



# The evolution of language, group conscience & Twelve Step Interpretations

*21<sup>st</sup> century liberation of the 1939 Twelve Step*

Advancing technology is *in our face*. In the most tech-influenced businesses, B.C. is now referring to “before computers” and A.D. means “after digital.” Grade seven students are A.D. children who never knew an era where every phone was stuck to a wall and *googling* was called “research.”

**If a Woman Needs It, Should She Be Spanked?**

[Today's question by Herman Martin, 125 Broad St., New York 4, N. Y.]

**MIGUEL MATOS**, Brooklyn, counterman: "Why not? If they don't know how to behave by the time they're adults, they should be treated like children and spanked. That ought to make them grow up in a hurry. If it doesn't at first, they'll soon get the idea."

**FRANK DESIDERIO**, Brooklyn, barber: "Yes, when they deserve it. As a barber, I've got a lot of faith in the hairbrush. I think there are certain cases when it is advisable. When it is, there's no reason why you shouldn't go right ahead and do it. I can't knock the idea. In my business, a man sets a lot of store by the results he can get with a hairbrush properly applied."

**TEDDY GALLEI**, Brooklyn, parking lot attendant: "You bet. It teaches them who's boss. A lot of women tend to forget this is a man's world and a lot of men who stepped down as boss of a family wish they hadn't. Spanking might help get back some of the respect they lost."

**WILLIAM DAVIS**, Brooklyn, toy factory owner: "Yes. Most of them have it coming to them anyway. If they don't, it will remind them how well off they are. I subscribe to the theory that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure."

WHAT QUESTION is buzzing around your mind? Send it to "You Said It", New York Mirror, 235 E. 45th St., New York 17, N. Y. For each query used The Mirror will pay \$10.

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Our language is another characteristic of our culture that we adapt to reflect our changing attitudes and it then, in turn, adapts our way of seeing and thinking about the world around us. From imbecile, to mentally handicapped, to mentally challenged, the way we describe someone with an IQ of 40 has evolved to incorporate our evolving context and awareness. In a chicken and egg way attitude gives birth to new language, which in turn, compassion hatches from, bringing a higher quality to our civilization. We see people in a more holistic way; imagination brings light where stigma darkened our life before.

Look at this 1950s New York City article from the Daily Mirror. The shocking candor of the attitude of the day angers us now. If the men quoted in this column were our grandparents or parents we would be ashamed of our family. But this is our lineages as a society. Dr. Jordan Peterson has degrees in Political Science and Psychology and has taught at Harvard and University of Toronto. When lecturing his students about good and evil, he tries to impart on students their

own capacity for evil. He makes this challenge to students:

“There’s an overwhelming probability, if you were in Nazi Germany in the 1930s, that you would have been perpetrators and Nazis—an overwhelming probability. And if they can’t accept that, because it’s a historical fact, you have absolutely no idea who they are. Now, imagining yourself as a Nazi perpetrator is an unbearably terrifying thing to do. But I don’t think that you have any insight whatsoever into your capacity for good until you have some well-developed insight into your capacity for evil.”<sup>i</sup>

“Every time you make a pathological moral decision, you move the world one step closer to complete annihilation. Every time you make an appropriate moral decision and you manifest moral courage in the face of your own vulnerability, then you move the world one step farther from the brink.”



Dr. Jordan Peterson delivering a lecture on virtue at University of Toronto

Yes, we all like to think that we would never have been sexist at any time in history. Yes, we like to think that we would have been the 1% of Germans who took action against the persecution of Jews. But odds are we would have followed the norm. Peterson’s point is that to recognize our personal capacity for evil, is to know our personal capacity for good. His ultimate point is that our own virtue should never be taken for granted. I use his shocking challenge to help make my point that we are evolving; we are becoming better. We are becoming more knowledgeable and to the extent to which we have virtue, increased knowledge means an increased compassion and usefulness to others.

How has the Twelve Step culture evolved? Well, we are more compassionate, inclusive and useful to the still suffering addict and to each other. Today, we look at the evolution of Twelve Step language.

In 1953 Narcotics Anonymous was formed, in 1957, Gamblers Anonymous came to be. So, before 1960 we found that the principles of the Twelve Steps could be spoken in a language to help any substance or process addiction. Dr. Peterson says that the foundation of all evil is arrogance and resentment. Looking at those opposites, humility and compassion, Our Twelve Step culture has allowed us to bring an immeasurable amount of good to the lives of those suffering in the grips of addiction.

The shock factor of this 1950s clip from the Daily Mirror hits home regarding how attitudes change our language and that new language reinforces our attitude. By the time Adult Children of Alcoholics and Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous came around in the 1970s, the sexist language was gone. “God as we understood God” replaced “as we understood Him.”

The turn of this century ushered in a maturing in our our collective understanding of non-theistic worldviews. Where in 1939, skepticism was likened to intellectualism or a stubborn defiance of the one true reality, today we embraced Humanists, Buddhists, Atheists and Agnostics, not as being at a way station to enlightenment, but as rights-bearing equals in a fellowship that embraces the Twelve Step program. Follow NA literature from late 20<sup>th</sup> century to the 21<sup>st</sup> century and you can see a new attitude. The basic text, *Narcotics Anonymous* goes from talking in the “we” voice, when referring to atheist and agnostics in the room. The tone is “they.” Look at this paragraph from “Just For Today—Living the Program:

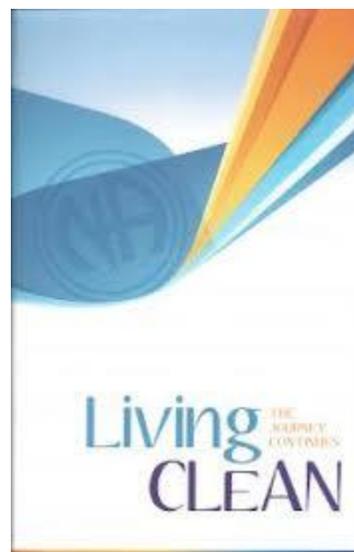
“Each of us is free to work out our own concept of a Higher Power. Many of us were suspicious and skeptical because of disappointments that we have had with religion. As new members, the talk of God we heard in meetings repelled us. Until we sought our own answers in this area, we were trapped in the ideas gathered from our past. Agnostics and atheists sometimes start by just talking to ‘whatever’s there.’ There is a spirit or an energy that can be felt in the meetings. This is sometimes the newcomer’s first concept of a Higher Power; the group may be all the power greater herself that the member ever needs of the purpose of recovery. Ideas from the past are often incomplete and unsatisfactory. Everything we know is subject to revision, especially what we know about the truth.”

Notice the subtle shift from “we NA members” to the third person description of nonbelievers. It may have been unintentional to exclude atheists and agnostics from team-recovery instead of saying, “We agnostics and atheists sometimes...” which would have been a more respectful, inclusive tone. But that was the 1980s.

*Living Clean* from 2012 has a different tone because it was written in a different time. The chapter called “A Spiritual Path” says, “We each find a way to surrender, but that does not mean we all come to believe in God. Many of our members have been clean for years as atheists. For some of us, coming to believe that NA can accommodate our atheism has itself been a leap of faith. We are welcome no matter what we believe. NA has no opinion on how our members define or practice spirituality.”

Notice how atheists are “us” or “we” and no longer referred to in third person as outliers.

New fellowships born in the 21<sup>st</sup> century don’t have the dogmatic fear of change to hold them back. Of course they talk in a modern language; there is nothing sacred to honor or uphold. In 2001 Online Gamers Anonymous (OLGA) came on the scene as did OLG-Anon for loved ones of gaming addicts. The 12 Principles for atheists and agnostics offer a secular Step language that any addict/alcoholic/ codependent could embrace. Principle 3 is Trust and it redefines, “Turned our will and our lives over to the care of God *as we understood Him,*” to “Seek the help of someone qualified in counseling or someone that we trust from experience to be capable of helping us.”



12 Principles for atheists and agnostics from Online Gamers Anonymous, <http://www.olganon.org/>

1. We admit we have been powerless over gaming, and that our lives have become unmanageable. Accept that we are no longer social gamers. It is affecting our real lives, and the lives of our loved ones, in a bad way. **Principle - Honesty and Acceptance**
2. Dare to believe that there lies within Us the Power to restore balance to our lives. **Principle - Hope**
3. Seek the help of someone qualified in counseling or someone that we trust from experience to be capable of helping us. **Principle - Faith**
4. Really take a good look at our lives, and make a searching and fearless inventory. **Principle - Action and Courage, Action and Courage** Have the courage to be aware of how we really lived our real lives. What were we trying to escape from? What didn't we want to face?
5. Fully admit to a trusted or qualified person or support group our understanding of the exact nature of our problems. **Principle - Integrity** What did I find out when I took that searching and fearless inventory in step 4?
6. We become willing to let go of our addictive patterns of behavior and start over. **Principle - Willingness**
7. Actually ask for help to remove our shortcomings from any person or persons or group that we feel are qualified to provide that help. **Principle - Humility**
8. Make a list of persons that we have harmed, during our gaming, and become willing to make amends to them (including ourselves). **Principle - Love of our brothers and sisters**
9. Make direct amends to such people wherever possible. **Principle - Justice**
10. Continue to take personal inventory, and when we are wrong, promptly admit it. **Principle - Perseverance** (Don't just say, we are sorry, say we were wrong.) And, also, acknowledge when we do right.
11. Find and study something that we find amazing. Realize that there are ways of living that can bring us a deeper degree of personal fulfillment. **Principle - Spirituality**
12. Having become aware of where we really ended up, how far down we went, and having discovered that there was a way out once we were willing to face our fears and come back to our real lives, we help others and share our story, and we help ourselves by practicing these principles in all of our affairs. **Principle - Service**

Check out #11 which is about beauty. They take AA's prayer and meditation step and do this with it: "Find and study something that we find amazing. Realize that there are ways of living that can bring us a deeper degree of personal fulfillment." Doesn't sound like a lot more fun than the futility of the never answer plea to hear from on high, what "his will for us and the power to carry it out" entails? Hey choose your Kool-Aid; not exactly sure what the best-before date is, I'll drink from the urn that hasn't been sitting around for 78 years.

Teen Addiction Anonymous (TAA) has been here since 2008<sup>ii</sup>. You won't find the word "god" used anywhere in the Steps. The word "Higher Power" works for believers but it also works for everyone so why would these Teen addicts cater to a tradition of reification? Wasn't part of the reason for having their own meetings so that they could speak in their own present-day language?

While taking out the binary thinking that the only explanation of how the universe is unfolding is under the guidance of a loving God, TAA also strips the religious morality out of the Twelve Steps. Step 4 reads, "I will make a fearless and honest

review of my life, my values, and my goals."

To one with binary thinking, one style is correct; everything else is wrong. People are either good or bad. Everything is defined as ones and zeros or black and white. Another way of looking at things is life is neither all black, nor white; life is a whole spectrum of color. What is gained, what is lost by each choice, to what extent is this useful and to what extent is it lacking? The OLGA members who work the 12 Principles will get the same results as the AA fundamentalist gets from her or his Twelve Steps. Each will be freed from a "merciless obsession" and can reasonably expect to live happy, joyous and free.

The Twelve Step breakthrough is the same for a believer or skeptic. The words to describe the experience are quite different. The meaning associated with the experience is different. Despite these differences, to the onlooker, they see two clean and sober people who were previously hopeless cases. So the theist, atheist and agnostic can either be three addicts divided by a common language or they can *live and let live*. And if they can *live and let live*, any one could sponsor either of the other or be sponsored by them. Each can work with or learn from the other. We are all different—no two exactly the same—but we are equal.

In our last Rebellious Dog Blog Post, we looked at how different language can and will be chosen depending if we have an external locus of control (“No human power could relieve our alcoholism.”) or if we have an internal locus of control (“[we] tapped an unsuspected inner resource...”). This time we look at how imagination makes the principles of the Twelve Steps of recovery accessible to all, regardless of our world view.

Oscar Wilde said, “Disobedience, in the eye of anyone who has read history, is man’s original virtue. It is through disobedience and rebellion that progress has been made.” With all due respect to orderly, scientific change for the better, Wilde’s point has validity. We have talked about variations, interpretations or evolving Twelve Step languages. The fact is—inside and outside Twelve Step rooms—that most of the progress has been from the marginalized who refused to bow to the status quo and demanded better for themselves. The result is better for everyone.

While the evolution of a more inclusive Twelve Steps naturally finds its way into the vernacular of newer fellowships, the granddaddy, Alcoholics Anonymous shows a few signs of being mired in resistance and/or hostility towards artistic liberty with the sacred wording laid out by our forefathers. Rebellion Dogs blogs have reported on the few Intergroups who set group and individual autonomy aside (as an emergency measure), in the name of preserving the integrity of *the message*. Most members and groups are left to follow their own conscience. However a handful of groups that read or distribute secular interpretations of the Twelve Steps have been de-listed by angry Intergroups who have taken it upon themselves to govern who is and is not an AA group. The larger question is, “What is *the message* that is being defended so zealously?” Was the message to obey a 1939 language or be excommunicated? Or was the message that more will be revealed and the principles—not the language—unifies AA members. There is room for the traditionalists; there is room for the radicals.

Bill Wilson said, “Rebellion dogs our every step at first.” There is a time for capitulation and a time to stand our ground. No one has come up with a way that works for everyone, every time. So, let’s embrace a degree of rebellion and see it as our virtue. More will be revealed, indeed.

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<sup>i</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uM25byj81Jc> <http://porkosity.blogspot.ca/2010/10/fed-52-professor-jordan-peterson.html>

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.teenaddictionanonymous.org/the12steps>