



The next era of 12-Step Recovery will see AA confronting our long period of – what I will call – being stuck. Predictably, what will follow will be to embrace innovation and the next generation of creative ways to express ourselves and to get from stuck to unstuck. Or put another way, to recover.

Crisis? What Crisis?

(Thank you [Supertramp 1975ⁱ](#))

This year saw British progressive pop band's breakthrough album *Crime of the Century*(1974) chart and support a tour so from the road in the USA, they sidetracked to studio in 1975 to make this new album. This same year was a milestone in recovery: this was the last time Alcoholics Anonymous offered the membership, those concerned about alcohol use disorder and the rest of the world, a published work of original thought. I will say it again, not since 1975 has the Fellowship of AA, through their General Service Conference, has there been anything new as official AA cannon. In July

of 2025, much ado will focus on AA's 90th anniversary celebration, at the AA World Convention in Vancouver, Canada. In 2025 it seems that we will also mark 50 years of a self-defeating, dysfunctional Alcoholics Anonymous standing on the sidelines of the global discussion about problems with alcohol and the how, when, where, why and who of recovery from alcohol addiction. We of AA, are a museum exhibit, a silent movie in a 3-D movie experiencing era. Do we have nothing official to add to a robust discussion going on around us about addiction and recovery?

Timeline: Bill W, founder of AA, dies in 1971; *Came to Believe* was published in 1973 offering a variety of notably *non-Bill W* voices of AA. *Living Sober*, which has sold 7,000,000+ copies to date, was published in 1975. *Living Sober* offers 30+ tried and tested AA techniques for getting and staying sober, drawing from hundreds of thousands of sober members and 40 years of collective AA experiences.

Our founder was gone four years in 1975; but new voices of AA were sharing our recovery processes and experiences, in our own words. *Came to Believe* was for those who have found supernatural intervention in their sobriety. *Living Sober* was more practical; more secular; more humanist. AA passed a test: could we carry on with the original voice and author of AA, now gone? Grateful for all those who came before, we could take it from here—creativity and innovation abounded.

Did you already know that 1975 was the last weighing-in of official “conference-approved” AA narrative in book form? “Say it ain’t so Joe!” you may be thinking on other books on your bookshelf or in your eReader. In 1986 we wrote *Pass It On*. Right. Penned by Mel B, this is the first of several nostalgic nods to our past: a book about Bill W. *Pass It On: The Story of Bill Wilson and how the A.A. Story Reached the World* is a historically valuable biography but, in the meantime, there is no 1980s AA story today of members going from one million to two million through the decade and young people climbing from one to three percent of our population. Overwhelmed by the Twenty-four Hour a Day book and newer readers, in 1987 AA demanded from GSO a daily reflection and we got it in 1990; again, looking back to the sacred words of our founder, each day starting with a Bill W-ism, reinforcing AA, not as a vibrant evolving movement but a fellowship who’s innovation died with our founder.

And yes, it’s a new millennium; we have our 2019 *Our Great Responsibility*... Bill W speeches. See a pattern here? Pamphlets just are not—to AA members—what the 164 pages from 1939 mean to us. While I am grateful for the General Service Conference’s intent to keep AA contemporary with offerings from P-1 to P-87, have you ever heard of an AA pamphlet study weekend, the weekly pamphlet meeting? No, you have not; me either, that’s my point—zero calories, AA-lite.

There is *AA Grapevine*, sharing individual member's views and experiences. Our current decade gives us the dawn of the first *AA Grapevine* Podcast. I hope there will be many more AA podcasts to join Sam and Don who trade *Big Book* quotes with each other. By their nature, *AA Grapevine* contributions are not "conference approved." Imagine delegates and staff and trustees gathering monthly to approve every story, cover and letter-to-the-editor each month. *AA Grapevine* has editorial autonomy and as a result, is not the official word of AA, just members talking to each other. So, yes there has been our AA meeting in print every month; new pamphlets and old pamphlet revisions are part of the General Service Conferences never-ending workload.

But as far as "conference approved" AA canon, will we either re-write our classic texts or add some AA "conference approved" narratives about sobriety today:

- relapse prevention,
- trauma informed care,
- the challenges, wisdom and perspectives of 20, 40 or 60 years-sober members,
- medically assisted recovery,
- connection, hope, identity, meaning and empowerment in a multicultural world of alcohol use disorder, and
- recovery by way of podcasts, Zoom rooms and social media?

Or is AA stuck, as a reified relic of the mid-20th century Americana? Our 1980s to 2010 AA was committed to certainty, closure, repetition and protecting AA from internal and external threats, including innovation and creativity. The popular refrain has been, "If it ain't broke; don't fix it." I am generalizing here, but over that 30-year period, was AA taking our own inventory?

Was it considered innovative or disloyal to point out a Big Book view that was widely treated as unquestionable universal truths? Or was criticism treated as disloyal?

Did we make our legacy of Bill Wilson, one man, first among us to find sobriety and try to explain the ineffable—to articulate the characteristics of alcoholism and the process of recovery? Is his approach one person's journey in a complex of many ways down and many more ways out? Or are we to model his process as an official, sanctioned process, an ideal that is above reproach? Is that what we are doing in AA?

Have we elevated one member's journey, his way of seeing addiction and/or the world about us, as "the AA program?" If he were here today, would he describe his views and experiences as a good start or strict instructions to which future AAs should emulate, without deviation?

Now, keeping original Bill Wilson writings in their original form for historical context, there is an argument for doing that. We want to preserve the integrity of our history.

But the question worth asking is in preserving history, are we eliminating the option to make history. Are we to imitate or innovate when it comes to the AA message? Is the book, *Alcoholics Anonymous* Bill W's story, an example or an official instruction manual to be followed unquestioningly without augmentation, for fear of falling into drunkenness followed by suffering and death?

From everything I heard from the man who wrote the book that we have somehow made sacred, he was not the best example of the Twelve Steps, he humorously referred to himself as "AA's *co-flounderer*."

My view, my one of two million votes, is let's treat his narrative as the historical touchstone that it is, and not as the voice of AA, today. To be clear, I am not saying burn all the book; this book is working just fine for many 12-Steppers today. It should always be available, so long as it is wanted and needed. Thumpers, keep thumping.

But also, along with preserving this deserving legacy for future generations, let us make room for the next generation—today's generation—to *make* history instead of merely *revering* Bill's and maybe Bob's history, too. Let today's member flounder, experiment and improve what we have left them with. You should vote based on your own deductions. It is of little value for you or I to worry about what "they" think or want. In a way, there is no "they" there. I don't know what the majority of two million members want or think is best for our future; why should I assume anything?



Most of us freely admit the experience and expression of Bill W does not resonate as well with today's diverse class of newcomers. Maybe middle American 1940s pre-television class of newcomers was more homogenous and maybe we have always been rugged individuals.

This unwillingness to change is based on what—respect for our hallowed past or fear of screwing it all up? What if a new book is not as good? Then what?

At Talent Connect Nashville, 2017, we heard a 21st century way of looking at things. "Vulnerability is the birthplace of innovation, creativity, and change," Brené Brown said. We cannot innovate without accepting risk and uncertainty. "If you've

created a work culture where vulnerability is not okay, you have also created a culture where innovation and creativity are not okay.”ⁱⁱ

Brené Brown’s research and findings about the relationship between innovation and healthy social, family and working relationships with vulnerability started reaching the mainstream in 2010 thanks to TED talks and YouTube. To call her work a “game changer” is not hyperbole.

Let’s look at pre-2010 AA by way of imposing on the General Service Conference, our avoidance of vulnerability (resistance to change). Charmed by the comfort of closure and treating change as a threat to AA survival, we came up with this:

1995 Advisory Action, Literature, p. 91

"The first 164 pages of the Big Book, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, the Preface, the Forewords, The Doctor's Opinion, Doctor Bob's Nightmare and the Appendices remain as is."

2002 Advisory Action, Literature p.93

"The text in the book, *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, written by Bill W., remains as is, recognizing the Fellowship's feeling that Bill's writings be retained as originally published."ⁱⁱⁱ

Were we preserving the memory of our early days time-capsul or were we resisting innovation? Have we, by asserting the primacy of the *Big Book* and 12&12 within AA culture, discouraged innovation and creativity, eying deviation as an existential threat? If it’s true that a society either evolves or dies, do we have a bright future?

Long gone is the symbol of the Marlboro Man, smoking on his horse, in the untamed American west. If *vulnerable* is the new *macho*, AA is already caught up in the zeitgeist of the lean-into-our-weakness new age approach. A healthy contingent of people are responding to honoring vulnerability; businesses and organizations, AA included, are embracing our own and our collective vulnerability. As a result, we have some innovation and creativity to show for it.

The sea change sounded like this:

Brown made the case at TEDx Houston that vulnerable is what makes you beautiful. The danger to a society like ours that loses our capacity for vulnerability, we give way to disappointment, perfectionism, extremism. The result is that we numb out to avoid fear and scarcity. Numbness doesn’t just dull the bad stuff; we become joyless and paralyzed.^{iv}

It should not be too surprising that a leadership posture that incorporates vulnerability, isn't so foreign to our 12-Step approach to recovery. We should be revealing instead of concealing, letting go of the facade of invulnerability, we find the root of authenticity, leadership and meaningful connection with each other. We are not portraying our program of fellowship as infallible but we right-size ourselves as "imperfectly human with uncertain outcomes."

Compare that to insisting AA is above reproach and meeting new ideas with hostility. This tends to "deplete workers and leaving many with less to invest where it is most needed: into the work, in the relationships and in the creativity necessary for progress."^v

So, post 2010, AA is growing into this embrace of our vulnerability, and it has already resulted in innovations. Here are some examples of millennial stewardship from our General Service Conference:

Safety in AA: in regional forums and assemblies, in coffeeshops and our home groups we confronted our shortcomings and the vulnerability of members and our group. We now have a roughly shared experience to add to the AA story:

... situations that can threaten group unity and safety ... those who are confrontational, aggressive or those who are simply unwilling to put the needs of the group first. Such behavior can hijack the focus of a meeting and frighten members, new and old.

... groups and members always have the option to call the appropriate authorities if disruptive behavior continues or anyone's safety is at risk.

Situations that groups have addressed include sexual harassment or stalking, threats of violence, bullying, financial coercion, racial intolerance, sexual orientation or gender identification intolerance, pressuring AA members into a particular point of view or belief, medical treatments and/or medications, politics, religion ...

... if a person's safety is in jeopardy, or the situation breaches the law, the individuals involved can take appropriate action to ensure their safety. Calling the proper authorities does not go against AA Traditions. Anonymity is not a cloak protecting criminal or inappropriate behavior. ... unwanted sexual attention or targeting vulnerable members can be troublesome. We are not professionals trained to handle such situations. Law enforcement or other professional help may be necessary.

Injuries, accidents, fires, etc., sometimes occur during meetings. ... Addressing an emergency situation is more important than continuing the meeting, and members should not hesitate to call emergency personnel in critical situations."^{vi}

2020's Conference charged the General Service Office with creating a Plain Language Big Book that would be more accessible while preserving its message. There are two main themes:

- Accessibility – due to the literacy level or lack of ability to adequately comprehend the message of recovery by the individual as written in the book *Alcoholics Anonymous*
- Relatability – changes in current language and culture (including views on modern language, gender and religion) which hinder the individual's ability to relate and embrace the program as set forth in the book *Alcoholics Anonymous*.

Asking tough, vulnerable, and controversial questions, here is where we are in the middle of this process ...

Do you think there are accessibility and relatability issues with the book *Alcoholics Anonymous*? If so do you think A.A. is ready to have informed discussions about finding solutions? And do you think it's possible that one common solution to accessibility and relatability with the Big Book can be found?

For those fond of grade reading levels, note that 50% of adults in the US cannot read a book written at an 8th grade reading level. That's half of 327 million people. If the Big Book is at 8th Grade reading level, does that mean 164 million adults don't have access to the message? Literacy is a more comprehensive tool to measure understanding and use of materials. Literacy is measured on a 1 to 5 scale, with one being the simplest and five being the most complex. Most of the Big Book requires a mid-range third level of literacy. The Literacy level at 3 or above in the US is 48%. Does that mean only about half of the adults in the US could read and comprehend the Big Book?^{vii}

Now, a more inclusive and sensitive AA Preamble

The 71st General Service Conference approved an amendment to our A.A. Grapevine Preamble. We have changed from "Alcoholics Anonymous is a fellowship of men and women ..." to "Alcoholics Anonymous is a fellowship of people ..."

These examples should not give the impression that all of AA is kumbaya open to change without organized efforts to resist change and rein in these accomplishments and or working projects. In April of 2022 motions on the plain language *Big Book* were tabled to:

1. Consider a request that work on the plain language book, *Alcoholics Anonymous* should be discontinued.

2. Consider a request to ensure that not a word of the Twelve Steps in Chapter Five be altered for accessibility or relatability or any other reason.
3. Consider a request to ensure that the book not be called, *Alcoholics Anonymous*.

Regarding the 71st GSC action to change the preamble (fellowship of *people* from fellowship of *men and woman*), some with an aversion to the change brought forth a motion:

1. Consider discontinuing including the A.A. Preamble in all A.A. World Services literature.
2. The committee discussed the wide-ranging impact that the AA Preamble changes have had on the Fellowship. The committee felt that after careful consideration of Fellowship feedback, it would be premature to quantify the impact when many AA members are still either uninformed or ambivalent about the change. The committee emphasized that at every level of our Conference process there is a reciprocal responsibility of all AA members and trusted servants, of participation and communication, to embrace the guiding principles of trust and transparency.

Thank you, Brené Brown and the wealth of vulnerability researchers and philosophers that impart on us that we can lead with our weakness and never have to doubt our worth and power. We are imperfect and incomplete... and we are worthy of connection, just as we are. AA and the broader 12-Step mutual aid world is an unfinished story. We have avoided collective stagnation and we seem to make progress. Also, we are worthy just the way we are. The Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews under the supervision of John F Kelly and Marica Ferri (Harvard Medical School) and Keith Humphreys (Stanford University) found substantial evidence that the AA approach and treatment centers that encourage AA engagement (Twelve Step Facilitation) outperform or equal other popular and more costly interventions into problems with alcohol and other drugs^{viii}

Here is how Rock and Roll shared the same ideas in the 1970s: "Easy Does It," Richard Davies / Roger Hodgson, Supertramp © 1975

And if my thoughts had wings
I'd be the bird that sings
I'd fly where love isn't shy
And everyone is willing to try
And if we had the time
That time's so hard to find

I could believe what you say
Start sending those shadows away
And if you know who you are
You are your own superstar
And only you can shape the movie
that you make
So when the lights disappear
And only the silence is here
Watch yourself, easy does it, easy does it,
easy while you wake
And if you know who you are
You are your own superstar
And only you can shape the music
that you make
So when the crowds disappear
And only the silence is near
Watch yourself, easy does it, easy does it,
easy while you wake

Sing along to the [whole Crisis? What Crisis? album](#). I know, it will take 47 minutes to listen to all of it. It was the era of album rock, concept albums and entire novels in song – not just a chapter, blog or greatest hits. Imagine reading the greatest chapters of any of the great authors; how absurd would that be; William Shakespeare’s best chapters?

So, how do you feel about all this? Have we canonized Bill W and was that right or wrong to do? If you are new here, do you find AA an engaging place to explore, sample ideas and get reinforced for your adaptations? Or do you feel an unspoken – or blatant – pressure to fit in, conform, and dismiss your own free will?

Wherever you are on the “preserve the integrity of the message” or “keep widening our gateway” camp, I would love to hear from you...

Write to news@rebelliondogspublishing.com – visit our Facebook or Twitter page and add your thoughts or experiences.

We are all in this together.

ⁱ Artist Paul Wakefield, A&M Records, [Supertramp album Crisis? What Crisis?](#)

ⁱⁱ <https://www.linkedin.com/business/talent/blog/talent-connect/why-being-vulnerable-at-work-can-be-your-biggest-advantage-brene-brown>

ⁱⁱⁱ Advisory Actions of the General Service Conference of Alcoholics Anonymous 1951-2022

^{iv} Brené Brown, 2010 TEDx Houston Texas <https://youtu.be/X4Qm9cGRub0> + TEDx KC

<https://youtu.be/UoMXF73j0c>

^v Lisa Schmidt, M.Ed. ACPC, <https://worldofwork.io/2020/01/vulnerability-in-the-workplace/> /

^{vi} SMF 209 https://www.aahomegroup.org/downloads/Safety_and_Our_Common_Welfare_smf-209_en.pdf

^{vii} <https://msca09aa.org/2020/03/03-30-2020/> District 9, Mid-Southern California 70th General Service Conference

Agenda Panel

^{viii} <https://www.cochranelibrary.com/cdsr/doi/10.1002/14651858.CD012880.pub2/full>