



Rebellion Dogs Blog July 2021

The Second Coming of Alcoholics Anonymous by David G

The 2nd coming of AA By David G



As the world witnessed the cogs of the great machine grind to a halt, and as each country surrendered to its own lockdown; human beings realized that science fiction was becoming a fact. A great plague was upon us. We were locked into government-enforced isolation. We suddenly found ourselves forced into living a totalitarian-like existence. Fortunately, our more friendly version of Big Brother allowed us certain luxuries that would make a long-term stay in our individual prisons much more comfortable: we had Netflix, online hobbies, takeaway deliveries, and mountains of booze. There was always a wall to paint, a garden to dig, a musical instrument to learn, and now one could work from home. It was truly the *Apocalypse-Lite*.

For most folks, lockdown was an inconvenience. Most would get through it, and soon hop back on the treadmill—back to those lovely comfortable routines. However, for one section of society the prospect of an extended disconnection from their community was most definitely akin to a Bible-esque end-of-days scenario. Members of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) were in a state of panic. All around the world, voices could be heard bouncing off the walls in the thousands of church halls, community centers, and rehab clinics where an estimated two million AA members met regularly to stay

sober. These face-to-face gatherings had always been the cornerstone of maintaining long-term sobriety. The meetings were a foundation of the AA program and integral to once-seemingly hopeless alcoholics defusing their addiction to alcohol. Jackie, an AA member from England, vivid recollections of the days leading up to the lockdown,

“I remember being extremely angry with the lockdown, and for a while, I had forgotten a basic tenet of recovery, that anger is just a mask for fear. I’d been sober since 2001, and that’s largely because I’d been regularly attending face-to-face AA meetings every week since then. I went even more often when times were tough. Lockdown without meetings was unthinkable. I was very anxious.”

Across the world in Texas, William W, sober since 1972, says it was the same in the USA,

“There was tremendous fear. There was anxiety. For those in AA whose reliance is on attending meetings, it really showed their level of concern was extreme. In fact, their level of concern, concerned me a great deal.”

While the formats of AA meetings differ in many places, the essential workings of the standard meeting had been based upon each alcoholic describing their drinking escapades to each other and then, importantly, how they got sober. By sharing their experience of gaining recovery, the attendee somehow could receive a reprieve from the killer craving for alcohol. The AA community had been forged by a mutual sincerity and focus on staying sober. Like survivors of a shipwreck marooned on a desert island, AA members had always put aside their differences and helped each other to survive. Camaraderie and fellowship had always been the essence of AA. That connection was not just during the meetings. To millions of ex-drunks hanging out and going to coffee with each other after the meeting closed had always been almost as important as the formal meeting itself. The bonds that these drunks had formed, by sitting close to each other, looking in each other’s eyes and voicing their feelings had always been the milk and honey of sobriety. Yet now this utopian existence was about to crumble. A prolonged lockdown— isolation from each other—posed a mortal threat to their lives, or at the very least, their sanity. For AA members and their families, the Apocalypse was upon them - and it was real.

In March 2020, faced with fellowship famine and dangerously prolonged, white-knuckled sobriety, a sense of horror and fear filled the final AA gatherings. In those last days of face-to-face meetings, in between the wailing and woe, a peculiar new word was starting to get a few mentions...something called “Zoom” was peppering discussions. William W says the first reference he heard about Zoom was in March 2020, just after the lockdown started,

“I’d presented important new material at an AA convention in Louisiana and the woman who organized it encouraged me to try doing future workshops by Zoom, but I was reluctant and fearful of the technology.”

As with any community, there are those who resist change, and because Zoom meetings were video meetings, or meetings conducted on computers, it was regarded by some as impure and not AA. Yet, this was not true as many were to discover. In fact, Zoom was pure AA. In the forward to the Fourth Edition of AA’s “Big Book” *Alcoholics Anonymous*, there is a clear reference to

online meetings as having equal effectiveness as face-to-face meetings.ⁱ Written back in the early days of the internet when one's computer made squeaky noises when it connected to the web, this endorsement was possibly one of the most important and prescient paragraphs ever written in AA literature. Zoom was allowed, and it worked.

Emilio M from Brooklyn, New York was instrumental in setting up early AA Zoom meetings; and he says that even with an endorsement by AA, there was still resistance to going online,

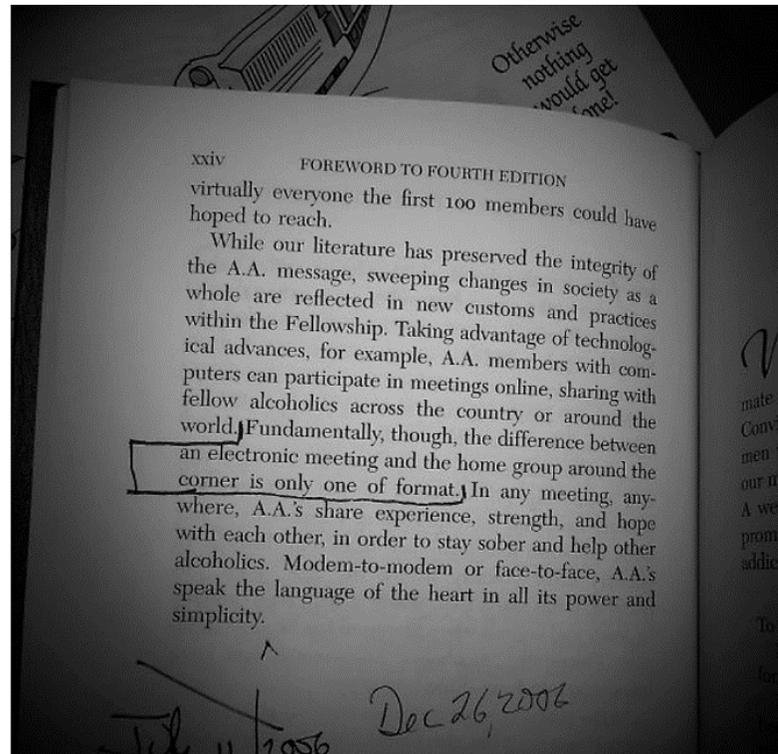
“Many of us knew what the implications of a lockdown would mean for AA, so we started to discuss the setting up a Zoom account, but several members thought there was no need as the lockdown would never happen, or if it did would only last a few weeks. How wrong they were.”

At first glance, the Zoom format resembled the opening credits to 1970's TV series *The Brady Bunch*. The viewer sees a grid of faces in boxes and can hear what these faces speak. Still, even as Zoom grew in popularity, the general wisdom in AA was that video meetings did not, and would never EVER compare to face-to-face meetings even though this thesis had not been tested by those in the know. Fortunately, there were enough tech-savvy forward-thinking members, like Emilio, who could see how this Zoom thing might just save the AA day.

As the first days of isolation began, there was a torrent of Zoom adoptions. In frantic phone calls between members, favors and tips were exchanged. Word spread like a highly contagious disease,

“Alcoholics stay sober on Zoom!” Emilio recalled, “getting phone calls and emails from members asking about Zoom and how to get a meeting set up. Most people had no idea about Zoom; but as the reality of our situation became obvious, they were desperate to start a meeting.”

The new Gold Rush was on. AA members stayed sober. The Zoom Company made a fortune in the processⁱⁱ. The trickle soon became a raging torrent. Zoom would go on to change the face of AA forever—and many other 12-step fellowships. It was a revolution in sobriety.



With the wholesale adoption of Zoom meetings came a plethora of new challenges that again, forced AA to adapt. The basis of the early trouble was that very few AA members had any understanding of which buttons to push or how to administrate a Zoom meeting. Often meetings would begin, and no-one knew how to unmute themselves or turn their cameras on. Minutes of silence would ensue as the blind led the blind, and the silence was deafening. Generations of alcoholics who in years gone by, had steadfastly refused to get involved with the internet and all its machinations, were suddenly forced to swim in a deep pool. Their learning curves were Everest-like in scale, and they had to climb fast! Virginia P from California said,

“Everyone heard I knew how to use Zoom, and I was inundated with calls about how to connect, find meetings, and use devices from laptops, iPads, and even cell phones. Many people were baffled. Some adapted quickly, and others struggled calling at all hours of the day and night.”

While alcoholics struggled with the technology, the predators came hunting. AA folks were not the only people who discovered the delights of Zoom. Bored and locked at home, teenagers, who were highly proficient at the internet and all its mysteries, found great pleasure in launching coordinated attacks on AA meetings. Like lambs to the slaughter, AA folks found that without security systems in place these Zoom bombers could literally take over the controls of any unprotected Zoom meeting. In the early months of the Zoom movement, many meetings were invaded by an international horde of porn-wielding, misogynist, homophobic and racist intruders hell-bent on causing as much offence as possible. Innocent participants found their screens suddenly filled with hard-core pornography and speakers blazed with death metal haze. With the waves of panic caused by the Zoom bombers, the whole Zoom adventure was in danger of ending as many AA members left online meetings in disgust, vowing never to return.

“I think the fear was a double whammy combination of the sudden isolation and being confronted with a disruption to a place of former safety,” says Emilio.” You have to remember that up until this point, members felt safe in their old face-to-face meetings. The most trouble members would see in a typical AA meeting held in a church basement was the odd argument between members or a drunk interrupting the meeting. Zoom bombing took disruption to new levels.”

Walter S from the USA recalls how shocked he was at the first bombing,

“I saw things I really didn’t want to see. There was a lot of hard-core graphic porn, straight and gay, that was being beamed right into the homes of people with pretty tranquil lives. That rocked a lot of people, and then there was a lot of use of the ‘N’ word.”

Fortunately, AA adapted. Members started to organize teams of security to keep meetings protected. One of the most important facets of AA’s program, for the alcoholic in recovery, is committing to a service position in a meeting. For example, traditional service might entail an individual stacking the chairs when a meeting ends, or making cups of coffee for members, or buying AA literature for the new member who has just come to their first meeting after a cataclysmic drinking spree. Suddenly these service positions morphed into on-line guises:

security teams would scour the meetings for unwelcome guests, or folks might be allocated the role of greeting new Zoomers to the meeting. As this transition occurred, the online fellowship grew. Two months after lockdown started, thousands of meetings from across the world were now on Zoom.

At the beginning of lockdown, members stayed Zooming in their local area, but with the introduction of AA Zoom Meetings Global List, members started to travel outside their geographical location through the wonder of Zoom. They left the country and went to Russia, Iceland, Alaska, Australia, Argentina, Scotland, and Kenya. They heard stories and wisdom from all corners of the world, many they had not heard before. Like many others, Walter S was an early Zoom jetsetter that travelled the world from the luxury of his couch,

“A friend gave me a list of meetings in the UK, so I immediately zoomed over to a small meeting in Aberystwyth in Wales. I was shocked at how great the meeting was. I still attend this meeting a few times a week, also a meeting in Edinburgh, Scotland and another in Newcastle in Australia.”

As Virginia from California recalls,

“I found an English-speaking meeting in Iceland, and my adventure was on. I, not only still regularly attend the meeting in Iceland, but I journey all over the world. It has enhanced my recovery to the tenth power!”

Suddenly, Facebook directories and website pages began to spring up, listing thousands of AA Zoom global meetings. Zoom AA meetings were in full flight. Non-stop, 24 hour Zoom AA marathon meetings appeared, where members could attend any time, day, or night from anywhere in the world (including a women’s only meeting—The Women’s International Marathon). Every day brought new challenges, such as when Zoom introduced passwords as a futile effort to thwart bombers. Unheralded upgrades to Zoom meant the audio on computers would not work.

One day, word got out that AA Head Office in New York was in financial strife. However, such was the fellowship and spirit that had been formed on Zoom in the months since lockdown began, a mass enterprise to increase contributions to the head office saw the coffers fill to sustainable levels.

Yet the phenomenon that gave the AA Zoom movement some real gravitas and momentum was the advent of the “Zoom baby.” These were the people who had never attended in-person face-to-face meetings, but they were getting sober using Zoom only! To many in AA, the newcomer is the most important person in any meeting. They are like gold to the erstwhile AA member, such was the power of the Zoom revolution; more and more newcomers than ever before were turning up at Zoom meetings and staying off alcohol.

Laura P, a Zoom baby from Texas, celebrated one year of sobriety in April 2021, said,

“By the time I got to AA, my drinking and drug using was as bad as it gets. A couple of years earlier the long-term toxic relationship I had been in for 15 years ended, and one and a week and a half later, my dad died. It was totally out of hand. I started going to a local Zoom meeting in Texas in April 2020, and then after three days, I suddenly realized I was sober. I went to four or five meetings a day. I met my AA sponsor on Zoom, and I’ve found a real fellowship. I can forge relationships on Zoom as easy as I can in real life. I’m still sober more than a year later.”

Another Zoom baby, Robert F from Scotland came to AA on Zoom following several visits to the hospital due to alcohol related illnesses, including gastric bleeding and dehydration,

“During my last visit to hospital for withdrawal, I was given some Zoom numbers and started to attend Zoom meetings. At first, I wasn’t very confident with it, but then I really threw myself into it. Six months later, I was coming home from the local store when I realized I’d left the store without looking over the bottles of rum. Since my sobriety date in August 2020, I haven’t been to a face-to-face meeting, so the Zoom online meetings must work.”

Varvara T from Moscow remembers the day she first met a Zoom baby,

“It was June 2020, and a woman from a nearby city appeared in a Zoom AA meeting. She was just a few days sober. We were in contact for a while then lost touch. Then many months later, she showed up at another meeting and was offering herself to people as a sponsor. This was unbelievable that she was still sober and helping others. It was a beautiful moment. Things like this are happening all the time now on Zoom.”

And the Zoom Babies keep coming. Even as face-to-face meetings re-open, daily meetings created specifically for newcomers are growing in popularity. It seems zoom has found its niche. Younger generations, much more comfortable talking to a computer screen than older AA’s are flocking to Zoom in their thousands. One of the more popular zoom meetings, the International ‘Shivering Beginners’ meeting runs each day with up to 200 newcomers attending regularly.

While it prides itself on helping newcomers, in years gone by AA has been criticized for not doing enough to attract members from diverse backgrounds, or those with non-traditional spiritual beliefs. Joe C, a sober member since 1976 from Toronto, believes that the on-line revolution has been the catalyst for AA to attract members from all walks of life,

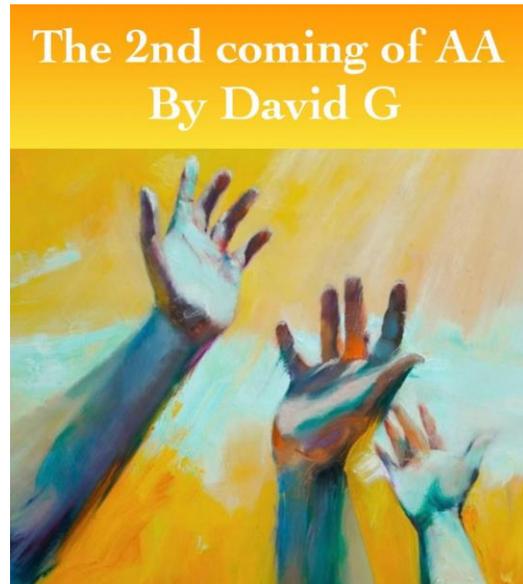
“Zoom and other virtual meeting platforms have been used with good results for underrepresented populations in AA, such as secular AA members who weren’t in urban areas that offered atheist/agnostic/freethinkers meetings, or those who are Black, Indigenous, or People of Colour (BIPOC). Since Zoom exploded these special purpose groups are thriving - meetings that had one or two dozen at their face-to-face meeting now have 50 - 200 showing up...more and more people who previously didn’t hear their story in the rooms, have now found their people.”

Now many members realize they are taking part in a new, golden era of AA. Not since the early days in the 1930's has the message of sobriety been carried to so many. While normal folks continue to watch Netflix and use copious amounts of booze as an antidote to isolation and loneliness, the fellowship of AA has become stronger. Not only have these once-hopeless alcoholics survived the once-feared lockdown, they have embraced it and they have become better people.

“Zoom has improved the quality of my sobriety out of sight,” says Walter S, “It’s made the world smaller, but AA has definitely gotten bigger.”

Indeed, the pandemic has not only increased the numbers of people who define themselves as being a member of AA, it has firmly reversed a startling, downward trend in membership. Between 2000 and 2019 AA membership went from 2 160 013 down to 2 077 374. In 2020/21 membership is reported to have increased by 60,800.ⁱⁱⁱ So, the proof is in the pudding.

While the world continues to grapple with the devastation from a global pandemic, the resilient spirit of AA members continues to new heights. What has shut down the world has become AA's second coming.



The author of this article David Gilbank is not associated with Alcoholics Anonymous, nor speaks on its behalf.

David is founder of the Women's International Marathon on zoom (a meeting for women only that has been running non-stop since April 2020), he is also founder of the world's biggest Facebook page that lists zoom meetings AA Zoom Global Meetings Lists <https://www.facebook.com/groups/3121314704565646>

He is the founder of the Shivering Denizens International AA zoom meetings that hold 4 online meetings every day at zoom ID 872 3295 0952 password 151.

David produces and hosts a weekly podcast 'Here's Tom with the Weather^{iv}' that investigates the plethora of 12-Step Higher Powers. He is founder of the Paul Hedderman 'Reflections on the 12 steps' zoom meetings every Tuesday and Thursday.

Email Gilwriter@hotmail.co.uk

WhatsApp 00 44 7824616668

ⁱ AAWS, *Alcoholics Anonymous* Fourth Edition, New York. 2001, xxiv “...sweeping changes in society as a whole are reflected in new customs and practices within the Fellowship. Taking advantage of technological advances, for example, A.A. members with computers can participate in meetings online, sharing with fellow alcoholics across the country or around the world. [Fundamentally, though, the difference between an electronic meeting and the home group around the corner is only one of format.] In any meeting, anywhere, A.A.’s share experience , strength and hope with each other in order to stay sober and help other alcoholics. Modem to modem or face-to-face, A.A.’s speak the language of the heart in all its power and simplicity.” As originally approved by the General Service Conference and printed in 2001. The sentence in [brackets] was later removed—at the insistence of members—by the Conference (2006).

ⁱⁱ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/zoom-pandemic-profit-income-tax-b1820281.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ AA members @ January 1, 2021 2,138,201 members [SMF-53 EN - Estimates of A.A. Groups and Members \(aa.org\)](#) and previous group/member estimates from [BOX 4-5-9 GSO News & Notes](#) (Summer editions)

^{iv} <https://www.facebook.com/groups/314088509589654/> Here’s Tom With the Weather live Zoom podcast Friday Noon Pacific, 3 PM EDT, 8 PM IE/UK, 5 AM Saturday AEST Zoom ID 882 1549 8348 Passcode Tom, available on YouTube, Spotify, Apple Podcasts, etc.