



Rebellion Dogs Radio # XIV *The Continuing History of 12-Step culture.*

*An Academy Award winner, a punk band, a
Taoist, a children's book and storytelling then
and now*

Rebellion Dogs Radio is a 21st century look at 12-Step Life, now with less dogma and more bite. Welcome to Rebellion Dogs Radio, Episode 14. I'm glad you're here. We'll be hearing from Ernie Kurtz and Bill White about the variety of recovery experiences. We'll be hearing, through the voice of Meryl Streep, the spiritual message or the recovery of one's humanity message that is *The Velveteen Rabbit*. A spiritual experience of life



can be the same as having a personal relationship with reality. The material world and the spiritual (non-material world)—like yin and yang—are not exactly opposites. John Bellaimey explains in a Ted Talk that “Each contains the seed of the other”; the dark yin swirl contains a dot of the light yang swirl and the white yang swirl has a dot of the black yin. Bellaimey says that this Taoist symbol explains that yin and yang are “relative to each other.” You know, just to kick off, let's give Bellaimey a couple of minutes to explain his point himself:

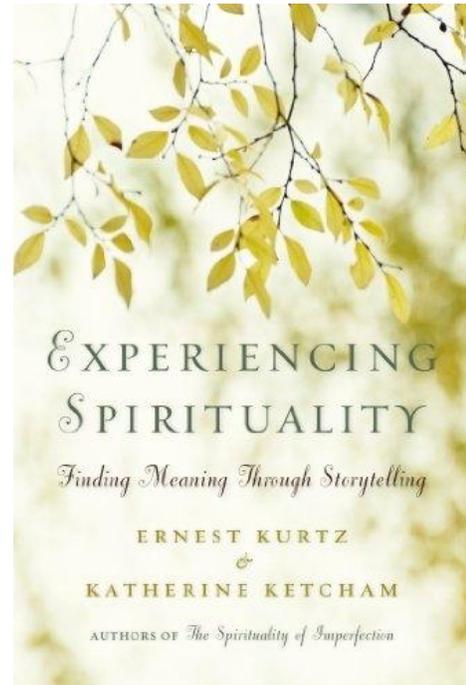
You might have seen this symbol before, whether as a temporary tattoo or in a Chinese Temple. It's called the Yin/Yang symbol. It comes from Taoism, a religion born in China, and it has far more meaning that you probably realize. The Yin is the dark swirl and the Yang is the light one. Each side has the dot of the other which gives a clue to the meaning of Yin & Yang; each contains the seed of the other.

Darth Vader has the capacity for good and Luke Skywalker has the potential to follow his father to the dark side of the force. Like Luke and his father, Yin & Yang are not total opposites; they are relative to each other. Taoism teaches that there is a power in the universe. It is higher, deeper and truer than any other force. They call it the Tao—“the way.” Like The Force in Star Wars, the Tao has two sides. Unlike other religions where the higher power is all good and perhaps has

an all-evil rival, Taoism teaches us that we need to learn from both Yin & Yang. And unlike religions with personal gods, the higher power in Taoism is not.

Taoists believe that, living in harmony with “the way,” a person will not have to fight against the universe’s natural flow. So for example, listen more—argue less, if you are willing to back-up or un-do something then you will get ahead faster in the long run. Don’t worry about being the best—be who you are. Live simply—complications take you away from the Tao. The wise person is flexible, the Taoists say. Learning to use the Tao is what Taoism is all about. And that’s why you should learn your Yin from your Yang.ⁱ

Here’s some context for this story. I’m on the verge of a journey. I’m going to New York City. There I will visit AA archives to do some research on atheists and agnostics in AA. I will attend Book Expo America to learn more about the publishing industry and to talk with a couple of other authors. I’ll be sharing those conversations with you in future episodes. I’ll be sharing my research findings in future episodes, too.



Since last show, I have been to a memorial for a mentor of mine, Ernie Kurtz. I got to celebrate his life and legacy with Roger C of AA Agnostica, Linda Kurtz his widow, his dog, his family and many of his colleagues and collaborators.

Katherine Ketcham was there. These two authors first met to collaborate on *The Spirituality of Imperfection*. After articulating this great fact that the human experience (call it spiritual if you like) is making peace with our incompleteness—the here and now—instead of waiting to live until perfection has been reached. Ketcham and Kurtz later collaborated to reinforce the idea that Spirituality can’t be understood in the way that an intellectual process can help us understand something. Spirituality has to be experienced. The example is given of describing what a rose smells like. If we understood it, we could explain it to another who’s never smelt one. But can we, with all the metaphors and language at our disposal, explain what a rose smells like? Or can we only recognize the smell of a rose? Maybe that would have been a better way to explain

the AA steps. Maybe a higher power is something we recognize in our world, not something we understand—or a higher purpose, if you prefer.

Ernie and Katherine wrote, "*Knowledge* is primarily a method; it seeks and attains truth by experiment and aims at exactness, focusing on *quantity*, asking, 'How much?' Knowledge produces experts.

Wisdom is a vision. It seems truth by understanding, is concerned with adequacy, and focuses on *qualities*. Wisdom questions 'What kind of?' and produces artists."

So recovery is more craft than science, isn't it? It certainly isn't an intellectual concept. I met Bill White who has worked closely with Ernie for many years. We'll hear a snippet of the legacy of Ernie Kurtz and I'll happily guide you to where you can hear and see more, for free.

Great truths of our world are found in our songs, our poems, stories and fiction and some of non-fiction we read may or may not be; it's just a label, not a fact. Here is an example of how, for real truth, we need to turn to fiction.

While Ernie Kurtz's body of work has shaped me through the years, I only recently got to know him personally. As most of you know he wrote the Foreword to *Beyond Belief: Agnostic Musings for 12 Step Life*. He read it, he offered an unsolicited review which took me aback, and it became the Foreword to the second printing of the First Edition.

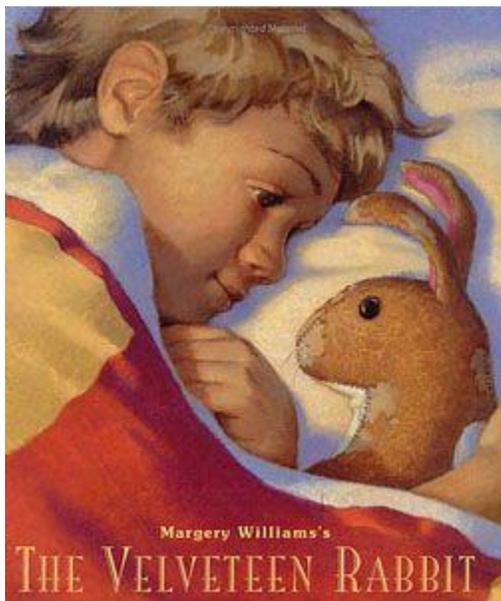
Dr. Ernie Kurtz was a bit aggravated that he would insist that I call him Ernie and I almost always called him Dr. Kurtz. I still don't embrace the idea of being confused as peers. He was a great teacher, a brutal literary/journalistic critic and a gifted story teller. As a historian and commentator he had an ability to tear something apart and expose its imperfection, its incompleteness, and still be in awe of its beauty. An author/anthropologist named Joseph Campbell was very much like that. Kurtz was a master of context. That's the best thing I learned from him; you can't just tell a story; it needs the context of what else was going on at the time.

Here's a story for context. The memorial for Ernie Kurtz was at Dawn Farm in Ypsilanti Michigan, close to Ann Arbor, the University town that Ernie and wife Linda both lived and worked in. Dawn Farm is a community that provides detox, residential services, outpatient services and more. Ernie was no stranger to this facility. Dawn Farm president, Jim Balmer, graciously made the facility available to us for the gathering. Bill White moderated remembrances, Father Terry Dumas gave a Homily and many of us were granted the opportunity to publicly remember Ernie. Ernie's little sister, Mary Ann Allen

read something that bonded her brother and her. It is a charming example of how this scholar, researcher and storyteller could find great truth anywhere. Mary Ann read from *The Velveteen Rabbit: How Toys Become Real*.

With George Winston on piano and Meryl Streep narrating, let me share with you what Mary Ann dedicated as her memory of brother Ernie. As we listen, let's ask ourselves, is this, or could this be, the story of recovery from addiction to finding or regaining our humanity? Is this or is this not the story of AA?

From *The Velveteen Rabbit* (Margery Williams 1922):



Between them all the poor little Rabbit was made to feel himself very insignificant and commonplace, and the only person who was kind to him at all was the Skin Horse. The Skin Horse had lived longer in the nursery than any of the others. He was so old that his brown coat was bald in patches and showed the seams underneath, and most of the hairs in his tail had been pulled out to string bead necklaces. He was wise, for he had seen a long succession of mechanical toys arrive to boast and swagger, and by-and-by break their mainsprings and pass away, and he knew that they were only toys, and would never turn into anything else. For nursery magic is very strange and wonderful, and only those playthings that are old and wise and experienced like the Skin Horse

understand all about it.

"What is REAL?" asked the Rabbit one day, when they were lying side by side near the nursery fender, before Nana came to tidy the room. "Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?"

"REAL isn't how you are made," said the Skin Horse. "It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but really loves you, then you become REAL."

"Does it hurt?" asked the Rabbit.

"Sometimes," said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. "When you are REAL you don't mind being hurt."

"Does it happen all at once, like being wound up," he asked, "or bit by bit?"

"It doesn't happen all at once," said the Skin Horse. "You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't happen often to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are REAL, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are REAL you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand."

"I suppose you are REAL?" said the Rabbit. And then he wished he had not said it, for he thought the Skin Horse might be sensitive.

But the Skin Horse only smiled. "The boy's uncle made me REAL but that was a great many years ago. But once you are REAL you can't become un-real again. It lasts for always."

The Rabbit sighed. He thought it would be a long time before this magic called real happened to him. He longed to become REAL, to know what it felt like. Yet, the idea of growing shabby and losing his eyes and whiskers was sad. He wished that he could become it without these uncomfortable things happening to him.

I don't mind telling you I cried when I heard it again. This was a story I took great joy in reading to my son. This is a story, my story of what it takes and what it means to be real. I was perilously close to being someone who didn't become real. "It doesn't happen often to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept."

I am on the eve of going to AA archives; where Ernie Kurtz had travelled before me. Many fellow AA historians remarked at his memorial how Ernie, this gentleman and professional, paved the way for others to research Alcoholics Anonymous. I feel humbled to follow in these footsteps. I am researching some of the history of AA and our relationship with members who don't buy into the theistic narrative of addiction and recovery.

May 16th 2015, *Grapevine* Quote of the day was this:

"Many people who believe wonder what atheists do when tough times befall us. To whom do we turn if not to God? I turn to friends and reason and experiences of the past. I now think, based on previous events, that the odds are I will get through whatever comes in my life until it ends."

It's from a member named June from El Granada, Calif., *The A.A. Grapevine*, April 1991
"Listening for the Reality"

She writes:

I do not assign all life events to the work of an unseen something or someone who distributes situations (as tests, perhaps) to struggling humans. I accept that some adversities simply occur in normal living and I try to make the best of them. My view of those events which benefit our lives (often called miracles in AA) is similar to my attitude on misfortunes. I think that not all events can be explained with respect to a reason or purpose. They are simply random phenomena--the luck of the draw.

A large percentage of occurrences, however, are the result of cause and effect and the causes that effect sobriety seem obvious. When I stopped using alcohol which distorts thoughts and emotions, a healing process began. When I went to meetings, associated with sober, sane people, and incorporated their way of living into my own actions, the logical result was an improved life through sobriety. Recovery is inevitable, not miraculous, under such a course. It would have been a miracle if the chaos of alcoholism had not abated and my life had not improved.

She also shares with us:

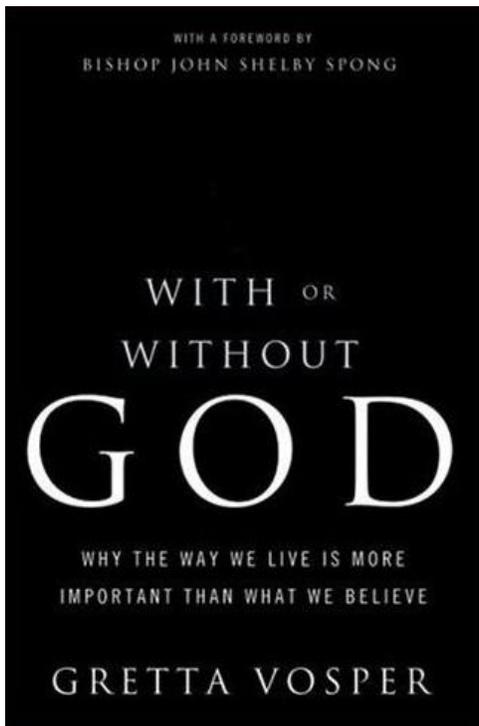
In retrospect, I see there are at least five points that have enabled me to stay in AA as an atheist.

1. I don't defend or explain the reasons for my atheism. I just state what I do to stay sober.
2. I don't attack the beliefs of those who are comfortable with the idea of God.
3. I haven't abandoned AA because of the jargon that muddles the ideas with terms that offend me.
4. I work out translations of ideas so that they are compatible to my thinking.
5. I try to work within AA to show by example that sobriety and atheism are not mutually exclusive. I have a personal commitment to that and I think it helped me not to drink early on and it helps me still.

Especially I try not to trouble myself with the language of the program. Sometimes I am uneasy when people talk about God's will or when they suggest I pray, but I try to tune that part out. Instead I listen for the reality of what they are describing. I keep working on doing what makes sense. After all, sobriety is the real goal of AA principles and Steps.

For many of us, the idea of a personal god guiding our life and/or recovery is as mythical as, well, the Velveteen Rabbit becoming real. Ketcham and Kurtz say this about myths: "A myth is something that never happened because it is always happening."

Days after I was at Ernie's memorial, I was asked to be a guest speaker at West Hill United Church. This congregation describes itself as progressive Christianity. They offer what they call a barrier-free congregation for post-theistic Christianity. I have referred



before to the atheist minister, Greta Vosper's two books before, *With or Without God: Why The Way We Live is More Important Than What We Believe* (2008) and *Amen: What Prayer Can Mean in a World Beyond Belief* (2012)

Of course I was honored to speak to the congregation. If you think it's a challenge to hold your own as a Godless AA group in an environment of contempt, fear and intolerance, just try running a Christian church on the same grounds. I can feel some of you resisting the idea right now; why call yourself a Church without prayer, Christians if you don't have any use for the myths and dogma.

I told them of how our atheist/agnostic AA group is, how our Sixth Warrantee is the protection for such groups no matter what. That the A.A. Service structure

...may act for the service of Alcoholics Anonymous, it shall never perform any act of government ... The A.A. Traditions accord the individual member and the A.A. group extraordinary liberties. In fact, we A.A.s probably enjoy more and greater freedoms than any Fellowship in the world. We claim this as no virtue...

Because we set such a high value on our great liberties and cannot conceive that they will need to be limited, we here specially enjoin our General Service Conference to abstain completely from any and all acts of authoritative government which could in any way curtail A.A.'s freedom.ⁱⁱ

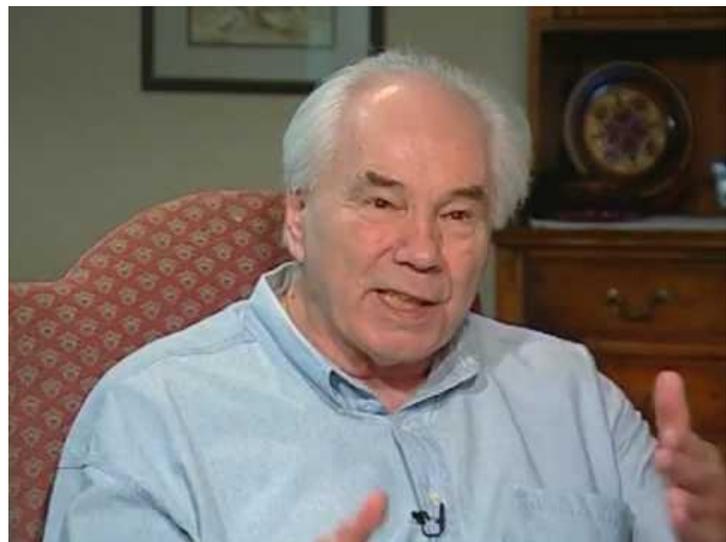
I was well received by the congregation. They took comfort that they were not alone, that like them, we AAs have suffered too, and that despite our current deadlock with our local Intergroup bigotry, that AA as a whole supports us. I shared how at our first ever

international gathering of Freethinkers in AA, our General Service Office came to witness a great step in AA's history and show their concern for the Toronto Intergroup breaking from AA Tradition and their concern for other groups and any groups that face hostility from other local AAs, such as Vancouver, Columbus and such.

On the eve of my great adventure, I want to pay homage to Ernie Kurtz by playing a small segment of *Reflections: Ernie Kurtz on the History of AA, Spirituality, Shame, and Storytelling With Bill White*.

Let's do it:

BW: Ernie, I'd like to go back and amplify some of our discussion about the varieties of recovery experience. Can you talk a little bit about how those varieties increased as A.A. went from Akron to New York to Cleveland and beyond?



EK: I think the explosion after the war helps me date it. The city of Cleveland is the first real explosion. New York A.A. started in Brooklyn or New Jersey really. There's a pamphlet they composed in Cleveland in 1946. Let me read a couple of paragraphs:

A.A. Groups are fundamentally little bands of people who are friends, who can help each other stay sober. Each group therefore reflects the needs of its own members. The way a group is managed is the way its members want it to be managed for their common benefit.

As a result, we have large groups, small groups, groups which have refreshments, groups which like long meetings, groups which like short meetings, social groups, working groups, men's groups, women's groups, groups that play cards, groups which specialize in young people and as many other varieties as there are kinds of people. Each group has own customs, its own financial problems and its own methods of operation.

As long as it follows as a group the same principles A.A. recommends for individuals—unselfishness, honesty, decency and tolerance—it is above criticism. (A.A. in Cleveland, 1946)”

BW: That’s beautiful.

EK: It’s amazing to me to was the short time this happened. I mentioned early that some groups would have clam bakes or various social activities. As it spun around the country this became true in so many ways. There are groups that wanted more of the spiritual and would say a prayer or two at the beginning and others that didn’t want any of that God-stuff and they’d just open and close. Every member had a desire to stop drinking but everything else was up to the members of the group.

With group conscience, it wasn’t usually a regular group conscience meeting, though some groups scheduled regular (business) meetings. It wasn’t a simple majority vote. They would try, almost in the Quaker principle, to find something with which everyone could be happy so no one felt like they were voted down. Again, you can’t generalize at all, but the general tendency was always in this direction. I think that’s an amazing part of A.A.’s longevity.

BW: Ernie, let me transition, if we can, from the concentrated work on *Not God* (A History of Alcoholics Anonymous) and the work that led from it to the work on *Spirituality*. I’m very interested about how the work that led to [*The Spirituality of Imperfection*](#) began.

EK: Again, it’s one of those AA-coincidences, I think. The spirituality of the Steps is what struck me and I was looking at the burgeoning of therapy in the mid- to late 1980s. The spirituality of the Steps struck me, I had some background in theology—I spent several years in the seminary—and I was a teaching fellow at Harvard Divinity School, so I was interested in developing this line of thinking and I went to talk to Father Jim Moise, a Jesuit priest who started a college of alcohol studies at Seattle University. In the meantime, a woman from Walla Walla Washington, Kathie Ketcham who had been Jim (James Robert) Milam’s co-author on *Under the Influence: A Guide to the Myths and Realities of Alcoholism* had been talking to (Father Moise), too. Kathie had the same sense, that what her book lacked was about spirituality. She didn’t know a lot about it but she had that sense from the people she met and so on. Hearing about Father Moise, a Jesuit priest, she thought he must know a lot about spirituality; she called him and asked

him, would he care to work with her on a project like this. Jim said, “No, but I think I know somebody you should call,” and Kathie called me.

She raised this possibility as a professional co-author with an agent. I was doing a lot of talking back then. I worked for the Veteran’s Administration, there’s a VA Hospital in Walla Walla and I pulled some strings and I was invited to give a presentation in Walla Walla, for their VA staff. Kathie came along. I always put things out orally before I write; I’m a speaker first and a writer second which is one reason why I’ve published so little—especially since I’ve been off the road. Kathy sat in the back, scribbling furiously all during the workshop I was giving and she said to me, “I think we’ve got a ‘Go’.” I spent two or three more days there. I don’t remember and she spent 16 hours a day with me; her husband was so marvelously tolerant, so trusting, we hammered out an outline, we decided what we were going to do. Then I went back to Michigan and she went home and we started exchanging manuscripts. This was before email. So while we wrote on computers—*Not God* was written on a typewriter by the way; some people don’t realize how old I really am—we mailed back and forth and used all the air-express agencies.

I can be difficult to work with; just ask Kathie. I think I only had to send her flowers four times in the time we worked together, when I realized that I had said something hurtful to her. But she is very thick-skinned and we hammered out what is now the book *The Spirituality of Imperfection*. Amazingly, it was published first in 1992, there were six books published that year on spirituality and because the editor at Bantam at the time, who had purchased our book, had left Bantam at just that time, our book received no publicity—not one advertisement. These other books came out with large names attached to them and what do you do? You play the hand you’re dealt. But now, it’s the only book published in 1992 that’s still in print. If you look on Amazon, sometimes it’s ranked in the top 2,000 or 3,000 books in sales in any given day.

BW: That book tapped such a nerve in the culture. I wonder if you have any sense of what it was about that book that tapped such an incredibly broad response. It seemed to meet a very unique kind of need for the culture at that time, and continues to do so.

EK: There are two things and it's exactly like A.A. First of all the book is a book of stories; there are 99 stories in that book. It is not a book of exposition. I had especially a lot of rabbinic stories; many people think I'm Jewish—I'm a Catholic if anyone's interested—I had experiences with Rabbi friends who told me stories way, way back. These stories linger in your memory and I sought them out to verify them. So I think the stories, as opposed to being a book of exposition—whatever it had to say it conveyed by stories—is the first thing and again, this is what you learn from A.A.

Secondly, I think the book did convey spirituality and if you pardon the metaphor there was a thirst for spirituality in the culture, yet so often, spirituality comes packaged in unattractive ways, the overt aggressive extreme—one extreme or the other. It turns off people and again, following the example of A.A. and avoiding things that were extraneous. The themes of that book are from ideas I got from listening at meetings. I kept going and I kept listening at meetings. For one thing, I found it tremendously personally enriching. For one thing, I cannot not study something; that's what it amounts to. I kept hearing these themes and I kept writing about those themes.

What is spirituality? How do you recognize spirituality? Spirituality cannot be defined; it has to be experienced. One of the stories is of a master speaking with a student. The student says, "If you cannot explain it, it is not real." The master says, "Do you know the smell of a rose? Explain it." There are some things we cannot explain and spirituality is one of them. We see it though in certain qualities. One of them is a sense of release—a quality of being free, which usually only comes from letting go of something. I think this is so clear, especially in alcoholism—the admission of powerlessness, the letting go of the need to be in control, from which comes this tremendous sense of freedom. And if you listen to the stories told by people who are glowing with sobriety, there is this two-fold thing; I have been freed; alcohol is a savage master for those addicted to it—or any substance—and the sense of being freed from that cunning, baffling and powerful master, which comes by letting go. Most people talking don't necessarily make that connection but if you listen to their stories, it's there. You can't even say which comes first but both are present. There is an experience of, "I have been freed—not that I have

"What is spirituality? How do you recognize it? Spirituality cannot be defined; it has to be experienced" Ernie Kurtz, Reflections with Bill White.

won my freedom but I have been freed” and also the experience of letting go something that they thought they absolutely needed. ⁱⁱⁱ

Google http://www.williamwhitepapers.com/ernie_kurtz/ where you can take the time to see and hear the whole interview.

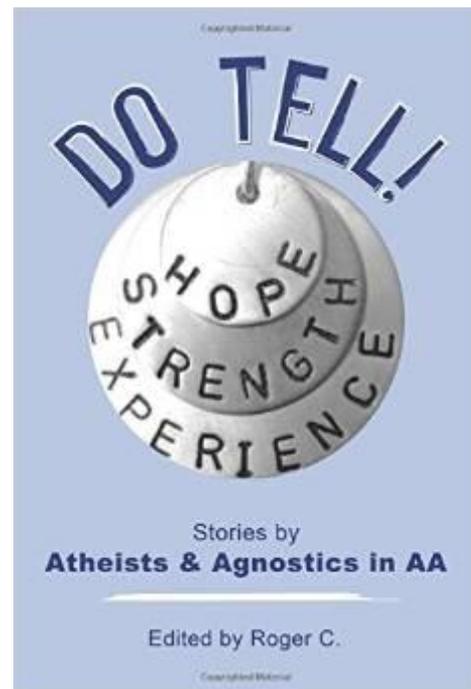
I am so moved by the Cleveland 1946 description of the vastness of what an AA group can be. Only our imagination limits us, so long as we all share a desire to stop drinking, what we reject, adapt, copy or create is our own business.

I share the sentiment that people in AA can recognize is who and what is REAL, what recovery is, what addiction is—even if we don’t understand it (we can recognize it).

Here’s something I understand about AA History. It isn’t just something that happened way back then. It’s happening right now. I’m on my way to research why nothing of what seem to be no less than seven requests to GSO to produce literature for and by atheists and agnostics in AA, has lead to actions that would or could satisfy the non-theistic community and our supporters inside AA. History marches on. Seven times GSO has told the humanists, atheists, agnostics et al, "Sorry, not at this time." *The Grapevine* was asked to compile stories they already have by atheists and agnostics and make it available. AA's General Service Conference said, "No."

While the General Service structure is impotent when it comes to the question of producing literature for and from AA members whose sobriety is self-defined as secular (humanist, agnostic, atheist, skeptical, educational, fellowship-based, non-theistic), the top of our inverted triangle, the AA members themselves, has assembled to do it for ourselves.

[*Do Tell! Stories by Atheist and Agnostics in AA*](#) is AA members’ sharing experience strength and hope in classic AA tradition—storytelling. No God? No problem. These members are doing it with or without faith in something more than the material world, with or without the Twelve Steps of recovery, but all as AA members because they have a desire to stop drinking (or stay stopped).

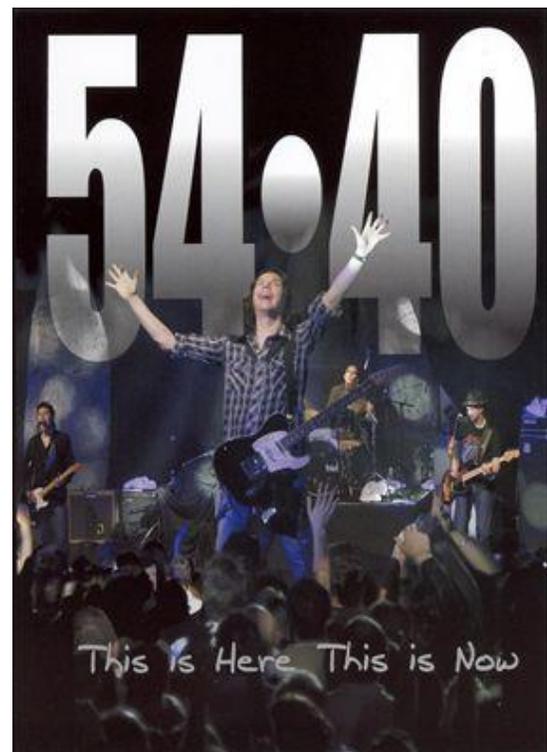


Visit RebellionDogsPublishing.com's bookstore page and enjoy. as we have, the continuing history of AA. AA history is not something that happened way back then in a codified story that does not change. AA evolves and we are making history now, that will be remembered as 21st century history.

Let's go out with a song. Hootie and the Blowfish covered a 54-40 song "I Go Blind." Hootie did it in 2000. It was written in 1986.

Every time I look at you I go blind
In the morning I get up
And I try to feel alive but I can't
I don't know what it is
Something in me just won't give it a chance
I think it's just that I feel more confused by the deal
Love has shown me
Little child did you know that there's light
And it's gonna' shine right through your eyes
What do you think that life is like
Every time I look at you I go blind

Somehow, somewhere, in this song, some of the Velveteen Rabbit truth of life is reverberating. This songwriter, Neil Osborn this band 54-40 has a number of great songs. Here's one that Neil Osborne told me on IndieCan Radio was one of his great achievements. It's a very Taoist song; it about one day at a time, it's about living in the moment. This song, listen all the way through 'cause it's part of the show, it's the money shot, the climax and it's called "This is Here, This is now."



For a link to sources from everything we borrowed in this show, visit RebellionDogPublishing.com and click on Rebellious Radio.

This is Here, This is Now, ©Neil Osborn, 54-40, from *Say Yes to Everything*, True North Records.

So you think that you're lonely
You know that you're only here to breathe
Love is emptiness, coloured with
Beyond the bitter and the sweet

Maybe you got it right
There's nothing to believe
(But) lovers, lovers just be
This is here, this is now
This is what it's like when you fall
Down from grace
Let yourself go, there's nothing to do
Nothing to know, let yourself go

So you think that it's over
You think that it's no worth
Drowning into life
Save me becoming your mantra
Oh how it's got you cold
Pick up the pieces

Maybe you got it right
There's nothing to believe
(But) lovers, lovers just be
This is here, this is now
This is what it's like when you fall
Down from grace
Let yourself go, there's nothing to do
Nothing to know
Surrounded by all things that are beautiful

This is here, this is now

ⁱ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ezmR9Attpyc>

ⁱⁱ W., Bill, *The A.A. Service Manual Combined With Twelve Concepts of World Service* p. 72

ⁱⁱⁱ http://www.williamwhitepapers.com/video/ernie_kurtz_reflections/?chapter=2