



Rebellion Dogs Blog February 2021 *Relatability & Accessibility AA takes inventory on literature in 2021*



The Years of Living Sober(ly): A personal look at how AA was different in our early years and conference agenda items for 2021 on AA literature.

Relatability? Accessibility? AA General Service takes inventory or dated literature; or is its classic literature? I suppose it depends on who we ask. This is one of those topics where much of AA lines up pretty quickly on one side of the issue or the other and they feel pretty strong about it before we even start talking together.

In the time-cycle of this report Alcoholics Anonymous prepares for the April General Service Conference. The program – at the time of writing – is now circulated, and

Literature has a few items including a modification to *Big Book* text. There is a video accessible to members of groups (and anyone) who knows a General Service Representative. Our fellowship, right now, is looking at the book's relatability and literacy as it relates to today's newcomer. If you want to know the issues, we will share the link/video with you. If you have a connection to the original text, you are being invited to review the concerns shared by fellow members and weigh in. Issues of literacy and accessibility are being researched. Societal changes that might leave the book's current wording offending or alienating today's newcomers are being considered.

Edition Two of Alcoholics Anonymous came out in 1955, 20 years into AA. In 1976 the Third Edition was released and in 2001, our current, Edition Four came out. That was 20-years-ago. According to custom, it is time to talk about a new edition. The video by the General Service Office outlines concerns today, sometimes borrowing from our founder's own thought about AA:

"Since the audience for the book is likely to be newcomers, anything from the point of view of content or style that might offend or alienate those who are not familiar with the program should be carefully eliminated," Bill W in consideration of the Second Edition.

Sexist language, the book's current literacy level and religious bias are worldwide concerns right now. For those who find *Living Sober* more relevant, changes are afoot here as well.

The last blog/Rebellion Dogs Radio episode looked at, how during my sobriety, AA society morphed from what was largely transmitting and maintaining sobriety through sharing our stories to a model today, largely following the authority of the book *Alcoholics Anonymous*. In our last episode, we broke AA's history to-date into two equal halves, starting in 1935, it being 2021 today, the ½ way point being 1978. In comparing AA "then" and AA "now," AA was never all one way at one time or another way, later. I am not suggesting that people didn't learn from reading in the first 43 years of AA (1935-1978, the first ½ of AA history to-date). Nor am I saying that we have lost the art of storytelling in the most recent 43 years. The point is this; I was introduced to a mid-1970's AA culture that then relied more on an oral tradition (one alcoholic talking to another) and in the second ½ of AA, I am recognizing the primacy of *Big Book* AA today. AA culture will more than likely change again. We are dynamic.

Is one way better? Is one way worse? That depends on who you ask because we have members that swear by each style of conveying the AA message. I suspect that diversity in AA does not blur the message and in fact, expands AA's usefulness and reach. *Vive la différence*; humility and tolerance is found in our AA code somewhere, orthodoxy and competitiveness – not so much. Still, we hear member decrees that it "should be" this or

that. Spoiler alert – I will own that I am anti-fundamentalism. I am all for enthusiasm for more of what worked for you or for me, but I see reification (a hardening and unbending of ways of doing things) as being harmful for any society and AA is no exception. I don't like to be anti-anything, but can I be pro-AA and not be against, what I perceive to be, threats to our overall health. Remember, this musing is one person's views and observations – not a manifesto.

AA isn't homogeneous. There were members/groups that read the book together way back when, and today there are some groups that rely on no conference-approved reading at all, or any readings at all in other cases. Why would what one alcoholic wrote 80 years ago be more healing or enlightening than what any alcoholic – anywhere – would share with another, today?

What works for one but not another, and Why?

Let's step away for a moment, from *this* AA way vs. *that* AA way myopia. What have we learned more broadly about recovery and how and why someone gets it and someone else does not – sometimes when both have tried the same method. Broadly speaking, we all have *recovery capital* and there is now a scale that can help rank our recovery capital index against others score or our previous score.

Individual A in recovery from addiction has mostly supportive relationships, financial stability, and access to physical and mental health resources that they routinely take advantage of.

Individual B has a life-partner that sees addiction as a moral weakness and reminds the whole family how much savings were wasted on the addict's rehab costs. B has debt, a mood disorder, extra-marital entanglements, and comes from generational dysfunction and addiction.

Two individuals, two results? Maybe? For both, recovery capital is predictably enhanced from a peer-to-peer group setting, becoming educated about addiction, a commitment to a structured regimen of recovery process (12-step or any other). Combined, these are a few of the external factors of recovery capital. The same regimen will not be suitable for every recovery candidate.

One could have "high problem severity." But, they may also have high recovery capital which makes mastering chaos possible. Someone else has low recovery capital but also "low problem severity" – their natural environment is supportive of their recovery and conducive to healthy living – they stay sober without meetings, working steps or service work. The more problem severity the greater amount of recovery capital is required to sustain recovery through life's challenges. The fall comes when someone

has higher problem severity in life and lower recovery capital; that's a situation prime for relapse and/or replacement addictions.

For more about recovery capital view/download a William White initiated effort called, ReCAPS (Recovery Capital Assessment Plan and Scale).

We have also talked about the mental health model borrowed by David Best and others called, CHIME. Here, five variables influence the probability of self-sustaining long-term sobriety: Connection, Hope, Identity, Meaning and Empowerment.ⁱ

CHIME enhancement can be found in a 12-Step model, but they can also be found in any peer-to-peer model and some of us, more than others, develop these five foundational factors outside or without rehab or peer-to-peer. As David Best says, people find long-term sobriety different ways; but no one does it alone. There is always a community or support network for every success story. But not all of these stories play out by working the Twelve Steps exactly as described in the *Big Book*, with the aid of a *Big Book* sponsor.

Some get the same good results from Women for Sobriety or Life Ring or a support group at their place of religious worship. Some, treat their recovery community like regular, lifelong trips to the gym to keep their sobriety in shape. Others go for a period, achieve sustainable recovery, and fully integrate into family/work/community. Others read a book, make a commitment, enjoy the support of family and healthcare providers, without any mutual-aid group or in-patient care.

Taking all this recovery capital context into account and looking at varieties of AA experience – as an example – we see how two people who read *Living Sober* and go to a few meetings a week can have different outcomes. Likewise, two people who go to 90 meetings in 90 days and work with a *Big Book* sponsor can have different outcomes. What their natural environment offers in terms of recovery capital and what catastrophic events happen in their days ahead will be a factor. Together, there is a way to measure one's recovery capital and have a sense of how much chaos and trauma that their recovery capital can endure.

This is predictive and was unavailable in the 1930s that birthed AA, but a recovery capital index score is no guarantee. A recovery capital score offers greater clarity of our wellness or risk factors. Without measurement of some kind, we are prone to superstition. I did A, then B happened; B was caused by A may be true and it may not. Michael Shermer, editor of *Skeptic Magazine*, calls this human tendency, "patternicity," maybe a more generous word than "superstitious." Seeing patterns is a human tendency of both scientific and religious people. In scientific inquiry, double-blind or randomized trials protect results from the observer's unavoidable biases and predisposition towards assigning causality to correlation.

I've been around for six different decades of sobriety now (the '70s, '80s, '90s, '00s, '10s, '20s). Personally and through observation of others, I see lots of this "because I did A and then B happened, 'proving' A caused B," potential errors in attribution. Even if A was a strong indicator of B resulting, there were likely other material factors.

Last episode we let AA book sales tell a story of a changing AA over the years.

Fun facts (from Episode 55 of Rebellion Dogs Radio):

1. The *Big Book* was not a best-seller out of the gate. It took 34 years to sell one million copies of *Alcoholics Anonymous*. This milestone did not happen until the year 1974, three years after Bill – the book's author – died.
2. A Third edition sparked new interest in 1976 and four years from the one-million mark, we hit two million cumulative sales (1978).
3. By 1987 AA World Services started selling one million *Big Books* every year.

The summation from Episode 55 paints *Big Book* AA as not always being *a thing*, everywhere. The phenomena of increased book sales (the growing domination/saturation of one AA book over all others) correlate with the book's impact in meetings and as part of our member's meetings and recovery regimen. Today we will look at life in AA back in 1974 to 1990 before so many members were quoting chapter and verse with storytelling instead of last month's stats.

A reliable argument for fundamentalist AA – following the instructions laid out in the book *Alcoholics Anonymous*, exactly as written – is based on a folktale that this is what my generation and the generation before me did. The story is that following *Big Book* instruction is how people get and stay sober; this is how AA can/will be more successful. Anything else is *watered-down* AA that cannot help real alcoholics get and stay sober. Here's a possible example of the "I did A, then B happened so B was caused by A," hypothesis. It becomes a contagious and hopeful story, parroted by others, without empirical evidence.

The model's logic is that with more *Big Books* and more *Big Book* sponsors sparking more spiritual awakenings and recovered alcoholics, more still-suffering alcoholics find salvation. The proof would be plain to see in a growing AA membership, each year.

Buying and following more *Big Books* doesn't seem to have caused any AA growth. AA did all of our growing during an era of greater diversity of AA approaches. Some approaches included *Big Book* and some centered around other readings, while still others included little or no tag-team book-learning. Using 1990 as a turning point, three years into selling one million *Big Books* a year, let's capture a before and after picture. Starting with "before," from the 1970s when I was introduced to AA until 1990, AA membership milestones included hitting ½ a million then doubling twice to two

million. Since the 1990s, we have stayed the same size. AA isn't growing everywhere that *Big Book* weekends are hosted. Some regions see AA shrinking. Overall our population has stayed flat for 30 years, since the *Big Book*-mania (1,000,000 book sales per year). So, some of our "watered down" AA was practiced in a time of AA membership growth. Thumpers will say, "Sure, you can stay sober without the *Big Book* if you're a heavy drinker but for a real alcoholic, there's no other way."

Well that's an interesting premise.

Of course we are all free to self-identify as we see fit. But should we be labelling each other? "That's a real alcoholic over there and a heavy drinker, there." As uncle Bill said about the absurdity of one alcoholic's judgement of another:

"The way our 'worthy' alcoholics have sometimes tried to judge the 'less worthy' is, as we look back on it, rather comical. Imagine, if you can, one alcoholic judging another!"ⁱⁱ

Here's a new "fun fact." I do not know how long this has been available but I'm calling this a newsflash: *Living Sober* in PDF can be read in whole on <https://aa.org>. The booklet is broken into sections, you can read or download for sharing in your Zoom meeting, here: https://www.aa.org/pages/en_US/living-sober-pdf-format

I recently read on social media, a member praising the book *Living Sober* for its role in his sobriety. "*Living Sober* is my AA 31-step program, and it's helped me enjoy sobriety and avoid pitfalls, for decades now."

A great endorsement of *Living Sober* as a stand-alone program of AA recovery is John Lauritsen's *A Freethinker in AA*. He dismissed the Steps as superstitious nonsense. His program of happy, joyous, free AA is found in the *Living Sober* booklet. I saw on Facebook, John turned 53 years sober, this month. So, if you are wondering, "Is it AA if you don't work the Steps?" read John's book. He's not telling you what to do but he is an example of Step-less AA.

I remember this first *Living Sober* books arriving in AA meetings in their very 1970's earth-tone yellow and brown cover. As a novelty, *Living Sober* was the most likely book to be quoted or read from in a discussion group. I mentioned last episode that *Living Sober* is no best-seller. Today, it sells 20,000 to 50,000 copies each year, under the impressive shadow of *Big Book* sales, still over 800,000 copies a year. Here are samples of the 31-step program. You do not need to memorize anything or practice the ideas all at once. Use as needed.

Chapter 11 "Availing Yourself of a sponsor."

An A.A. sponsor is not a professional caseworker, counselor, a medical expert, nor qualified to give religious, legal, domestic, or psychiatric advice, although a good sponsor is usually willing to discuss such matters confidentially, and often can suggest where the appropriate professional assistance can be obtained. A sponsor is simply a sober alcoholic who can help solve only one problem: how to stay sober. And the sponsor has only one tool to use – personal experience, not scientific wisdom. Sponsors have been there, and they often have more concern, hope, compassion, and confidence for us than we have for ourselves. They certainly have had more experience.

Chapter 27 “Letting go of old ideas.”

The ideas that got so deeply embedded in our lives during drinking do not all disappear quickly, as if by magic.... What we try to achieve is a feeling of being relaxed and freed from the bonds of our old thinking. Many of our former habits of thought, and the ideas they produced, limit our freedom. They just weigh us down and are of no use – so it turns out when we look them over with a fresh eye. We don’t have to hang on to them any longer unless, upon examination, they prove valid and still truly fruitful. We can now measure the present-day usefulness and truthfulness of a thought against a highly specific standard. We can say to ourselves, “Now, that is exactly what I used to think, in the drinking days. Does that kind of thinking help me stay sober? Is it good enough for me today?” Many of our old ideas – especially those about alcohol, about drinking, about getting drunk, and about alcoholism (or problem drinking, if you prefer that term) – prove either worthless or actually self-destructive for us, and it is a great relief to get rid of them. Maybe a few examples will suffice to illustrate our willingness to throw out our old, useless ideas.

The chapter goes on to list some common blind spots we arrive at the doors of AA with about drinking and about recovery.

Chapter 31 “Finding your own way.”

Most of us have seen death close up. We have known suffering. But we also have known the sort of hope that makes the heart sing. And we hope this booklet has conveyed to you more encouragement than pain. If you are a problem drinker, you already know enough about pain and loneliness. We’d like you to find some of the peace and joy we have found in meeting the reality of life’s ups and downs with a clear head and a steady heart.

No doubt, we have made just a bare beginning in the business of living sober. Time and again, we learn additional ideas that can help. As you stay sober, you are sure to think of new ideas not recorded here. We hope so. We also hope that when you do come up with fresh ideas on this subject, you will pass them on. Please do share. (You'll recall that the act of sharing can itself be helpful to you.)

Some of us go back to drinking a time or so before we get a real foothold on sobriety. If that happens to you, don't despair. Many of us have done this and have finally come through to successful sobriety.

AA as a whole and/or by design, is not *Big Book*-centric. Book fanaticism is popular, but popularity doesn't delegitimize many other groups and other members doing their own thing. "Finding your own way," the title of Chapter 31 of *Living Sober* is conference-approved, so this do-it-your-way approach is *legit*. Our drinking tales are not identical and our paths to contented sobriety aren't identical, either.

Other people's sobriety experiences are proof to me that *Big Book* enthusiasm is effective – for the people who have done it and are still sober. But I believe fundamentalism – the idea that this is one true AA way – is holding AA back.

With more of Fourth Edition *Big Book*-talk of course, comes more God-talk.

In a Yahoo.com question about how many times the AA god is mentioned in *Alcoholics Anonymous*, this was one offering:

"God is specifically mentioned 277 times, reference to God by the use of pronouns such He, Him, Himself, and His is mentioned 107 time; counting the times God is referred to by Creator, Maker, Father, and Spirit totals more than 400 times God is mentioned in the Big Book of AA."ⁱⁱⁱ

Because there is more quoting from the book, faith-based approaches to sobriety dominate a lot of AA discussions: 2.4 times per page, if we're in a *Big Book* meeting. The developed world is becoming less theistic. In light of this new reality, how can praying and God-talk portray AA as relevant to many of today's newcomers that it might of for the 1950's crowd? Should we stop AA members from talking about God or quoting the *Big Book* in meetings? First, we can't; secondly, we ought not to.

But we are in a season of change. AA recognized the heteronormative, gender and religious bias of our Big, Old Book. This is where AA democracy comes in. Our copyright is held in trust by AA World Services for our fellowship as a whole. Where we can find substantial unanimity, the members – not the General Service Office decides what changes, what is preserved, what is eliminated, what is added.

On the theism of AA, the possibility of a supernatural man-with-a-plan in the sky will, I expect, continue to be popular. I say, have at it, believers; my sobriety is good without gods. Literalists say the single purpose of AA is to achieve a conscious contact with God – as you imagine him/her/it/them. This connection with the supernatural comes about from working the Twelve Steps. While I considered the possibility of all this being true, in the spirit of open-mindedness, I found no evidence of supernatural influence in my life. What seemed more reasonable was that this Judeo/Christian explanation of the AA effect was just how 1930 god-fearing middle-America talked. Imagine a time of no google, no Yahoo, no Siri or Alexa. So I'm more inclined towards rational, mindful approaches to my AA. I follow my own moral compass and I almost never talk in higher-power terms except when I'm trying to explain myself in the language of other AAs.

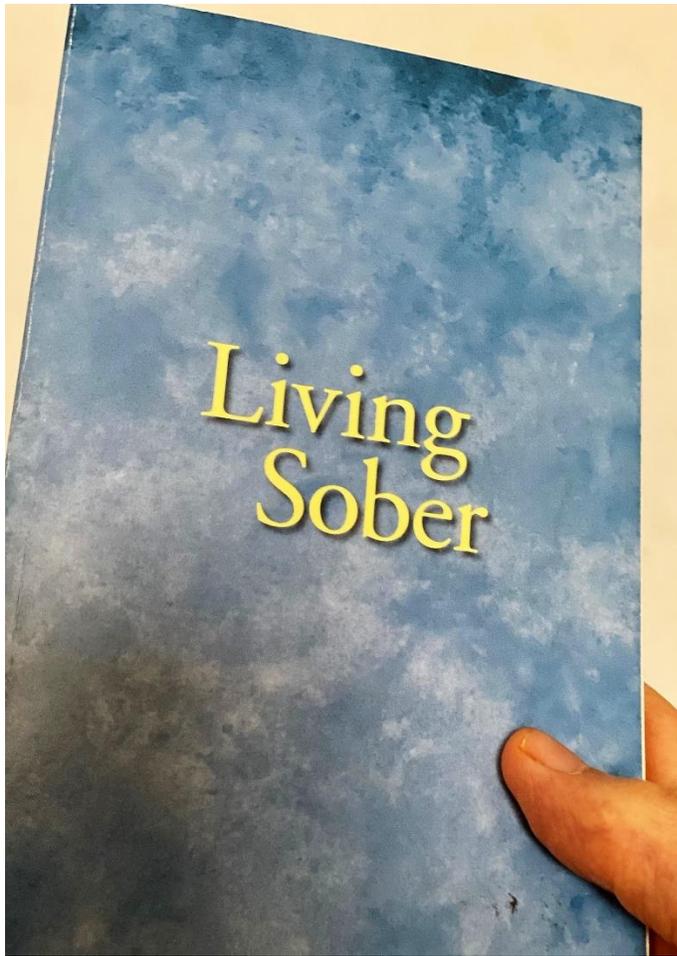
So no fourth dimension, no Devine intervention and if awakening was somehow spiritual, I missed it. I have a conscious, but delicate, grasp of reality. That is awesome enough for me.

I think that if more meetings encourage a practical expression of AA sobriety, we will reach and help a larger number of people who feel their alcohol consumption is problematic. Today's discussion of our literature opens the door to additive and/or subtractive measures to make AA accessible to all – not some. If nothing changes in our text, that doesn't shut the door to my group or group taking our own steps to find readings and topics that resonate with our newer and long-timer members.

Some nonbelievers find the antiquated language insulting, or anti-intellectual or an inauthentic way to speak, themselves. Not every atheist dreams of more irreligious AA. Some nonbelievers happily translate God-talk into useable actions and concepts. Living with the reality of residing in God-fearing America, or practicing a program created there, we make allowances.

Feminists, LGBTQ+ members or anyone who finds the 1930 America stereotypes a barrier will find our current dialogue promising. Everyone is invited to have their say. Of course, not everyone will get their way. Others, like some AA atheists, aren't held back by 1930's language. Some of us can, more easily than others, look past the language for the meaning, the message and they don't fight with the antiquated language.

Using the book *Living Sober* in more meetings would/could articulate the AA experience in an irreligious voice of AA sobriety. The original manuscript was written by a gay, urban member in the 1970s who had been in AA since the 1940s, borrowing from various offerings from the half a million members of the day. Of course there is lots of 21st century literature written by AA members about 12-step life. Some groups avoid the language barrier and read from more modern books.



An upside to *Living Sober* is it clearly connects the group to AA as a whole – not that reading other secular 12-step literature is un-AA. *Living Sober* may not be as popular, today, as the *12&12* or *Alcoholics Anonymous* but it is legitimate AA. And with *Living Sober* available online, it is easy to save a PDF and screenshare a chapter for your Zoom or face-to-face AA meeting.

AA culture is in constant flux; meetings are added, closed, and changed regularly. If you see AA as being a certain way, it may be different somewhere else, and it most certainly will be different sometime in the future.

The availability of *Living Sober* access online presents a wider gateway of AA. Now that AA.org is offering the entirety of *Living Sober* online as your own eBook or paperback for

purchase, or for reading online for free, I will be posting the link to download *Living Sober* in the chat at meetings. I've always enjoyed *Living Sober* meetings – each chapter is a good conversation starter. It's almost always spot-on for newcomers and relevant for all of us. So that is my one-man plan for AA's future – I did so last Thursday, so it begins.

My story – a blast from AA's Past

He's a walkin' contradiction, partly truth and partly fiction,
Takin' ev'ry wrong direction on his lonely way back home.
There's a lotta wrong directions on that lonely way back home (Kris
Kristofferson)

I did want/need to do the Steps. For some people quitting drinking solves all their problems. Their work or school improves, they behave better and relationships right themselves, and their health returns. Why would anyone on a winning streak work Steps... at least the writing-all-that-stuff-down Steps? I still feel that way, today.

Sobriety didn't solve my problems – it exposed the problems that were masked by alcohol and other drugs. I was raw, unglued and vulnerable to the world. Let's just say, I came to the conclusion that the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous were the best therapy available to me at the time, in my price range. And there was no shortage of people with first-hand experience with them, so exploring the Steps was a fit for my circumstances... especially those writing it all down Steps.

This is the same way that I learned guitar, financial planning, being a dad, and pretty much everything else. Ask people who know; model people you admire. Get ideas from anyone and everyone who would share what they know. So fellow AA's became my teacher and a sounding board.

Today, the average sobriety is 10 years^{iv} – there's more old-timers than newcomers, today. In part, this is because AA works; long-time sobriety is a testament to AA effectiveness. But the high percentage of long timers is also because AA isn't growing; we are maturing as a fellowship. The same two million members for the last 30-years suggests that for everyone that joins AA, someone leaves or dies. A stagnant AA is the AA experience of everyone who has gotten sober this century.

In the 1970s, AA was always growing. I remember when we became 500,000 (1974). Someone read about it in *Box 4-5-9: News and Notes from G.S.O. or AA Grapevine*. As mentioned in my sixth year, we were a million (1982) sober drunks and then, two million (1990). I thought AA would always be growing. 1991 was fifteen years of continuous sobriety. I was a father now for a second time. My daughter was born the day Nirvana were playing Toronto's Opera House (800 audience capacity). I thought AA would never stop growing and some other day I could see Nirvana. Wrong on both accounts!

Back when membership was accelerating from less than ½ a million to the first million, the average sobriety was between two and four years. This lower number (compared to 2021) is not because AA didn't work as well as it does today; the low average was because ½ of us had just gotten here, so many people with so little sobriety brought the average down. AA was growing. So people with four months were helping people with four days. There was no such thing as a *Big Book* meeting in the region I got sober in. We transmitted the AA message by way of AA's time-tested storytelling model, one-alcoholic-talking-to-another.

Today, you may well belong to a *Big Book* meeting, or attend Cocaine Anonymous. Your sponsor took you to *Big Book* study weekends and you take your sponsees to *Big Book* study weekends; that's how it goes now. I know that works; your sobriety is proof enough to me. But the folklore about how this is how the first hundred did and they taught it to the next thousand and so on – that's not factually accurate.

This treating the book, *Alcoholics Anonymous* like an instruction manual is a fairly new phenomena and it is not how AA came to be. I am sure some towns and some people did behave in a way that resembles the *Big Book* sponsorship, today; not in my town; not anywhere I saw in my first ten to fifteen years of sobriety.

I just have one story, and this is mine, an AA culture indifferent to the 164-page instruction manual that would have been called, *le Gros Livre* in Montréal, if spoken about at all.

And I know how regional AA is, too. I moved to Calgary Alberta for a summer, from Montreal in 1979. It was a culture shock – both inside and outside AA meetings. I was sober two and a half years and while I planned on being there a few months, I stayed for five years and never returned to live in Montreal. That surprised me; but life is what happens when I'm making other plans – thank you John Lennon. Where the prairies meet the Rockies, AA was different from the “Je ne sais pas quoi” of Montréal. Calgary was a smaller city; I got a job that had me traveling to even smaller towns. Meetings were smaller. Speaker meetings were few and far between. Discussions and 12&12 meetings were the norm. I wondered how they stayed sober with these rituals, unfamiliar to me. I was a homer – I thought my home-town AA was the best in the world – but no one said, “Joe, we are so glad to see you; please tell us – show us – how to do AA right, like the Montréal way.” No, I had to adapt to them; they seemed to be growing and staying sober, their way. Adjusting is always awkward and mechanical. For me, already set in my ways at 18-years-old, this Calgary AA lacked the *Joie de vivre* of a large, liberated bilingual city.

And my next move was to Toronto, which I again thought was temporary; that was 1985 and I'm still here. Toronto was different again from Western Canada, so again it was me adapting; not AA bending to me. Toronto, only a six-hour drive away, is quite different than Montreal. Montreal is Euro; Toronto is a “Thank God it's Monday,” town. T.O., or The 6ix as urban music fans call it now, is very career, accomplishment, protestant work-ethic, corporate climbing, rule abiding goodness.

The AA in Toronto started on time and ended exactly an hour from start time. Business meetings employed Robert's Rules of Order and being a cool kid meant you could identify AA Traditions violations, point a finger, and quote the Tradition, verbatim. “Conform or be cast out” was a Rush lyric (a Toronto band suggesting that some of the problems of AA where also problems beyond our meeting doors). At least, for me, I started to sense meta-rules in Toronto AA, rules about the rules or rules about the unspoken in crowd and privileges that came with and from joining in on the right AA-ese of language. For me, nine-year sober 25-year-old, in 1985, that's how it seemed.

I would celebrate 10 years and, as a gift from my group, I would be given *Pass It On: The Story of Bill Wilson and How the A. A. Message Reached the World*. I would never have

asked for it and I would never have bought it for myself, but I saw it as a thoughtful gesture. I remember when *Living Sober* was brand new and it was kind of fun, so I'd give this brand-new book a try.

I didn't read *Pass It On* right away, but I had gained something in my tenth year of sobriety that I didn't have when I was new---an attention span. I could read, now. Maybe the Calgary and other Western Canada meetings taught this dyslexic autodidact how to focus and learn to settle down enough to read.

I was—as I had been in Montreal and Calgary before—engaged with the Young People's AA crowd in Toronto. We ran conferences with themes like, “Do It Sober, Eh!” and “Stark Raving Sober.” There was an irreverence and some playfulness to it. Even for young people, addiction is as serious as a house fire, but “we are not a glum lot.” We organized dances and live concerts, we joined each other's bands and played song to each other, or worked out together or went camping. Some of us were artists with day-jobs. Others were motorcyclists, students or climbing the corporate ladder. I tried all of that, more or less. We carpooled to other cities on a whim, looking up conferences from the back of *AA Grapevine* in cities we had never been to. I was in a band—a sober band—and this was way more important to me than reading about AA history. We covered Prince, Talking Heads, Aretha Franklin, The Ramones, Jefferson Airplane, originals by a band mate Cathy S including her song called “Rebellion Dogs” and we did a parody of Wild Thing called, Mild Thing that had a very sexual punk-rock finale.

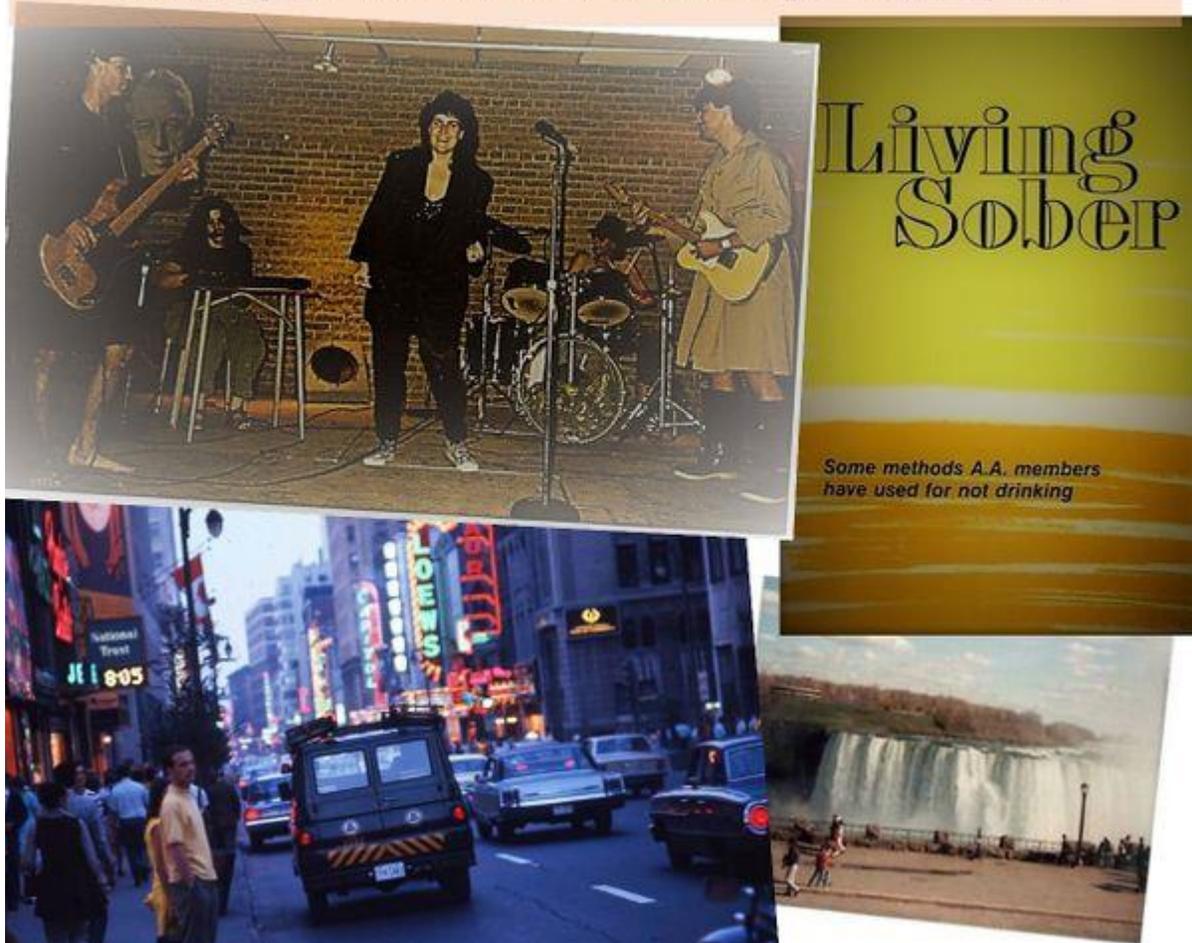
But the rainy day came that I set my 10th year anniversary book aside for. I did get to *Pass It On*. The old stories were as interesting as contemporary stories in meetings about newcomers freebasing cocaine in executive washrooms or punk-rock bars. *Pass It On* captivated me, and it gave birth to an interest in the *Big Book*—not as a way to get sober or how to work the Steps—as a historical place-marker.

And it was a good thing, too. I was thinking past my best-before date as a peer in AA's Young People's circles. I was going to be 30 eventually and I was feeling old(ish). I was resigned to making a place for myself inside a mainstream AA that was so much more conservative than the rooms and community that got me sober. And there was going to be a lot more *Big Book* AA in my future.

Book-based AA became stiflingly boring. After my first lap of the first 164 pages, I didn't understand, “What, we're going to start over and read it again?” I asked. “Isn't there something else we can read?”

Joe & Charlie AA workshops was what new people did instead of crashing conferences in new cities. CA, muckers, Primary Purpose and Back to Basics replaced our garage bands and coffeeshop AA. “Make AA Great Again,” themed AA was a shared dreamland of a mythical “long time ago in a galaxy far, far away” AA of better times

Toronto Young People's Conference, Sober Skid Row, one of many performing acts on Friday Night, 1986 — *Living Sober* and Montreal streets from 1975—
“Road Trip” Blossom Time Conference in Niagara Falls, May 1987



whereby everyone got sober who really tried, back in the day, and groups all got along, fine. As the fairytale went, that was all before the big, bad, treatment centres poisoned and diluted AA with contemporary language and talk about the role of childhood trauma and the need to empowering alcoholics and addicts.

This, in a meaningful way, a perceived existential threat to AA traditionalists, gave birth to AA fundamentalism, I didn't grasp it at the time, but I was witness to it in real time. It wasn't one cause; as the primacy of the *Big Book* as the one and only sacred text of AA (but for the grace of God), there came cult-lite charismatic leaders (Big Book “teachers”) and an increased theism in the AA narrative that comes with 1930's doctrine. I saw it as comical.

You see, even at sixteen in 1970's Montreal AA, I would hear "How it Works" read and see the language as too silly to take seriously. I would be asked to read, "How It Works" sometimes. I performed it. I came from acting-as-if as a survival tool. In High School, I had been Orlando in *As You Like It*. So what's the difference between Bill S (William Shakespeare) and Bill W wordsmithery?

Live a little; comfort a little; cheer thyself a little.

If this uncouth forest yield anything savage, I will either be food for it or
bring it for food to thee. Thy conceit is nearer death than thy powers.
For my sake be comfortable; hold death awhile at the arm's end.
I will here be with thee presently; and if I bring thee not something to eat,
I will give thee leave to die; but if thou diest before I come, thou art
a mocker of my labour. Well said! thou look'st cheerly; and I'll be
with thee quickly. Yet thou liest in the bleak air. Come,
I will bear thee to some shelter; and thou shalt not die for lack
of a dinner, if there live anything in this desert.

Dramatic prose from Bill S, Circa: 1599. So, three hundred and 30 years later Bill W takes his best shot with dramatic poetry:

"At some of these we balked. We thought we could find an easier
Softer way. But we could not. With all the earnestness at our command
We beg of you to be fearless and thorough from the very start. Some of us
Have tried to hold onto our old ideas and the result was nil until
we let go absolutely. Remember that we deal with alcohol – cunning,
baffling, powerful! Without help it is too much for us. But
there is One who has all power; that One is Oden, May you
Find him now! Half measures availed us nothing. Stood we,
At the turning point. We asketh His protection and care with
Complete abandon. Here are the steps we took, which are suggested..."

Reading "How It Works" was a ritual at enough AA meetings that I learned from meetings that used it, dramatic pauses, enunciation and tempo from fellow amateur performers. The right costume or prop gimmick could earn points from the judges; straightening the knot of one's tie, I didn't have one, but rolling up sleeves or a well-timed sip of coffee for dramatic pause, there was no Academy Award up for grabs, but this was sobriety – what else was I going to do for fun. I didn't think about the meaning of the words any more than songs I sung, about riding with a truck driver in the rain to Baton Rouge Louisiana. I played along, as I would with scripts for drama class. Reading AA was getting into character. The words didn't matter because they didn't represent me – they represented the character I was portraying as I read my lines. I never thought that other people took them too seriously... certainly, not literally: "God

could and would if He were sought?" Who says that with a straight face? It could only be the babblings of the clinically insane, or the poetic license of literature.

Rule 62, I would come to learn from coffee, before or after meetings, is from a story in Tradition Four in *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*.^v The rule is a lesson for AA, "Don't take yourself too damn seriously." Sober kids are not the cool kids; AA is not the hot spot – not my group and not yours.

I am a case study in inaccessible or unrelatable AA language and this is 45 years ago.

As was the case in, *As You Like It*, my tale is a romantic comedy; I didn't die from this tragic flaw. We can ask, how did the ironic distancing, the playing along to get along corrupt my recovery path. There is a dark and troubling side to my tale which involves mental health and process addiction problems that were not averted by my AA process. AA offered me a new life (of new suffering at times). The spiral in long-term sobriety was something I also survived, but it has left a mark. A crack where the light shines in if we want to keep a brave face but could better, more relatable literature have helped me dive into the deep end of AA gleaning more healing? Could I have avoided suffering and inflicting suffering on others? Those are some big "what ifs?"

More consequentially, what about the scores of tragedies that didn't work out as well as my checkered story; how many came and left, felt the microaggression, felt excluded, humiliated or insulted by AA. How many would be in AA today if we could or had done more to live up to our always inclusive, never exclusive sales pitch?

Time to reflect; time to be heard.

Well enough about the past; we are on the dawn of a new era. Will we stand idly by? Will we act with others as an informed, empathic society, honoring our differences and finding ways for everyone to get what they need and want from AA?

The adventure continues. I'm game. Let's do this. Let's talk about it; let's listen to others, listen to understand, listen to what's not being said, if we can. Let's engage others. Let's have our vote counted.

Rebellion Dogs is not AA or affiliated with any 12-step fellowship. However our constituents, largely, are the community of people within 12-step culture. I make this distinction because I post this link for AA members and groups. The following document/video, at the request of AA General Service Office is for AA members and groups only. Please do not re-post on non-private social media pages such as YouTube pages that aren't private or Facebook pages accessible to the general public. .

[The Big Book Researching Issues, Possible Tools and Accessibility video](#)

The hope is to share this with the widest reach of AA attendees/members for their information and consideration. Our concerns and experiences, with the topic at hand, are sought and welcome.

Visit <https://rebelliondogspublishing.com/rebellious-radio/blog/episode-56-aa-takes-inventory-of-the-relatability-and-accessibility-of-literature> for links to: ReCAPS (Recovery Capital Assessment Plan & Score, A Freethinker in Alcoholics Anonymous and more.

ⁱ <https://aaagnostica.org/2021/01/17/pathways-to-recovery-and-desistance/>

ⁱⁱ https://www.aa.org/assets/en_US/p-17_AATraditions.pdf p. 12

ⁱⁱⁱ Thank you, Paul B: <https://ca.answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20070726090755AAwkXeQ>

^{iv} https://www.aa.org/assets/en_US/p-48_membershipsurvey.pdf

^v http://www.aa.org/assets/en_US/en_tradition4.pdf