authority. The [AA Service Manual](#)ⁱ describes AA as an upside-down triangle with members/groups at the top with a service structure doing the bidding of the groups. In the 2019 revised [The AA Group](#)ⁱⁱ, each group that

wishes, has the authority to do outreach (public information) directly, keep archives, run its own affairs and appoint a General Service Rep (and sometimes central office representative) to express the groups views to AA as a whole and to do our share of the work of AA that happens beyond our virtual or face-to-face meeting.

Going back to the question, “What is AA like today?” what home-group do you go to? Is it online or in a physical space; how traditionalist or liberal, or big or intimate is it? What AA meeting could we point to today and say: This is quintessential AA?

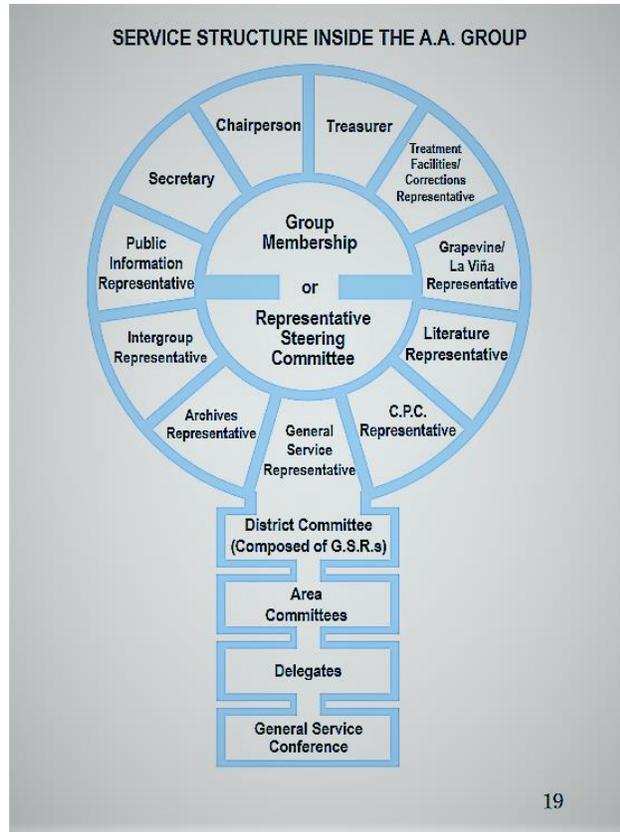
Hasn’t that always been true? When all of AA was only two meetings, wasn’t the Akron group different than the New York group? Looking at AA then and AA now, we have no official format or sample 1950s group to compare to a sample 2020 group, we have to look at sample individual experiences of AA.

And in comparing the wellness of today’s society over yesteryear, one health-factor for any society would be how engaged and how empowered the younger demographic—the future of the society—feel. So, we check the vibrancy of AA youth in two ways. First, Earle, 41-years-old when he sobered up in 1953, was considered a younger, high-bottom drunk of earlier AA. If 41 as “young” sounds like a stretch in any era, in AA crowds it is always on the younger side and also, as you get to know Earle he was young at heart—a natural seeker and trailblazer. Also, today’s young people (teens and twenties) have their say in our September 2020 *AA Grapevine*.ⁱⁱⁱ

Previously, Rebellion Dogs has talked about an inciteful autobiography, *Physician Heal Thyself: 35 Years of Adventure in Sobriety by an AA ‘Old-Timer*, that Dr. Earle wrote in 1989. See [“Musings from San Francisco”](#)^{iv}

Six years after his book, Earle was interviewed by *AA Grapevine* about the old days. "Physician Heal Thyself!" author, Dr. Earle was interviewed by telephone at his home in California by *Grapevine* and asked about the current state of Alcoholics Anonymous (25-years-ago, in 1995):

“People say there is only one way to work the program. That is crazy. We talk about the *suggested* Steps—which are guides to recovery—not absolutes. Chapter five of *The Big Book* says ‘No one among us has been able to maintain anything like perfect adherence to these principles.’



If we had all the members of AA standing here, everyone would have a different idea what AA is all about. Bill's idea was different from Dr. Bob's, yours will be different from mine. And yet they're all based on one thing and that is: don't drink, and use the Twelve Steps in your own way.”

Riffing off the good doctor, everyone’s experience and description of AA differs. I say, “AA is the group,” and *the group* is not a McDonalds. McDonalds is not a chain of unique restaurants whose only commonality is serving food to hungry people. Being in a McD’s is a visit to *anywhere-ica*—anywhere in North America. Inside McDonalds you can’t tell if you are in Miami, Madison or Montreal. It’s the same menu, price, aesthetics—McDonalds delivers a predictable experience. I don’t see groups in AA, presenting the same uniformity. Some have 20 minutes of ritualistic readings; some have a chair introduce a speaker and then open up the discussion to the floor. You don’t need to read from the *Big Book*, you don’t need to read the preamble, you don’t need to say, “My name’s Joe and I’m an alcoholic.”

Each group is its own AA with shared culture and connection to the larger fellowship, but beholden only to the members of that group’s desires and chosen format. My view of AA isn’t “the” view of AA. You say, “AA is a program, with instructions in a 1939 book.” Someone else says, “AA is a mutual-aid society, all of us helping each other, directly or indirectly.” I wouldn’t disagree with any of that; like you, I am just one voice and view in a collective of individuals that have an inalienable right to participation and self-expression. So, AA is orthodox, and AA is freethinking.

Eleven years sober, Dr Earle was a member of San Francisco’s The Forum AA group. Communally, members were concerned for the growing number of self-identifying drug addicts or irreligious members who found God-talk unattractive. Members re-wrote the AA Steps in 1965 for reading at meetings. See for yourself if the Forum AA Group’s interpretation, *Ten Suggested Steps* variation of our AA experience, doesn’t share Earle’s idea of many paths in AA:

1. We realized deeply that we cannot handle mind-altering drugs safely; our attempts to do so courts disaster.
2. As we commit ourselves to abstinence, we welcome nature’s healing process into our lives.
3. In the group, we discuss our common problems in recovery; to do so hastens healing.
4. We find a friend, usually also recovering, with whom we can discuss our deepest, guarded secrets. Release and freedom become ours.
5. By making amends to ourselves and to others, we put to rest past injuries.
6. When we face our emotional problems squarely, we discover that change automatically happens. We do not seek change—it simply occurs.
7. Our lives are orderly and full of meaning as we live second for second.
8. Recovery together constitutes a fabric of unity. Each of us, however, follows a unique, personalized pattern of recovery.
9. We share our lives with those who are still drinking or using. Many of them decide to join us.
10. Our meeting doors are open to all users of mind-altering substances. The welcome mat is in full view.

Is AA a program or a fellowship? Earle's experience was that AA was family.

“Well, some AA groups have turned into kind of psychological forums and that isn't AA to me. Maybe it is, I don't know. But here's the way I feel about it, correct or incorrect: AA is my family, and every family has a mix of people in it. Every family has people who are braggarts who think they know everything—every family does. Every family has people who whine all the time—every family. And every family has people who go out and do very well and succeed at the art of living. So when I hear the whiners—well, they're kind of a bore, but on the other hand, a family always has boring whiners in it.”

Earle and Bill W met and talked often. Both wrestled to find contentment. In the 1960s, Bill and Earle wondered if better answers could come from Eastern philosophy. *AA Grapevine* asks, “Have you had periods in sobriety that were emotionally difficult?” Here's a classic Dr. Earle story about his search for serenity:

“Let me tell you how I got at some emotional rest. Years ago, a medical college in the South asked me to go to Saigon as a visiting professor to help the Vietnamese set up a new department in gynecology and obstetrics. Before I left, I went back to see Bill and Lois and Marty M. and some others, and I spent about eight or nine days back in New York before I went to Asia. Bill took me to the airport and on the way there he said, ‘You know, Earle, I've been sober longer than anyone else in our organization. After all I was sober six months when I met Bob. But,’ he said, ‘I don't have too much peace of mind.’ He said, ‘I feel down in the dumps a hell of a lot.’

So I said, ‘So do I, Bill. I don't have much serenity either.’ I was sober by this time maybe sixteen, seventeen years.

He said, ‘Do me a favor. When you get over to Asia, see if you can investigate, firsthand, the various religions in Asia. That means Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism, and Confucianism and ancestral worship and the whole shebang.’

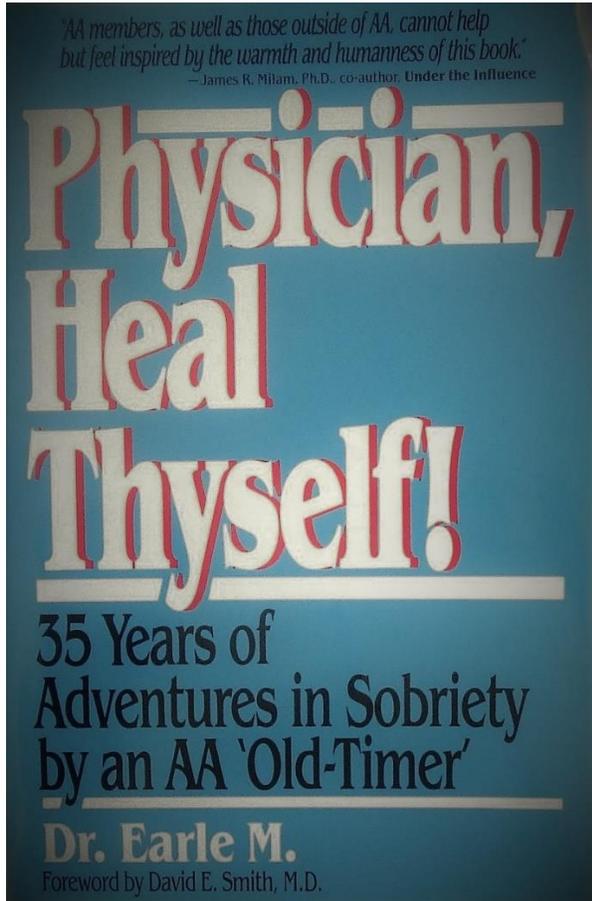
And I said, ‘All right, I'll do it.’ And he said, ‘Stay in contact with me and maybe we can find something in those religions. After all, we've taken from William James, we've taken from all the Christian religions. Let's see what these others have.’

So I hugged Bill and got on the plane and went to Asia. I had three or four rest and relaxation periods a year but I didn't rest and relax. I was determined to find something that would bring peace and serenity to me. I spent a lot of time in Nepal and in Indonesia. I spent time in India. I went into these places looking, looking, looking for serenity. I spent two or three years just driving to find out something. I tried meditation, I read the Bhagavad Gita, the Vedas—everything.

I went to an ashram on the southeast coast of India, run by a very famous guru and saint. There were about a hundred and fifty East Indians there. I was the only Westerner and they welcomed me. I wore a dhoti—that's a white skirt that men wear—and I wore one like the rest of them did. We all ate on the ground on great big banana leaves over a yard

long. There would be food on the banana leaves and you'd make it into a ball with your right hand and throw it into your mouth. There were no knives or forks at all, so I did what they did. I didn't like the taste very much but I did it.

I happened to be there at the time of the Feast of Dewali. Dewali is like our time of Easter; it's the time of renewal. We were awakened on the early morning of Dewali around two o'clock. This ashram was located at the base of a mountain known as Arunachal. Now Arunachal in Hindi means sun, and the myth goes that one of the gods, Rama, lives inside of this mountain. We were told we had to walk around the base of this mountain--which was a ten mile walk—and as we walked, we were yelling to Rama. If you do it in a very firm and believing way, it's said that Rama will come up and wave at you and bless you. I was there, and I did it. We walked around and we were yelling "Rama, Rama, Rama" hoping that Rama would come up and bless us all. They all walked in their bare feet. I didn't, I wore my shoes. Gosh, I was tired. But I walked all night long, the whole distance.



After that event, I came back to my little apartment in Saigon, ready to return to my medical work. I was so beaten because I'd been driving and searching and clenching my fists for almost three years (and I kept writing to Bill about all this, you know). And I came into my apartment and I suddenly collapsed down onto the floor. I lay there breathing kind of heavily and I said to myself, 'Oh, to hell with serenity, I don't care if it ever comes.'

And I meant it. And do you know what happened? All of a sudden the craving to find serenity utterly evaporated—and there it was. Serenity. The trouble was the search . . . looking out *there* for what was right *here*.

You know, we only have this given second. There's always now. Once I realized that, serenity became mine. Now—I'm speaking about emotions—I haven't sought one single thing since that day because it's all right here.'

... *Is there anything you'd like to say in conclusion?*

...I'm not a church-goer—I'm *in church* all the time. To me, prayer is utter awareness. I don't know if that makes sense to you but it does to me. It's being aware of things, of what's going on around me all the time, in a given second. That to me is a form of prayer, that to me is a form of righteousness, if you want to use that religious word.

A Buddhist might call that awareness *mindfulness*." Read the whole interview online: <https://www.aagrapevine.org/magazine/1995/oct/interview-author-physician-heal-thyself>

My take-aways from this look back at 20th century AA is that:

- AA wasn't the same for the first two members, Bill W and Bob S. Also true, AA is not the same for the most recent two members of AA, either. Earle mentioned the Bob and Bill's experience was different from each other, just as yours and mine is not the same.
- Long-term sobriety comes with difficult circumstances and emotional challenges. The recently converted view of AA life is portrayed by Bill W, "a new freedom and a new happiness ... uselessness and self-pity will disappear. We will lose interest in selfish things ... self-seeking will slip away. Our whole attitude and outlook upon life will change (*Alcoholics Anonymous*, pp 83-84)." This "happy destiny" turned out to be over-selling or wishful thinking as exemplified by both Bill W's and Earle M's actual experiences of AA sobriety.
- Detaching from self-seeking sometimes ends the fight and brings relief. Not doing sounds counterintuitive to the "do the work (The Steps for instance)" mantra. Effort has purpose but the relief is from letting go? That's curious. As Earle observes, "I often say to people at meetings, 'You're trying to find peace of mind out there. I do not blame you, but it isn't out there. It's here. Right here.'"

But let us not get too bogged down in the old-timer past. In the September 2020 *AA Grapevine*, young people rule the day.

Emma from Philadelphia got sober at 14 and talks about AA life this century: "I was lucky to get sober in the middle of young people's AA. No one there told me I was 'too young' or 'couldn't understand.' They taught me how to do homework sober. They taught me how to get through lunchbreak sober. And, eventually, they taught me how to go to prom sober, to apply to college sober and to take the risk of moving across the country sober.

I made it to an AA meeting my first week in my new college town. I was 18, three years sober and living in the dorms. While my classmates were just discovering drinking, I was going to meetings, engaging in AA fellowship and learning how to be a sober college student."

And from the what was old is new again file, Susan of Plymouth Michigan talks about how "I have had amazing experiences already with virtual AA meetings, and over time I've come to the conclusion that there is little difference between those and physical meetings," she pulls a 1960 quote from Bill W out, who was maybe warning about anonymity in the advent of television in everyone's homes. "Nothing can matter more to the future welfare of AA than the manner in which we use this colossus of communication."

Imagine Bill W. and Dr. Earle logging onto a meeting together, Bill from New York, sharing about anonymity on Zoom, Earle in Bangkok talking about the Dharma Recovery meeting he went to yesterday.

And Nachele from Collingwood Ontario got and stayed sober before her 24th birthday and she has been sober 15 years now. Her story puts an exclamation point on Dr. Earle's, AA experience that is something different to all of us: "I was a bar drinker; I always drank in bars. So when I had just a couple of months sober, I remember asking people at a meeting what AAs did for fun. It was a legitimate question at the time, because so many people my age were busy partying. But luckily, I soon found ways to have fun sober. And many have been pretty amazing.

Since I got sober, I've gone hiking on the Inca Trail to Machu Picchu and I've climbed mountains on various continents. I've gone snorkeling, skydiving, bungee jumping, white-water rafting, and I've even played with baby tigers in Thailand.

I'm so fortunate that many of my dreams have come true in AA. I came in only having been to three different countries and now I can say I've been to 63!

I love going to meetings all over the world, even if I barely speak the language."



Carole P from San Francisco's share is so 2020: "In my own mind, my share that day was a disaster. I was horrified by how I looked on my smart phone. As I spoke, I got distracted by my cat and my landline kept ringing. Then I saw a good friend of mine 'leave the meeting' in the middle of my share! I was not in my body, nor in the spiritual solution. It was a case of 'instincts on rampage.' Another sleepless night.

Where had my program gone? I needed to get real and to practice the Steps like my hair was on fire. And so I did. I am reminded that I'm powerless over alcohol, the virus, technology and what I look like on video."

We sometimes here about quality sobriety vs. watered down AA, or real AA for real alcoholics as if there is a gold-standard for how to get/stay sober in AA. For instance, "Working the Twelve Steps exactly as described in the book *Alcoholics Anonymous*." Well, that is "a" way to do AA. Not everyone has done that. For a sample of successful AA that did not follow

the AA instructions as outlined in the *Big Book*, how about starting with the people whose stories appear inside that 1st Edition of *Alcoholics Anonymous*. Their stories were recorded before the 12-steps were conceived. Bill W had written up to Chapter Four "We Agnostics" as well as "Working With Others," and "A Vision for You," that describe the benefits of AA. Completed, or near completed, were also chapters to employers, loved ones, about the post-recovery family, and all the stories that appeared in the book.

How many members there were—be it 40 or so, or the rounded-up 100 that is been popularized—there are 28 stories of AA members in the 1st Edition. Outcome rates were stellar, without the Twelve Steps, “exactly as written.” In fact we know that of 28 recorded stories, 14 never drank again after their story was recorded for the *Big Book*. Of the other 14, seven drank and never got back into sobriety, seven drank and came back to AA, dying sober. So a 75% success rate was achieved by this sample of AA members—14 who never drank again, being ½ and another seven who would get and stay sober, being another ¼ of this early AA sample.

In *Writing the Big Book: The Creation of AA* (2019), Bill Schaberg writes:

“Eight expositional chapters had already been drafted and edited providing more than ‘enough background and window-dressing’ for the book. Finally, he was going to have to put down in black and white and in simple declarative sentences ‘a definite statement of concrete principles, telling the new man exactly what he had to do to get sober and then stay that way. It was a seemingly insolvable problem that he had been dodging for far too long (p. 440).”

So, on the one hand, some espouse on the Twelve Steps panacea, as outlined in *Alcoholics Anonymous*, as how the original members got sober, documentary research reveals that this characterization of members working a shared program in a uniformed way is false. On the other hand, Bill W’s attempted to describe his own, or our collective experience—as testimony, not direction—that’s fine; take what you like, leave the rest. Earle who knew Bill, wrote his step eight of ten steps of AA, “Recovery together constitutes a fabric of unity. Each of us, however, follows a unique, personalized pattern of recovery.” Earle was a maverick, doing AA his way and always restless, a seeker looking for a better. This was true of Bill W before him, 16 years Earle’s senior. We see in today’s youth this same restless tendency to extend themselves outside of their comfort zone, travelling, learning, trying out new experiences. AA then and AA now is the experience of alcohol use disorder, the experience of recovery and the adventures (or our experiences) we live and share with each other.

Before his death in 2015, reunited with Katherine Ketcham, Ernie Kurtz wrote, *Experiencing Spirituality: Finding Meaning through Story Telling* (2014). This was a 20-year follow up to their previous collaborative work, *The Spirituality of Imperfection*.

“Experience carries numerous connotations. Many users have recognized both its strengths and its slipperiness. Oscar Wile is credited with, ‘Experience is simply the name we give our mistakes.’ And although it does not originate with him, Randy Pausch’s *The Last Lecture* (2007) is the most frequently cited source for ‘Experience is what you get when you don’t get what you want.’ Because the word’s power, *experience* has at times been twisted and used in attempts to justify all kinds of aberrations, especially claims to certainty.”^v

When people quote Bill W—or Kurtz and Ketcham for that matter—aren’t we borrowing authority... making, or insinuating “claims of certainty”?

Each of us have our own experiences. Our explanation of an experience is as valid as everyone else's. I think that putting too much weight on people who borrow the authority of what AA was or should be by *Big Book*-quoting or their understanding of Tradition so-and-so has folly in as far as we are subordinating our distorted memory and view for someone else's distorted memory or view. Clinging to the past isn't the way of any generation in the wings. Youth don't want to duplicate a well-worn path; in a healthy society, the young forge better ways, be it seeking enlightenment, summitting mountain peaks or embracing new technology. If the kids are alright, then AA is alright.

AA is as good (and incomplete) today as it was way-back-when. Alcoholism and recovery are just as mysterious today as it was in the 1930s. Yes, we know more in 2020; yes, we are better off for the increased body of discovery and evidence since Dr. Silkworth's 1938 opinion. Yet, the secrets of who will stay sober by doing what-exactly, has still not been revealed to us, has it? All we have is stories.

So, why not take our cues from AA's mavericks. Why rest on our laurels? Let's be courageous enough to try novel approaches. People who hold themselves out as "truth-tellers" quoting authorities about why we should go back in time or resist change are fearful. And while we need not be reckless about our future, if we don't adapt, we will perish as a society. There is wisdom to be gained from honoring those who have gone before us. But hanging on every word and duplicating every action, leads to reification.

'Tis a balancing act. Why reinvent the wheel or impose change for changes sake? Yet, a body of evidence warns against holding our forefathers out as wiser, higher authorities or replicating every ritual and written expression from our past as if it were sacred. To accent—with humor—a warning against putting our founders on pedestals we defer once more to Ernie's and Katherine's who themselves borrow rabbinical parables. Hopefully, this will help us to not take ourselves, or others, too seriously.

"The great rabbi was dying and, as we all know, deathbed wisdom is the best. So his students lined up, single file to receive his last words. The most brilliant student was at the bedside, the second most brilliant behind him, and so on, till the line ended at the student who was a room and a half away. The most brilliant student leaned over to the slowly slipping rabbi and asked, 'Rabbi, what is the meaning of life?'

The rabbi groaned, 'Life is like a cup of tea.' The most brilliant student turned to the second most brilliant student, 'The rabbi said life is like a cup of tea.' And word was whispered from student to student till it arrived at the fellow who was waiting a room and a half away.

'What does the rabbi mean—life is like a cup of tea?' he asked. And his question was passed back up the line until the most brilliant student once again leaned over the dying rabbi. 'Rabbi, what do you mean—Life is like a cup of tea?'

The rabbi shrugged, 'All right, so maybe life is not like a cup of tea!'"

Endnotes...

ⁱ https://www.aa.org/assets/en_US/en_bm-31.pdf

ⁱⁱ https://www.aa.org/assets/en_US/p-16_theaagroup.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.aagrapevine.org/>

^{iv} <https://rebelliondogspublishing.com/home/blog/musings-from-san-francisco-march-2019-rebellion-dogs-blog>

^v Kurtz, Ketcham, *Experiencing Spirituality: Finding Meaning through Story Telling*, New York: Penguin, 2014 (pp 32-33).