



Renascent

The road to recovery starts here.

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[Perspective: What I Believe To Be True](#)

by Joe C.



Today, 36 years into my sobriety, I don't stay sober predicated on the existence of an intervening/interfering deity in my sobriety or in the world around me. I am not claiming the non-existence of God; I conduct myself and work the Steps as if God is mythical, because that is what is true for me. I find that the Twelve Steps offer the same life-altering force for my atheistic sobriety that they offer believers. I simply had to translate the theistic Twelve Steps into my language – not unlike what the French or Tibetan alcoholic must do.

I was told to keep an open mind; that remains to be good advice. I was told to “fake it until I make it” and that has shown to be a dangerous idea for me. Some of us just can't tell little white lies without tragic consequences. I wanted to *feel* like I belonged in AA, once I decided I *did* belong. I got the impression that belonging and believing in God were synonymous. I wanted so desperately to belong that I feigned God-consciousness. We addicts and alcoholics are good liars; talking the talk can go undetected for years. But living a lie is a ticking time bomb. And feeling inauthentic gets harder – not easier – as you go forward in recovery.

I meditated on and was open-minded to feeling a connection with Divine intervention. When I felt like I didn't get this god-stuff and everyone else did, I felt like an impostor, trapped in a catch-22. To be accepted for who I am, I would have to come out of my atheist closet. To fess up might excommunicate me, disconnecting me from my sobriety-maintaining bond of the AA fellowship. I paid close attention to how candid atheists were treated and talked about behind their back. I've experienced hostility at worst and a condescending attitude at best from some of AA's most outspoken believers.

While I was biding my time, the internet broke the deadlock. Being connected to members of the recovery community all around the world, I found that I was not alone. Being a sober skeptic was as legitimate as being an orthodox believer. Becoming part of a community within a community gave me strength and courage, and the catch-22 was broken. I felt more a part of AA being candid than massaging my language to sound like I fit in. I don't evangelize atheism but I am comfortable being a doubter. I don't feel like I am missing something or that I need to be

fixed. My belief in a world without a deity is far from conformity with the majority. But I feel equal. Non-believers aren't second-rate AA members and we aren't a high-bred of enlightenment. We are different, yet equal.

I had to get on to recovery through the Twelve Steps without a white-light experience and I found that in doing so, with an open mind, not believing in God was irrelevant to my recovery. I don't deny that a belief that God is doing for them what they cannot do for themselves is keeping many of my fellow AAs sober. But their belief in such a thing is no proof to me that it exists.

Today, I call myself an *apa-theist*. What that means is I don't know and I don't care. If the myth-busters disproved god or if God revealed Himself to us – whichever way it went – I wouldn't change how I conduct myself today or tomorrow. I live by values today that I expect any deity would approve of and in the absence of a watchful, punishing, nurturing, Divine parent, my values are still the best way to live life – for me.

I have worked with countless alcoholics and I find that we don't "come to belief." It is my experience that we can no more change our belief that we can change our favourite colour. We can come to understand what we do believe (what is true for us) and we can work the Steps in a way that works for us. Don't tell me that the only way to work the Steps is word for word. My experience suggests something very different. If you are working with a new member and a word is a deal breaker, change the word – the word won't mind. On page 63 of the Big Book, Bill Wilson talks about Step Three. "The wording was of course quite optional so long as we expressed the idea, voicing it without reservations."

Humanists, cognitive behavioural therapists, Aboriginal North Americans, Buddhists and atheists have all translated the Twelve Steps into a language that offers the alcoholic sobriety with integrity – not having to accept someone else's belief, and not having to deny their own.

Editor's Note: A list of Toronto area Agnostic AA meetings is available online at <http://www.aatorontoagnostics.com/toronto-agnostic-aa-meetings.html>.

Joe C is a member of the Beyond Belief Agnostic Group in Toronto. He is a contributing writer to The A.A. Grapevine, Renew Magazine and TheFix.com. Joe also writes about music and financial planning. Most recently Joe has written the first ever daily reflection book for non-believers, freethinkers and everyone. *Beyond Belief: Agnostic Musings for 12 Step Life* (Rebellion Dogs Publishing, January 21, 2013, <http://rebelliondogspublishing.com>)

Tags: [spirituality](#)

2 Responses to "Perspective: What I Believe To Be True"

Denis K.

April 30, 2013 at 3:40 pm <#>

Hi Joe,

You have written my story almost word for word. I came to AA in Toronto April 30/75

frightened, broken and desperate. I was impressed with some of the people I met and decided I wanted what they had. I was convinced that all my beliefs were flawed just like me, that I had to adopt everything that was written in conference approved literature no matter what in order to be just like the others who seemed to have something I didn't have.

I tried faking it till I made it for 20 years always with the vague feeling that I was living a lie. Quite simply, my actions were not in lockstep with my words and this made living very uncomfortable.

Shortly after my 20th year I had to confess to myself that I didn't believe in an unseen diety and better yet, I had to examine every bit of that thinking and look at what in fact I did believe in. I read all sorts of books and ideas that were contrary to what I was hearing around the rooms; I sought out others who were questioning this diety business as well. Much like your experience, the internet broke the deadlock for me. Through this medium I connected with kindred spirits who were on the path I was looking for; people who have shared their experience's that have greatly enriched my daily living and my core values.

Today after 38 years of sober living I feel more excited about life and the future of our AA fellowship than ever before.

Thank you everyone!

[Reply](#)

Mark C.

April 30, 2013 at 7:40 pm <#>

Hi Joe,

Thank you for writing this piece. While I have not been sober nearly as long as you, nor my experience with 'recovery' as broad as yours, I think your writing does a good job of elaborating the experiences of many non-theistic people in AA. I am an atheist, but once had deeply held Christian beliefs. I agree with your comment that a person can not make themselves believe anything. They either believe or they don't on the extreme ends of the continuum regarding the existence of a god. There are a lot of people who do not fit well at either end on that basic question.

Once I had come to squarely face the fact that I was addicted to alcohol, and that for some reason all my efforts to moderate, control, or to quit for good had failed, and that the problem grew worse over time, I had to admit I needed help. In my neck of the woods AA is the only game in town. I took action by walking into an AA room knowing it was rooted in Christian fundamentalism, and that somehow there would at least be people like me there who might be able to help me in my decision to get sober. But I also knew I had

to be honest about being an atheist. Before walking into AA I intuitively knew that “honesty” was going to have to be the bedrock of any ‘recovery’ I might experience.

Here in the West Texas Bible Belt an “out of the closet” atheist is almost taboo. To admit such disbelief is tantamount to standing in the middle of the room and saying “I’m a child molester and where are your children.” And that sort of response was what I experienced early on, but people, even some of the more devoutly Christian fundamentalist types came to allow a grudging acceptance there was a ‘godless SOB’ in the room.

I waited and watched, and eventually picked a guy to be my sponsor. He had around 28 years sober, seemed open minded, seemed fairly non-plussed over my nonbelief. He did not speak in theistic terms or theistic concepts and I thought “well maybe this guy...” He fired me after about two months after having tried various ways to get me to work the steps, which were in fact nothing other than shadow boxing with theism proper. I’ve not had a sponsor since but use various people to bounce things off of when I feel or think I am somehow stuck.

I found the original 6-steps to be much more useful to me, as an atheist, than the highly theistic, overly religious 12-steps found in the Big Book. I utilize the first five steps, omit the sixth which assumes a god exists, and have found that ANYONE and EVERYONE can do those five steps.

Keep up the good work,

Mark C.

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The Dilemma of No Faith by Bill Wilson



The phrase “God As We Understand Him” is perhaps the most important expression to be found in our whole AA vocabulary. Within the compass of these five significant words there can be included every kind and degree of faith, together with the positive assurance that each of us may choose his own. Scarcely less valuable to us are those supplemental expressions – “A Higher Power” and “A Power Greater Than Ourselves.” For all who deny, or seriously doubt a deity, these frame an open door over whose threshold the unbeliever can take his first easy step into a reality hitherto unknown to him – the realm of faith.

In AA such breakthroughs are everyday events. They are all the more remarkable when we reflect that a working faith had once seemed an impossibility of the first magnitude to perhaps half of our present membership of three hundred thousand. To all these doubters has come the great discovery that as soon as they could cast their main dependence upon a “higher power” –

even upon their own AA groups – they had turned that blind corner which had always kept the open highway from their view. From this time on – assuming they tried hard to practice the rest of the AA program with a relaxed and open mind – an ever deepening and broadening faith, a veritable gift, had invariably put in its sometimes unexpected and often mysterious appearance.

We much regret that these facts of AA life are not understood by the legion of alcoholics in the world around us. Any number of them are bedeviled by the dire conviction that if ever they go near AA they will be pressured to conform to some particular brand of faith or theology. They just don't realize that faith is never a necessity for AA membership; that sobriety can be achieved with an easily acceptable minimum of it; and that our concepts of a higher power and God as we understand Him afford everyone a nearly unlimited choice of spiritual belief and action.

How to transmit this good news is one of our most challenging problems in communication, for which there may be no fast or sweeping answer. Perhaps our public information services could begin to emphasize this all-important aspect of AA more heavily. And within our own ranks we might well develop a more sympathetic awareness of the acute plight of these really isolated and desperate sufferers. In their aid we can settle for no less than the best possible attitude and the most ingenious action that we can muster.

We can also take a fresh look at the problem of “no faith” as it exists right on our own doorstep. Though three hundred thousand did recover in the last twenty-five years, maybe half a million more have walked into our midst, and then out again. No doubt some were too sick to make even a start. Others couldn't or wouldn't admit their alcoholism. Still others couldn't face up to their underlying personality defects. Numbers departed for still other reasons.

Yet we can't well content ourselves with the view that all these recovery failures were entirely the fault of the newcomers themselves. Perhaps a great many didn't receive the kind and amount of sponsorship they so sorely needed. We didn't communicate when we might have done so. So we AA's failed them. Perhaps more often than we think, we still make no contact at depth with those suffering the dilemma of no faith.

Certainly none are more sensitive to spiritual cocksureness, pride and aggression than they are. I'm sure this is something we too often forget. In AA's first years I all but ruined the whole undertaking with this sort of unconscious arrogance. God as I understood Him had to be for everybody. Sometimes my aggression was subtle and sometimes it was crude. But either way it was damaging – perhaps fatally so – to numbers of non-believers. Of course this sort of thing isn't confined to Twelfth Step work. It is very apt to leak out into our relationships with everybody. Even now, I catch myself chanting that same old barrier-building refrain, “Do as I do, believe as I do – or else!”

Here's a recent example of the high cost of spiritual pride. A very tough-minded prospect was taken to his first AA meeting. The first speaker majored on his own drinking pattern. The prospect seemed impressed. The next two speakers (or maybe lecturers) each themed their talks on “God as I understand Him.” This could have been good, too, but it certainly wasn't. The trouble was their attitude, the way they presented their experience. They did ooze arrogance. In fact, the final speaker got far overboard on some of his personal theological convictions. With

perfect fidelity, both were repeating my performance of years before. Quite unspoken, yet implicit in everything they said, was the same idea – “Folks, listen to us. We have the only true brand of AA – and you’d better get it!”

The new prospect said he’d had it – and he had. His sponsor protested that this wasn’t real AA. But it was too late; nobody could touch him after that. He also had a first class alibi for yet another bender. When last heard from, an early appointment with the undertaker seemed probable.

Fortunately, such rank aggression in the name of spirituality isn’t often seen nowadays. Yet this sorry and unusual episode can be turned to good account. We can ask ourselves whether, in less obvious but nevertheless destructive forms, we are not more subject to fits of spiritual pride than we had supposed. If constantly worked at, I’m sure that no kind of self-survey could be more beneficial. Nothing could more surely increase our communication with each other and with God.

Many years ago a so-called “unbeliever” brought me to see this very clearly. He was an M.D. and a fine one. I met him and his wife Mary at the home of a friend in a midwestern city. It was purely a social evening. Our fellowship of alcoholics was my sole topic and I pretty much monopolized the conversation. Nevertheless, the doctor and his lady seemed truly interested and he asked many questions. But one of them made me suspect that he was an agnostic, or maybe an atheist.

This promptly triggered me, and I set out to convert him, then and there. Deadly serious, I actually bragged about my spectacular spiritual experience of the year before. The doctor mildly wondered if that experience might not be something other than I thought it was. This hit me hard, and I was downright rude. There had been no real provocation; the doctor was uniformly courteous, good humored and even respectful. Not a little wistfully, he said he often wished he had a firm faith, too. But plainly enough, I had convinced him of nothing.

Three years later I revisited my midwestern friend. Mary, the doctor’s wife, came by for a call and I learned that he had died the week before. Much affected, she began to speak of him.

His was a noted Boston family, and he’d been Harvard educated. A brilliant student, he might have gone on to fame in his profession. He could have enjoyed a wealthy practice and a social life among old friends. Instead, he had insisted on being a company doctor in what was a strife-torn industrial town. When Mary had sometimes asked why they didn’t go back to Boston, he would take her hand and say, “Maybe you are right, but I can’t bring myself to leave. I think the people at the company really need me.”

Mary then recalled that she had never known her husband to complain seriously about anything, or to criticize anyone bitterly. Though he appeared to be perfectly well, the doctor had slowed down in his last five years. When Mary prodded him to go out evenings, or tried to get him to the office on time, he always came up with a plausible and good-natured excuse. Not until his sudden last illness did she know that all this while he had carried about a heart condition that could have done him in at any moment. Except for a single doctor on his own staff, no one had

an inkling. When she reproached him about this, he simply said, “Well, I could see no good in causing people to worry about me – especially you, my dear.”

This was the story of a man of great spiritual worth. The hallmarks were plain to be seen: humor and patience, gentleness and courage, humility and dedication, unselfishness and love – a demonstration I might never come near to making myself. This was the man I had chided and patronized. This was the “unbeliever” I had presumed to instruct!

Mary told us this story more than twenty years ago. Then, for the first time, it burst in upon me how very dead faith can be – when minus responsibility. The doctor had an unwavering belief in his ideals. But he also practiced humility, wisdom and responsibility. Hence, his superb demonstration.

My own spiritual awakening had given me a built-in faith in God – a gift indeed. But I had been neither humble nor wise. Boasting of my faith, I had forgotten my ideals. Pride and irresponsibility had taken their place. By so cutting off my own light, I had little to offer my fellow alcoholics. At last I saw why many had gone away – some of them forever.

Therefore, faith is more than our greatest gift; its sharing with others is our greatest responsibility. So may we of AA continually seek the wisdom and the willingness by which we may well fulfill that immense trust which the Giver of all perfect gifts has placed in our hands.

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[Audio: Agnostics and Atheists in AA](#)

atheists
agnostics
secular
humanists
freethinkers
skeptics

Have questions about how agnostics and atheists in AA work the 12 steps? Listen to this 16-minute audio excerpt from the CBC Radio program *Tapestry*, where three members of the Toronto agnostic AA group “Beyond Belief” share their experience.

You can also listen to the full one-hour *Tapestry* radio broadcast called “The God of Your Understanding: Religion in AA

<http://www.cbc.ca/tapestry/episode/2012/07/20/the-god-of-your-understanding-religion-in-aa-1/>