



Rebellion Dogs Blog August, 2021

Why all the “God talk” at an atheist/agnostic AA meeting?!?!

#fundamentalism, #secularAA, #AlcoholUse #addiction #recovery #zoom

First, most atheists and freethinkers AA meetings lean into the practical aspects of AA life, employed widely by 12-Step members, regardless of worldview.

If you are secular-curious – sincerely interested in atheist/agnostic Alcoholics Anonymous – be scientific, bring a beginner's mind to your curiosity about secular meetings. Hard and fast conclusions based on a single, or few, sample(s) can lead to either false-positive or false-negative evaluations. Consider sampling four or five secular meetings. Visit them with regularity over three or four weeks. Neophytes will find mostly rational, intuitive approaches to living sober, spoken in a contemporary language. Examples of 12-Step folk-wisdom and/or 12-Step philosophy are shared. While cliches and book-quoting are not forbidden, you're not likely to find AA by rote (follow a list of instructions, in the order prescribed) or holy writ (a hierarchy or authoritative text). For instance there aren't many members one-upping each other with Bill W quotes like TV contestants competing in a game show.

However, if you only try a few (or just one) secular AA meetings, you may or many not hear some of the members venting or purging some of the time. Newcomers to secular

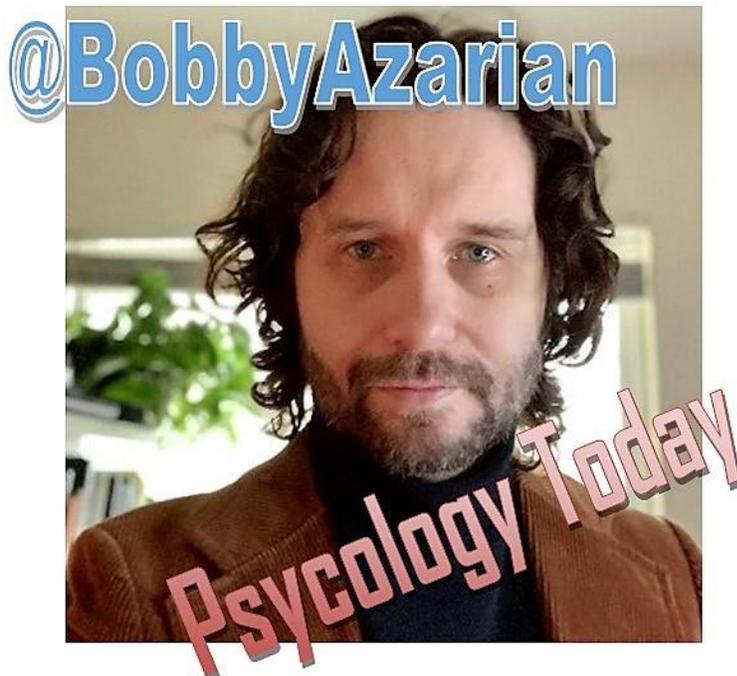


AA, may have had negative AA experience and problems in AA as with problems in life, need to be talked about to be worked through.

Separate from this therapeutic venting, some meetings, some of the time may also have a burst of anti-theist campaigners, critical of popular AA ritualistic praying and theistic bias in AA meetings. Some atheists find AA's faith-based recovery old-fashioned and superstitious. Sometimes – mostly before or after the meeting itself – there are animated cases made about incongruities in the book *Alcoholics Anonymous* of how faith-healing AA language hurts our credibility and efficacy with reaching more of today's people suffering from alcohol use disorder. This posture about overhauling all of AA isn't extraordinary nor is it discouraged. How or why would we quiet these legitimate voices and concerns from AA discussion? The bulk of freethinkers and humanist AA are happy to be part of AA as a whole, recognizing and benefiting from AA's evidence-based merits. Arguments about one worldview being superior to another is for another blog at another time.

Today, can we address personal experiences expressed in meetings about encounters with 12-Step fundamentalism, found in some meetings? Literalists and rigidity in a society isn't particularly an AA problem; but neither is AA immunized from it.

Bobby Azarian, PhD, cognitive neuroscientist, agrees that moderate spiritual practice (like moderate drinking for people who can handle it) is part of overall wellbeing. But there is a dark side to extremes – “fundamentalist ideologies act like mental parasites” as expressed in *Psychology Today*:



“... fundamentalism – which refers to the belief in the absolute authority of a religious text or leaders – is almost never good for an individual. This is primarily because fundamentalism discourages any logical reasoning or scientific evidence that challenges its scripture, making it inherently maladaptive...”

... fundamentalism is a parasitic ideology that inserts itself into brains, commanding individuals to act and think in a certain way – a rigid way that is

intolerant to competing ideas. We know that religious fundamentalism is strongly correlated with what psychologists and neuroscientists call ‘magical thinking,’ which refers to making connections between actions and events when no such connections exist in reality. Without magical thinking, the religion can’t survive, nor can it replicate itself. Another cognitive impairment we see in those with extreme religious views is a greater reliance on intuitive rather than reflective or analytic thought, which frequently leads to incorrect assumptions since intuition is often deceiving or overly simplistic. ...”[i]

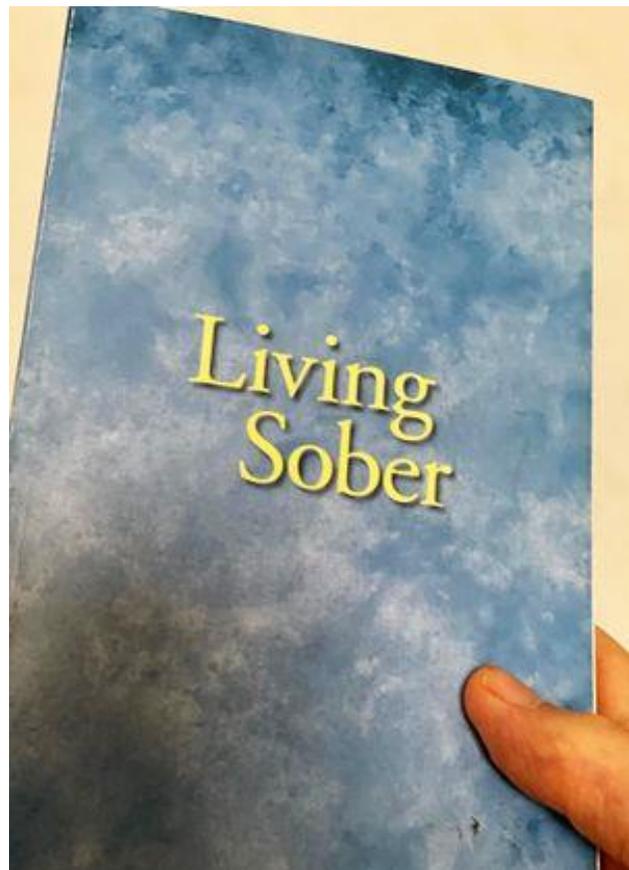
Psychology Today refers to religious fundamentalism. True, AA isn’t a religion in an organizational sense, but AA does borrow axioms from formal religion. AA fundamentalism comes with very similar characteristics to the problem outlined above by Bobby Azarian, the text of religious language, the *Big Book* and the authorities that wield them.

Atheists new to AA will sometimes have no baggage to unpack if they efficiently find secular AA meetings, well suited to them. Apostates—people who were indoctrinated into the possibilities of a character defect removing higher power, and other “magical thinking”—might have spent years currying favor in seemingly “conform or be cast out” in-groups. People de-converting from the supernatural narrative of AA may need a longer, more involved, reframing process.

Keeping it real, people embracing a newfound supernatural faith in AA, while others outgrow their early AA higher power dependency is not extraordinary. This isn’t always traumatizing; it’s just part of the journey described on page 2 of conference approved *Living Sober*:

“There is no prescribed A.A. ‘right’ way or ‘wrong’ way. Each of us uses what is best for [ourselves] – without closing the door on other kinds of help we may find valuable at another time. And each of us tries to respect others’ rights to do things differently.”

The *Living Sober* description of AA is the gentle opposite of fundamentalism. What Bobby Azarian referred to as “absolute authority” of “text and leaders,” is a



subculture of AA, representing themselves as the true and one-way of AA. Some de-converting AAs know the fundamentalist rhetoric; they were themselves, *Big Book* thumpers, conditioned to repeat *AA gospel*. *Living Sober* thumpers: that is not a thing. While the 1939 *Alcoholics Anonymous* eclipsed 40-million sales in 2020, the 1975 *Living Sober*, at 7 million sales, doesn't provide the book pounding certainty of its predecessor. Seven million copies sold would be a convincing "voice of AA," if not overshadowed by the *Big Book* million sales per year craze between 1987 and 2009 which left *Living Sober* in it's dust.

Apostates may still be able to quote, "But there is One who has all Power – that One is God. May you find Him now!" In the return to – or transition from – magical thinking to critical thinking, some may feel betrayed, foolish or angry. Why shouldn't they share their feelings and experiences? We know this process: connection, speaking, being heard. This helps reset one's equanimity; a humanist, secular understanding of AA recovery and life replaces the hyperbole of, "God could and would if He were sought."

So, back to the click-bait title: "Why all the God (or anti-God) talk in a secular AA meeting?" For context, think about any AA meeting. Someone else might say of AA, "Why all the talk about drinking; isn't AA about living in the solution?"

Yes, to both; talking about drinking, craving, and diminishing impulse control is part of talk-therapy healing and is living in the solution – especially for early recovery. Purging and reframing is not strictly 12-step mutual aid phenomena; here's what Ellen Hendriksen, PhD says in *Psychology Today*:

"Discussing a painful experience can feel humiliating or terrifying. We think we'll break down and never recover. We think that we're the only ones to experience anything like it, and no one would understand. ... Even though it's difficult, there are many reasons to talk about trauma. Whether with one heart-to-heart conversation or many ongoing discussions over time"ⁱ

How does this psychology play out in 12-step meetings? There is still some mystery. An increase in randomized controlled examinations of aspects of AA reveal more.

Researcher and professor, John Kelly talks to the *Harvard Gazette*:

"Our findings are shedding light on how AA helps people recover from addiction over time,' says Kelly. 'The results suggest that social context factors are key; the people who associate with individuals attempting to begin recovery can be crucial to their likelihood of success. AA appears adept at facilitating and supporting those social changes. Further questions we need to investigate are whether particular groups of individuals – women or men, young or old people, those with or without accompanying psychiatric disorders – benefit from AA in the same or in different ways.'"ⁱⁱ

There's nothing here in the clinical findings about a supernatural approach outperforming rational AA. The 21st century doctor's opinion reveals that the social, or fellowship, factor is key – not one worldview over another. Do “particular groups of individuals ... benefit from AA in the same or in different ways”? In previous blogs we've mused about the Zoom effect on AA, on how subcultures find each other, and special purpose AA groups have thrived with the broad reach of Zoom. *Big Book* lovers are finding their own people but so are BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color), LGBTQIA+, young people, irreligious AA members, etc. A safe, inviting environment can model prosocial behavior without forfeiting integrity or feeling guarded about minority characteristics (creed, gender, sexual-orientation, age, race, etc.). Over the last year (COVID-19), early days of wide-spread online peer to peer adaptation, increased the number of people finding recovery. Finding help from people who look, sound and live like us, helps.

IN THE BEGINNING

Before there was a book or Twelve Steps, part of Alcoholics Anonymous recovery process was talk-therapy. Talk-therapy, passed along for generations, early AA's adopted this from the Oxford Group who were encouraging the process of open confession (sharing), in the 1930s, to help identify wrongs done and reparations needed, meditating on God's will and what it means to live a more Christ-like life. Bill W recalls the early days in *AA Comes of Age*:

“The basic principles which the Oxford Groupers had taught were ancient and universal ones, the common property of mankind. Certain of the former O.G. attitudes and applications had proven unsuited to A.A.'s purposes ... But the important thing is this: the early A.A. got its ideas of self-examination, acknowledgement of character defects, restitution for harm done, and working with others straight from the Oxford Group and straight from Sam Shoemaker, their former leader in America, and from nowhere else.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Today, we know talk-therapy regulates emotional wellbeing. Drilling down further, *Science Daily* describes this neurobiological process whereby,

“... cells of the nervous system and the organization of these cells into functional circuits that process information and mediate behavior.”^{iv}

Even the spiritual approach to recovery from addiction and/or trauma is now understood in neurobiological terms:

“The amygdala – the brain structure responsible for processing emotion and anxiety – demonstrates plasticity, and the purpose of therapy may be to allow the cortex to establish more effective and efficient synaptic links with the

amygdala. A main feature of spiritual approaches is changing one's focus of attention. Instead of worry, one focuses on peaceful thoughts, thoughts of helping others, etc. Research demonstrates that thought, meditation, and other manifestations of mind can alter the brain, sometimes in an enduring way.”^v

So talk therapy, meditation, prayer, assisting other people with alcohol use disorder, and other AA customs are now corroborated, not only by folk-wisdom but also brain-science, not measurable at the time of AA's early days. Our addictive patterns, our traumas suffered are overcome, in part by purging, sharing, talking it out, in a safe, healing environment of fellow sufferers at various stages of our recovery. Now, I used the expression, “traumas suffered,” and every person with alcohol or other substance use disorder suffers a number of indignities and compromises as we spiral down the addiction cycle. This ranges from isolation to abuse, from maladaptive coping mechanisms to enmeshment in chronic dysfunctional entanglements – “wreckage of our past” in recovery terms. We grieve the loss of our toxic but best friend, our drug of choice; emotions thaw just as we're taking stock of the harmed relationships, legal, financial, or medical consequences, shame, guilt and embarrassments of our debauchery.

So AA talk releases the mounting pressure of our reluctant enlightenment. For some people with addiction, one entanglement that has to be worked through, is conflict with, or indoctrination into, religious (or other) fundamentalism. This may have happened before addiction. It may have happened, at a vulnerable time in our lives, in a 12-Step meeting. Some of the people in meeting preoccupied with “god-talk” are members who came up against AA fundamentalism. Yes, AA's take what you like, leave the rest tenant isn't fundamentalism. I'm talking about pathological and tyrannical control and corruption of the AA process. Magical thinking is an addiction, too. Like coffee and cigarettes, there's some of that in AA.

Do people who are new to secular AA deserve our patience and tolerance as they purge to work through adverse encounters with religiosity? Maybe you “don't want to listen to that crap,” and maybe you care and you identify, but it helps to reconcile how “god-talk” can be part of the healing process.

Being stigmatized or shamed as someone with substance use disorder is commonplace.

Trauma is an almost unavoidable side-effect of addiction, if not, a precursor.

Destructive self-talk, physical and psychic trauma from the humiliations and depravity of substance use chaos, this damage comes with the territory for people in early recovery. When we were in addiction, we were outsiders in the community, the non-addicted majority may see us as a threat, shun, fear or ridicule us.

In 12-step recovery, the nonbeliever may also be or feel ostracized by the tyranny of the God-centered AA majority. “If you don’t find God, you won’t stay sober.” “If you don’t find a spiritual solution, you’re not a real alcoholic.” “I once believed as you believe; then I overcame my intellectual pride and asked help from God as I understand Him.” These are real statements that routinely get laid on struggling alcoholics who want sobriety but not conversion. Sure, lots of AA’s could care less what another believes. I don’t know what percentage of AA nonbelievers face microaggression or hostility or find the god-heavy text uninviting. But obviously, some do. And it’s easily overcome by purging and reframing. Secularphobia exists in society, so it exists within AA, obviously. Cross-talk can take the form of borrowed authority. A classic microaggression to someone who candidly dismisses faith in god, I call, and have been the subject of, the “Dr Bob’s Nightmare” maneuver:

“If you think you are an atheist, an agnostic, a skeptic, or have any other form of intellectual pride, which keeps you from accepting what is in this book, I feel sorry for you.”^{vi}

When quoted to challenge an AA member’s dismissal of supernatural forces, this is weaponizing AA tools to put down or alienate nonbelievers. This is not what we call in AA, one alcoholic relating to another. This badgering and bullying isn’t motivating or supportive. Yes; I know... It’s meant to “save my life.” Isn’t this kind of insistence more about reinforcing your belief construct than trying to help another alcoholic? We don’t arrive at our first 12-Step meeting on a winning streak. Who isn’t already traumatized – if that’s too strong for you, how about vulnerable, or in a weakened state – when we first enter an AA meeting?

Secularphobic hostility or condescending rhetoric is not helpful, if it was even intended to be helpful. And when already vulnerable, such cultural insensitivity manifests as prejudice and how can it not *leave a mark*, which will need healing?

So we talk about it... some of the time, just like we may talk about any problem or impediment to joyful sobriety. A secular AA meeting is a safe place where nothing is sacred and nothing is forbidden so talk about any issue.

There is not a single atheist/agnostic personality type, so our personal relationships vary when dealing with our more religious AA members. Some of us embrace being an outsider, welcoming an opportunity to debate or challenging the norms. Some of us crave inclusion and avoid controversy; we don’t want to be treated as special – just equal – we don’t wish to offend anyone. Some have a long history of strife with religious persecution or dysfunctional hyper-religious pasts. Others never gave the notion of supernatural agency any thought until we heard it talked about so much in our first 12-Step meeting. Some of us, in the company of our faith-based 12-Stepers

don't mind or notice their higher power talk anymore than someone talking about what their Horoscope told them this morning. Others find the notion of God-dependent drunks praying for grace to be irritating or distracting. There are plenty of atheists who go to AA for sobriety and could care less that most of their fellow AA's believe their "character defects" can only be overcome by an act of Divine providence. Others are offended by the superstitious and evangelical tone and can't and won't tolerate the religiosity that comes with many AA meetings, out of a strongly held, personal principle. Some atheists never consider AA's "God could and would it He were sought," premise or spend very little time trying what the well-intentioned folk suggest. Some atheists accept the AA ideology as a lesser evil than dying of alcoholism so they either buy-in and proselytize the good word of AA or we do a very good job of closeting our skepticism and dismissal of "Nothing is wrong in God's plan" magical thinking.

So obviously, as believers come in every variety imaginable, so do rationalists. Our experiences have been different, our reaction to prejudice is a broad spectrum and hence, our needs will be different. Some can only go to secular 12-Step meetings out of principle, some like to spice it up with variety. Some will resent a meeting or person or book we haven't been in direct contact with for weeks, months or years and we are stuck for a time in our re-feeling of anger and hurt until the "exorcism of the evil spirits" is silenced. And some of us love to talk about how much smarter we are than our superstitious half-wit, fellows. Others find any putting down of others distasteful and aggravates an otherwise pleasant day.

So if your secular-curious and you don't want to hear God-talk from heathens, your not alone. Many of our long-time members have limited patience with people talking about what is NOT helpful and what they DO NOT believe. "Let's talk about the solution – not the problem!" On the other hand, any of us who have gone to a 12-Step room, sincerely open to help in any form, only to have popular supernatural constructs and literature weaponized against you for holding a natural, rational worldview, maybe you want to talk about that experience, and you can. This is not an "outside issue" any more than sexism, homophobia, predation, racism or other exploitive or discriminatory practices.

Some of us talk nostalgically about our drug of choice for longer than others would, some of us are stuck emotionally for a time, some of us need to express sorrow and yes, even in a meeting with no *Big Book* in sight and no "God as you understand Him" being read, we need to talk through our negative experiences of 12-Step culture as a precursor to being free to benefit from 12-Step life. And some of us go off topic and talk about what "they" should do in "their" meeting to make AA more effective for "their newcomers." Sometimes we will talk about how the General Service Office should

change *this* or *that*, and impose those changes on every group. That probably wasn't the meeting topic, either. As I oft' say and am comforted when I hear it, "We're all here because we're not all there." We are not saints; we are bound by a kinship of common suffering; our paths forward will be as individual as our thumb print.

What is "Traditional" AA? The secular AA approach has been practiced right from our beginning.

We don't know how many people in AA literally believe they have been touched by the hand of a loving White God on a white cloud. We don't know how many of the million+ AA's sober over ten years went through all the Steps. Ask an AA deacon for clarification; there's no risk of us telling you what *you* want to hear, you'll hear what *we* want to hear. That may not get you closer to objective truth. Fyodor Dostoevsky spoke of the human condition how we...

"... love abstract reasoning and neat systematization so much that they think nothing of distorting the truth, closing their eyes and ears to contrary evidence to preserve their logical constructions."

So the meeting-makers make it crowd will tell you, "How it (really) Works," and the *Big Book* muckers will tell you something else, all of it based on objective reasoning from agreed upon facts — just ask us.

Checking the documentary records and not relying on what someone else said about how AA evolved, we see that human power in the form of wit, integrity and working together has always been working side by side with AA's idea that only God can empower alcoholics to get/stay sober.

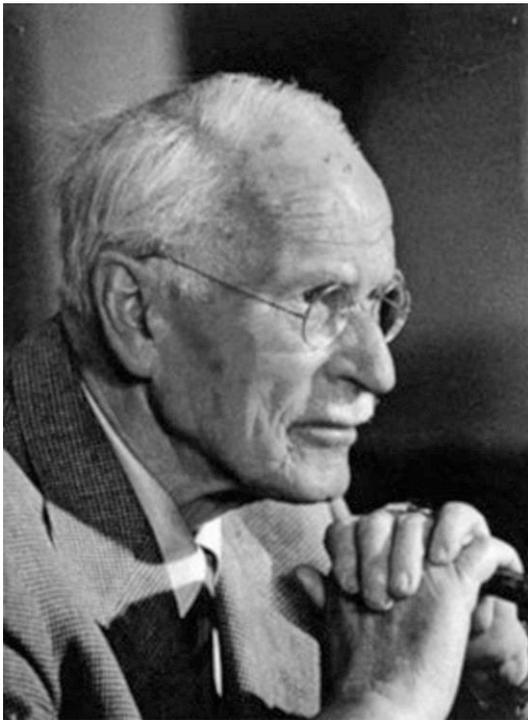
And in American's very Christian biased culture, the tension between realists and people of supernatural faith has always been around; why would AA be any different? White, suburban *mansplaining* has frustrated attempts to accommodate underrepresented populations in AA since the start. The Traditions help encourage love and tolerance; AA has some nifty expressions, those Bill W nuggets, for example. The man who wrote the *Big Book* did nothing to reify it, casting it's fate to the inevitable discount-bin heap of quaint, harmless, irrelevant texts. Bill Wilson, of course, was a seeker, experimenting with psychotropic drug therapies for alcoholism (LSD) and constantly urging AA to learn from our critics and prevent the tyranny of the majority from inflicting governance over group and individual inalienable rights. This has never been people who believe in gods vs. those whose faith is in practicality. The literalist's augment to avoid a more contemporary narrative is that, "It's always been this way; it works; don't fix it if it ain't broke!"

This view of how it *always* was doesn't hold up against a close exploration of how it *actually* was. Bill W referred to Carl Jung as a father of Alcoholics Anonymous and in 1961, years after the infamous Roland Hazard therapy, the two would correspond. Jung would write about the dilemma of dipsomania/ alcoholism:

“The only right and legitimate way to such experience is, that it happens to you in reality and it can only happen to you when you walk on a path, which leads you to higher understanding.”

In his letter to Bill Wilson, January 30, 1961, Jung listed three ways addiction could be arrested:

1. You might be led to that goal by an act of grace
2. Through a personal and honest contact with friends
3. Through a higher education of the mind beyond the confines of mere rationalism.



Jung saw the AA process, as exemplified by Rowland Hazard's success as the second path. Long before the fascination with rat park experiments, Jung saw the life-altering impact of connection: a community that supported the addict with emotional support, community and prosocial modeling. As championed by Bill W and some AA historians, Jung recognized religious experience as a path to rehabilitation, too. Jung's evidence persuaded him that the power of belief or the personal experience of supernatural Providence could heal an inflicted person, where science could not. Theology was not his area of professional expertise but as a man of science, he objectively accepted the evidence before him. Finally, a third path: internal agency. An inebriate or drug addict could devote themselves to education – not mere reason and logic but a broad higher education that we might assume includes philosophy and the examination of historical popular belief structures and intuitive awareness.

So Jung, while we don't know what he believed, could see how faith in a God of *Bill W's understanding* (or anyone else's personal god concept) could be a game-changer for the seemingly hopeless. Jung was no more or no less convinced that irreligious humanism (connection) was sufficient agency. Also, for introverts maybe, committed self-agency

was equal to the task if the inflicted devoted themselves to educational pursuits. In Jung's own word to AA's founder, 60 years ago, his findings were that there are multiple paths to rehabilitation from addiction:

"I am strongly convinced that the evil principle prevailing in the world, leads the unrecognized spiritual need into perdition, if it is not counteracted either with a real religious insight or by the protective wall of human community."^{vii}

Jung expressed to Bill Wilson that he was frustrated with being misunderstood and misrepresented. I don't know if Bill W, being brought into his confidence, did a better job than anyone else expressing Jung's complex and multifaceted view of addiction, recovery, and the human experience. I don't know if I have a grasp of Jung's wider views and what he meant by his ideas of personal unconsciousness that houses material beyond our awareness and that connection to the deeper and greater collective unconscious of latent memory traces from our ancestral past – something he proposed was shared with all humanity.^{viii} .

I wonder if the many who "think Jung" really understand Jung. He held some very complex theories up for the world for our benefit. But did we understand the insight/ views Jung offered us?

Some of the reason that tension has built up between believers and nonbelievers in AA is a false narrative (alternative facts) about how, in the good old days of AA, it was always about God's grace; human power didn't work. Self-will was an impediment. AA's history is rich with atheist success stories that suggest otherwise.

Fundamentalists are trying to preserve a purity of approach that never existed in the era they insist on replicating. Literal interpretation of *Alcoholics Anonymous* has, in some meetings, moved from "suggested" to what Psychology Today describes as, "belief in the absolute authority of a religious text or leaders." And as Dr. Bobby Azarian illustrates, like religious dogmatism, AA fundamentalism is toxic to freethinkers and the increase in fundamentalism – not the increase in secular AA – has led to a spike in agnostics and atheists needing some time to talk through their early AA experiences.

The world gets more secular; the fundamentalists get more dogmatic and the secularphobic hostility endured today causes undue suffering on both sides. Literalists are trying to return AA to an era that never existed, as they describe it.

Another facet of AA indoctrination by our stricter, more "by the book" members has been, what a newer member from a suburban Big Book loving AA community referred to as the ratcheting up of dogmatic rhetoric. The description was a tough love getting tougher over time as the next generation of Big Book sponsor aims to impress, not the

newcomer they work with, but their peers, their sponsor and their sponsor's sponsor. Is "hazing" too strong a term to use for our more zealous acts of fundamentalism?

"Hazing – the abuse of new or prospective group members – is a widespread and puzzling feature of human social behavior, occurring in divergent cultures and across levels of technological complexity."^{ix}

From the Journal of Cognition and Culture (2011) study uses the word "widespread;" so has this severity of indoctrination crept into AA culture?

We hear about hazing rituals in sport and post-secondary education fraternities. We also hear about a growing movement to counter or "out" this practice within these organizations. Hazing has been defined in Garret's Law to include emotional harm, humiliation, intimidation or coercion into demeaning acts contrary to the subject's values.^x

Our working definition for fundamentalism, from Psychology Today includes, "to act and think in a certain way – a rigid way that is intolerant to competing ideas." This intolerance to competing ideas and growing demographic of irreligious newcomers, could lead to a ratcheting up, an increase, a repetition in small increments over time. What signs are there that fundamentalist AAs may be getting more mean-spirited or hyperbolic with atheist newcomers? There is the *White Paper on Non-believers*^{xi} written by charismatic circuit speaker, Sandy Beach. He certainly raised the temperature for skeptical newcomers as he stated that AA General Service was wrong to ever allow agnostic and atheist AA groups into the fold because our brand of "watered down AA was killing real alcoholics." The way he saw it and sold it to others was:

"In a not too subtle way, the idea is being advanced that we could make our Fellowship more 'inclusive' if we put 'God' in the background and let outsiders think that spirituality in A.A. was 'optional'. This would enable so-called 'non-believers' to enter A.A. with the assurance that they could easily get sober and keep their current beliefs. I would rather hear about serving beer at meetings than diminishing God's central role. ... there seems to be a trend at some meetings to encourage discussion of components of sobriety such as unselfishness, forgiveness, understanding, love, patience, etc. without any reference to God. ...A.A. cannot be hurt by anything occurring outside of the Fellowship. Our only danger will always lie within. Since the very survival of the A.A. vessel is dependent on our collective relationship with a loving God as He expresses Himself to us, a critical leak such as this must be repaired and sealed as soon as possible. ... in A.A. we are shown how to achieve contact with a God. Our literature makes it perfectly clear that this is A.A.'s only way to truly overcome the disease of alcoholism. ...

In order to feel comfortable to talk freely about their philosophy with others who felt the same way, they started agnostic/atheist groups, which they felt was appropriate for them to do. The discussion by A.A. to sanction, not object to, the formation of such groups calling themselves A.A. was never seriously discussed or debated. It was simply accepted as matter of courtesy or because groups for not accommodating them were never examined. The Fellowship has a hard time saying no to anyone. The increasing influence within A.A. of the philosophy of 'Sobriety without God' or it's second cousin, 'Sobriety without mentioning God' has become a very troubling presence..."

This 22-page anti-atheist rant is only part of the AA legacy left behind when Richard "Sandy" Beach died in an AA meeting at age 83 in October 2014 in Florida. Only a month later we held the first International Conference of Secular AA (then called "We Agnostics and Freethinkers International AA Conference") and, who knows – the stress of that news might have done him in. But again, this manifesto to rid AA of the scourge that is secular AA is a dark blip on a resume of helping AA members, coining the still infamous phrase about his old lifestyle like swimming while carrying a heavy rock. His "Drop the rock" talk in 1976 has grown into quite a thing. He has a number of YouTube AA talks that I enjoy and I am sure, would offend very few. He was loved; people credit their sobriety and second chance to life back to a kindness or turn of phrase from Sandy Beach. He was influential and he is a contributing factor to what was a growing secularphobic fear for AA's survival which could certainly be a contributing factor to a ratcheting up of microaggression and anti-atheist sentiment among his fundamentalist worshipers.

Cocaine Anonymous is a very *Big Book* focused movement that opens *Big Bookism* to any addict with any affliction. They don't care what the malady is; the solution is the *Big Book*. And to hold that idea in a literal understanding isn't a very friendly path for people with approaches to AA outside the 400 God-references over 164 pages *Big Book* language. Language borrowed from treatment centers, neuroscience, ideas like empowerment, secular views of the AA process, none of these are anywhere to be found in the good book, *Alcoholics Anonymous* so therefore spoken of as "watered down AA," suggesting inferior approaches with inferior outcome rates.

Again, Cocaine Anonymous members help many people find sobriety and I support their efforts. They help people that you or I might not be able to reach; excellent. Some of the people they can't help and don't help find their way to secular AA meetings having felt ridiculed, dismissed and/or intimidated into conformity to their way of talking and strict reading regimen. What we hear is they didn't feel the inclusive, never exclusive tenet of AA at work. The pitch might have been that if they are a "real alcoholic" only an act of God can relieve their alcoholism. We watered down AAers, all

just “heavy drinkers” who think we’re “real alcoholics,” what we say, and the AA we espouse, is killing that real alcoholic that only the *Big Book* and a *Big Book*-sponsor can help.

Is that “hazing”? I don’t know; that might be too strong a term. But it does suggest that there has been an increasing edge and mean-spiritedness that comes with AA fundamentalism. And while the whys and the hows are subjective and debatable, there does seem to be an AA extremism that leaves freethinkers feeling hurt or scared or pissed off with AA as a whole because of negative experiences.

So they share and others in secular AA meetings relate – we may even share our own story about a “my way or the highway” ultimatum that left us feeling we could have sobriety or integrity but not both. We talk about it and we move on, just like we talk about our drinking escapades and we move on. As Ellen Hendrickson said about the benefits of talking about our humiliating or disheartening encounter with fundamentalism in AA, “Even though it’s difficult, there are many reasons to talk about trauma. Whether with one heart-to-heart conversation or many ongoing discussions over time.”



And then we move on.

Secular AA is a growing subculture while AA as a whole has had dormant growth for over 30 years. There was a handful of meetings for atheists and agnostics at the turn of the century and there are several to chose from now, over 16 hours of secular AA gatherings every day.

For the most ardent fundamentalist they see an existential threat in a growing humanist voice in AA. Secular AA – as well as, not instead of – “by the *Big Book*” AA is a better path, or choice of paths, forward, to meet the needs of todays and future generations of persons with alcohol use disorder. That’s AA purity: always inclusive never exclusive. To each, their own. Or in Bill W vernacular, “Imagine if you will, one alcoholic judging another.” The perceived threat is what is causing the added tension. This escalating tension creates a greater need for a growing number of secular-minded AA members,

who get confronted by this one-way-AA rhetoric, needing for vent and decompress from the inhospitality from AA's more zealous faction. This is hopefully just a growing pain as AA's gateway widens. Higher Powered AA is better understood as a way that works, that is popular, but is not the only way that yields positive outcome rates. Collectively, AA stumbled with accepting women, African American, LGBTQ+ and young AA members. But we overcame our fear and prejudice before, we will surely evolve and improve once more.

Why does discrimination happen in a society that is intended to help everyone who wants to get/stay sober?

Part of this is human nature. The narcissism of small differences is always at work in our subconscious, seeing how others differs vs. embracing what we have to gain by a variety of styles and personalities in our community. All of our closely held beliefs are delicate constructs, and we are protective of real and perceived threats. It's true that secular AA members can feel just as superior or more evolved than believers. There is potential for the arrogance of theistic fundamentalism; both atheists and agnostics can feel just as superior and act just as unkindly to others.

Both of our cofounders, one in New York, one in Akron, are as susceptible as any of us of intolerance which is really just a manifestation of fear. Bill and Bob were as human as any of us. Remember, the same Dr. Bob that offered the anthem for spiritual arrogance: if you don't believe as I believe, you are ill-equipped and I feel sorry for you, was the man who brought, "Love and tolerance is our code," to AA's official canon. Bill walked back on his spiritual exclusivity as best he could in the second printing of *Alcoholics Anonymous* in Appendix II: "The Spiritual Experience" expanding the AA breakthrough to either supernatural or educational (religious or rational). Both Dr. Bob and Bill are on record for showing leadership and influence in including all underrepresented minorities, including our early African American, female, gay and lesbian members, etc.

While people of both poles of belief constructs are just as susceptible to being petty or intolerant, there is a balance of power issue when it comes to minority views vs. majority views. Systemic discrimination is always found in democratic societies, like AA, that have majorities and minorities. What AA calls "taking regular inventory" can foster corrective measures when tyranny of the majority interferes with minority rights to equality. Concept V^{xii} talks to guarding against the negative impact that impulsive, ill-informed, angry or hasty majorities can have in corrupting a society.

Unchecked intolerance is potentially damaging. But AA does have checks and balances.

For instance, The *White Paper on Non-believers* did have a harmful influence for a time. Agnostic/Atheist AA groups have been threatened with expulsion and discriminated against. Godless AA's growth in popularity is a perceived – not a real – threat. The growth of alternative worldviews threatens the primacy that majority beliefs hold and when we are afraid, we project our fear, dark imaginings for the society we love and depend on fill our heads and makes us susceptible to rash and regrettable words and deeds.

The law of unintended consequences will see to it that societies are better – not worse – after such skirmishes. Groups were actually excluded from meetings lists, hostility reached a boiling point and two things happened. Reconciliation from the larger AA society, in the form on increased secular recovery literature, welcoming nonbelievers and legitimizing our approach to recovery as rights-bearing equals, not “watered down AA.” More impactful is what's happened on a grassroots level. Members of AA reacted to the injustice by either starting or supporting more and more secular groups. The rate of growth of agnostic and atheist AA has increased – not decreased – since the writing of the *White Paper* and the excommunication of some groups that followed.

What does healing/resolution look like?

That's a good question to be asking; we are all about living in the solution. How severe was the discrimination suffered? How often and/or how extreme the indignity was will have a bearing on becoming centered and whole again, how involved corrective action is, or how long resolution takes.

If you were merely put off by an approach to AA that is incongruent with your worldview and needs, finding a secular meeting, or any more liberal 12-Step or other (non-fundamentalist) meeting will provide that better fit. We “find our people” where we are encouraged in approaching AA in accordance with your own beliefs and values.

For any of us who find ourselves more deeply hurt by the experience, we may ruminate or withdraw or be angry and revengeful. What are our recovery resources? Meditation, writing it out, talking it out, these solutions have worked before for similar problems. Reframing, for some of us may help give lasting value in seeing the humanity in others. Are they evil, or merely afraid? Do they have power over me, or are they just a perceived threat? Ultimately, some of us can settle on the resolution that people who have harmed me, may have been well intended, are 99% the same as me, sharing many of the same values and hold many of the same attributes.

“Live and let live” has been a longstanding AA axiom for a reason... it’s in constant demand.

Why do we hear so much about secular AA, now?

Before books or AA orthodoxy, AA was one alcoholic talking to another, utilizing anything that helped, in or outside the AA meeting. Secular AA format, according to we agnostics and atheists, is the real old-school Alcoholics Anonymous: fellowship and connection... one alcoholic, talking to another. Largely in response to demographic shifts, there is a greater demand – and supply – of humanist AA. Instead of prayer and theology, freethinkers offer a contemporary AA lexicon, reason and empowerment. Let’s talk about 2021 doctor’s opinions, neuroscience, medicine, mindfulness meditation, citizenry, exercise, and wellness. This – not god-talk – is what is actually being discussed at most secular AA meetings.

Zoom is not a stopgap, second rate means of connection. It’s a way to reach more people more of the time. The integration of podcasts, Online workshops, and hangouts, along with 16 hours a day of atheist/agnostic AA gatherings, are creating a surge or recovery dates since the pandemic struck, without face-to-face meetings.

Secular AAs also look forward to face-to-face meetings, again; there are cautious plans for the 4th biennial conference for ICSAA, the International Conference of Secular AA. This, according to our plan, will be in-person, in Washington DC October 29th, 30th and 31st, 2021. (<https://aasecular.org> for details).

Again not either/or, but “yes, and...” Online AA has made it easy to dispense with dated meeting rituals and welcome a new generation to recovery seeking AAs. And Millennials and Gen-Z are learning the ropes from others sober without theology for days, weeks, years and decades of sober living.

That’s what we’re talking about in meetings; AA history is evolving and it’s never been a better time to find sobriety with the variety of programs to choose from, the greater diversity within AA and the mediums of sharing and taking in the message of recovery :-)

ⁱ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/blog/how-be-yourself/201903/5-reasons-talk-about-trauma>

ⁱⁱ <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2011/09/what-makes-aa-work/>

ⁱⁱⁱ AA World Services, *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age: a brief history of A.A.*, p 39

^{iv} <https://www.sciencedaily.com/terms/neurobiology.htm>

^v <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/08854720903451055>

^{vi} “Doctor Bob’s Nightmare,” *Alcoholics Anonymous*, p 181

vii [Dr. Carl Jung's Letter To Bill W., Jan 30, 1961 – Welcome to Silkworth.net](#)

viii Beard Brady, Edith, et al, *Psychology Themes and Variations 6th Edition* Belmont CA: Thomson Waldsworth, 2004 p.486

ix <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/233626429> The Evolution of Hazing Motivational Mechanisms and the Abuse of Newcomers

x <https://deanofstudents.umich.edu/article/what-hazing>

xi [The White paper on Non-believers\[1\].pdf](#)

xii Twelve Concepts of World Service BM-31 - The A.A. Service Manual combined with Twelve Concepts for World Service - by Bill W. (aa.org)