



## Rebellion Dogs Radio May 2020

*“Sober-curious” or “Secular-curious”  
I’m new here, can you tell me about  
this secular AA zoom meeting?*

*A “Welcome” letter to people new to secular recovery.*

Excuse me,  
I'm new here, Tell me  
about Secular AA

For a list of secular  
AA meetings  
worldwide,  
click here.

SECULAR AA  
ICSAA

Have you noticed that secular AA zoom meetings have a lot more participants lately? Me too. Episode 53 of Rebellion Dogs Radio welcomes people new to our irreligious brand of Alcoholics Anonymous.

Some of these new participants are new to AA: sober curious. If this is you, you're not so sure about signing up for a life-time membership. Either you're confronting – or someone else is confronting you about – your alcohol (or other substance) use disorder. Be skeptical; check it out. I hope you like us.

If you want to drink and can, that's your business. If you want to stop but can't, that's our business. And if you seek the tools to recovery from addiction without any God-talk, that's where secular AA comes in.

It is not surprising that problems associated with drinking and other addictions isn't on lock-down during the COVID-19 pandemic; either is recovery. You may be in the right place; welcome.

Maybe you are not new; you know all about AA. You went – or go – to meetings; you like the community of fellows in recovery from alcohol and other drugs. But you outgrew the "Just let go and let God," talk, or you never really bought into it. You have thought about or already left AA a while ago, feeling you couldn't relate to the idea of a prayer-answering, sobriety-granting higher power. And now – like the rest of us – you have some time on your hands. And you are secular-curious... if you don't mind the label.

Maybe you wonder, "What have these Godless heathens done with the AA that I grew up on?" Well, welcome. Practical AA makes more sense than you may think.

Episode 53 of Rebellion Dogs Radio covers the basics. We read a recent survey of atheists and agnostics experiences navigating the Christian nation of the USA. It's called *Reality Check: Being Nonreligious in America*. People needed to be closeted about their beliefs, even with loved ones. People got asked to go along with religious rituals and asked not to rock-the-boat... awkward. People were belittled, ignored, or discriminated against. It sounded like familiar AA stories we have heard. So this show looks at this study, recent AA history, and how members are creating groups and literature to foster the community of AA for those who prefer an irreligious narrative of addiction and recovery. We are glad you're here.

There are plenty of successful secular paths to recovery from substance and/or process addiction, Life Ring, SMART, Women for Sobriety, Dharma Recovery (Buddhist based, with no higher power). There's SOS and do-it-yourself also but what my most recent experience has zoom meetings, mostly AA meetings, and most of them secular AA meetings.

From time to time, there have been great growth spurts in secular AA in the first two decades of this millennium. With the prevalence of zoom meetings this means easier access to secular AA than before. I see a surge in interest and attendance in agnostic/atheist AA meetings. From my vantage point, I see two sources feeding this growth spurt: sober curious newcomers and secular curious newcomers.

New people continue to come to AA, regardless of social-distancing measures. From treatment centers, detox, drug/DUI court or self-motivated, people are coming to AA on zoom conferencing and other virtual/internet platforms.

Some old-school AAs are quick to judge online recovery as superficial or a second-rate version of face-to-face meetings. That assertion is a feeling – not a fact. Even if it's true for you or me, it isn't a universal truth. Other platforms – before Zoom – like InTheRooms.com have been going gangbusters, while face-to-face meetings were readily available. So there was already a crowd down with the online format vs. the time and energy to go somewhere for recovery talk. I have not made my mind up yet about one style being better than the other.

A whole generation of new people will be telling their story in the next months and years about finding recovery online, during the COVID-19 pandemic. I reserve judgement on comparing the effectiveness of online means of “one alcoholic talking to another” vs. meeting in our U of Toronto classroom where Beyond Belief Agnostics & Freethinkers Group meets or wherever your home group once called home. Of course for some, online is preferable, for others, face-to-face (f2f) is better. But let's think about newcomers to AA who have no f2f experience to compare to the zoom meetings they've found in the last weeks or so.

This “sober-curious” crowd, not all of them know if they're going to stay with the peer-to-peer crowd. How involved or engaged in the meetings will they be? Undetermined. That is normal. That is healthy. Be skeptical. Bring a beginner's mind; avoid long term decisions made rashly.

The second category of people new to agnostic/atheist AA, I call “secular-curious.” Some have been in AA a long-time and never heard of an irreligious way of doing AA, or maybe they heard a disparaging remark about our

“watered down AA.” Other’s left AA, “Tired of the God-stuff,” they say. Some who leave AA, relapse but many do not. Not everyone returns to the rooms to a chorus of, “We told you so.” You see, if you might have been in the category of AA graduate, you are still free of your substance or process of choice, but like many of us, you have time on your hands, and access to Wi-Fi. So here you are, taking a break from Netflix and COVID news; you’re checking us out, this unconventional brand of AA.

I don’t think secular AA is superior to pray-your-way-to-a-spiritual-experience AA. I don’t think we’re precious or stylin’. But godless AA is absolutely legitimate AA. People on this freethinker path are growing in numbers. Just as North America is growing less religious, more secular, so is AA. Members are making that adjustment by starting meetings “without a prayer.”

For years, some atheists have been happy as anyone else in mainstream AA. Even for believers there are some awkward adjustments to sober life and AA culture. People in meetings will declare to us that they owe their sobriety to God’s grace. Okay... This doesn’t bother some atheists; how could anyone be mad a God you don’t believe in?

Why begrudge someone who believes some version of personal higher power? Belief is not contagious. There’s no fear of catching it at a meeting. The fact that people attribute AA recovery to an intervening, anthropomorphic, personal deity – to many nonbelievers through AA’s history – so what?

While this religious majority might be harboring a false worldview, as far as rationalists are concerned, this attribution error harbored by the God-squad is not worth getting stuck in. Atheists and agnostics see how AA really works, what material actions, material supports, and practical daily activities keep AAs sober.

We have unabashed nonbelievers who don’t take any shit; “The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking.” “The Steps are suggestions only, right?” In many cases, this candid and confident nonbeliever is impervious to microaggressions or more hostile belittling.

Several atheists, active in AA, know the Twelve Traditions, Concepts and Service Manual better than the *Big Book* thumper or other variations of AA-literalists. Atheists are drawn to AA service work. If you find the Steps too “Godey” the Twelve Traditions only mention a higher power once and then, only as an explanation of how and why groups bow to no outside authority. The decisions made by the members at their own business meetings are the only thing that can dictate each group’s actions. Tradition Two: “For our group purpose there is but one ultimate authority – a loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience. Our leaders are but trusted servants; they do not govern.”

The remaining eleven Traditions are practical principles based on the experience of the growing pains of what historians call, AA’s “flying blind years.” Traditions are collective experience; not rules, any more than the Steps are a membership requirement. Groups may violate one Tradition or the other and what are the consequences? You might get gossiped about at other groups but there is no expulsion in AA for nonconformity. Still, if the “God” word in Tradition Two bothers you, if you will not read Tradition Two out of principle, that’s no deal-breaker. Some groups re-write it. It means the same thing, less a few words: “For our group purpose there is but one authority – our group conscience. Our leaders are but trusted servants; they do not govern.”

If you get supper nerdy and interested in how the General Service Conference works and how our General Service Office is conducted, now you get Twelve Concepts to memorize, they don’t mention higher powers at all.

There is less time spent on our knees in AA service, and more time spent rolling up our sleeves. So this is one possible reason you’ll see more *not-God* AAs working on committees than “taking the new person through the book.

Along with overt nonbelievers among the general AA population, we also find closet-nonbelievers. We have clever turns of phrase, that dance around the higher power issues with ambiguous language that keeps a rational, natural worldview, private. Some AA nonbelievers prefer not to draw any attention to themselves.

So there is a way to stake our claim in any AA meeting, if we chose to mix it up with the faith-based majority. There is so much more that we have in common

with others in recovery that the worldview issue is not worth quibbling over. In some meetings, the God and prayer stuff doesn't come up, much. Not every non-secular AA meeting is drowning in orthodoxy. Groups vary.

Many mainstream AA meetings are liberal and emphasize "take what you like, leave the rest," or "Live and Let Live." Other groups are more zealous; while every group is helping a good number of alcoholics, the tone inside the more orthodox meeting might be too instructive or dogmatic for you or me. They say in AA, "If you haven't been to an AA meeting you dislike, you haven't gone to enough AA meetings, yet."

With all that, understandably, for many of us, all this God-talk is distracting, annoying or a barrier to connecting with the process and people who are going to be needed to draw upon to get and stay sober. Some nonbelievers experience microaggression or outright hostility from so-called sober, spiritual giants. For some realists, subjecting ourselves to condescending or abusive attitudes and talk is unhealthy and our more religious members (not every believer, of course) are on the other side of a bridge too far.

For nonbelievers exposing themselves to meetings of the AA God-conscious, the potential conflict may be likened to a toxic relationship, enduring the condescending tones, or cold-shoulder of non-empathetic believers. Why not eliminate AA barriers and mental gymnastics of trying to conform talk into G.O.D. acronyms like "turning your will and your life over to" a Group of Drunks, Gift of Desperation, Great Out Doors, Good Orderly Direction, just to get along and communicate with our God-conscious members?

No one is saying that believers are willfully bullying the minority nonbelievers. Microaggression or systemic discrimination, by definition, points to a subconscious undercurrent in a predominantly theistic environment.

**Microaggression** is indirect, subtle, or unintentional discrimination against members of a marginalized group.

**Systemic discrimination** can be described as patterns of behavior, policies or practices that are part of the structures of an organization, and which create or perpetuate disadvantage to a minority group.

It would be one thing if, while the majority of AA were believers, the literature and readings were neutral: neither religious nor irreligious. But AA is not worldview-neutral. And while many AA's are quick to say, "AA is spiritual – not religious," by "religious," I am referring to the beliefs – not to an organized structure, like a synagogue, mosque, temple, or other institution of worship. A supernatural force is a core tenant of AA : "God could and would if He were sought", "There is one who has all power; that One is God, may you find Him now."

The language in AA systemically promotes theism and cautions against a human power as anything more than a temporary fix. While we talk about inclusion and tolerance, the language is one-sided. The atheist view of recovery is not candidly represented in our more infamous AA literature.

So, I'm not bashing *Alcoholics Anonymous* or wanting to de-convert happy, joyous and free believers in an interventionalist higher power. Let them pray at their meetings with impunity. But if everyone was offered the choice of a higher power AA meeting in room A, or a rational AA meeting in room B, which would you prefer? Like any special purpose group the need comes from the need to identify. And we identify with people who talk our language. If the *Big Book* talked about teenage angst, we wouldn't need young people's meetings. If it was still 1940, we might not need women's meetings. If non-binary gender language and same sex couple examples filled the *Big Book*, maybe we would not need LGBTQ+ groups. And if as much ink was devoted to a natural (scientific) worldview as a supernatural (theistic) worldview, maybe we would not need secular AA. But we need all these things and to AA's credit, that is why no meeting format needs to be vetted to be called an AA meeting. We do not need to pass a popularity contest to have our god-less meeting "approved." That's where AA is systemically inclusive and tolerant. But just like no one can understand an alcoholic like another alcoholic, no one can explain addiction and recovery in secular terms like another atheist/agnostic can.

For some of these reason's you've found your way to secular AA. That is where we're at.

So, today's podcast is a welcome letter (or chapter – Let's see how long it goes) to secular AA.

Regulars at agnostic/humanist/freethinker groups know all of this and could spout it out just as well as I'm doing but this episode, takes a pause from our brand of escalating rhetoric to look at the basics of secular AA.

There are so many people new to this irreligious approach to Alcoholics Anonymous, why not review the basics? We do have some hot-off-the-press stats for regulars, also. But as goes ye' olde AA cliché, "The newcomer is the most important person in the room."

If you have recently found us, you may be looking beyond AA because there are more secular recovery peer-to-peer options than just AA. I have been to many; I've read most of the literature I can get. I like it, I recommend it, but I am no expert because I have been to Refuge Recovery or Life Ring. So let's not be AA-centric.

Academics have studied and compared different modalities against an AA/12-Step approach. Most recently the 85-year-old AA way was tested against Life Ring, SMART Recovery and Women For Sobriety.

While results showed that none of these more contemporary approaches showed better outcomes, none of them were any worse in effectiveness, compared to the AA model. Of course some will be preferable or more effective for each of us individuals, but collectively, for the most part, they were at par. *The Journal of Substance Abuse Treatment* findings...

"...suggesting no differences in the efficacy of WFS [Women For Sobriety], Life Ring, or SMART, vs. 12-step groups. ... The study made a valuable contribution in view of the extremely limited evidence on mutual help alternatives. Results tentatively suggest that WFS, Life Ring, and SMART are as effective as 12-step groups for those with AUDs [alcohol and other drugs], and that this population has the best odds of success when committing to lifetime total abstinence. An optimal care plan may thus involve facilitating involvement in a broad array of mutual help groups and supporting abstinence motivation.<sup>i</sup>

Twelve Step facilitation – a clinical approach that involves AA philosophy – has been compared to cognitive behavioral therapy and other clinical remedies to substance use disorder. The Cochrane study reports the following:

The evidence suggests that 42 % of participants in AA would remain completely abstinent one year later, compared to 35% of participants receiving other treatments including CBT. This effect is achieved largely by fostering increased AA participation beyond the end of the TSF program.

When compared to the other treatment approaches Alcoholics Anonymous (AA)-based programs may perform just as well at reducing drinking intensity, negative alcohol-related consequences, and addiction severity.

Dr. John Kelly, Elizabeth R. Spallin Professor of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and Director of the Massachusetts General Hospital Recovery Research Institute said, “Alcohol use disorder can be devastating for individuals and their families and it presents a significant, worldwide, costly public health problem. Alcoholics Anonymous is a well-known, free, mutual-help fellowship that helps people recover and improve their quality of life.”<sup>ii</sup>

AA isn't foolproof but it's as – or more – effective, when compared to other interventions. If you are new to recovery and the only thing standing out to you right now is, “42% success is the best you can offer? That's failure; I'm looking for better odds.” That was how many people had uninterrupted sobriety for their first year. Many others do relapse but find their way back to sobriety. Also, while it's not the topic of today's conversation, there are clearly identifiable activities and regular practices that have a dramatic influence on if you're going to be in that 42% or the other 58%. It isn't all a matter of chance.

Is secular AA better or worse than religious AA? I don't know, although I'm curious how outcome rates compare based on worldview. But irreligious AA is legitimate, and we have success stories going back as far as early as AA history reaches.

*A more secular world:*

Pew Research has closely followed worldview trends in the USA and the whole world. In 2018, of 102 countries surveyed by Pew, “The USA is the only one with both above-average GDP per capita and above-average frequency of daily prayer.” Canada, Eastern or Western Europe, the UK, China or Australia all have above-average GDP but don’t spend so much time worshipping gods.

The USA is where AA was created. America is also home to over ½ of all AA members. So while AA views may seem dated or superstitious to many of us, to the majority of AA, the ideas and rituals at meetings are at least culturally familiar. Also, while the majority of AA is in no hurry to change. “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.”

In 2019 we learn from Pew Research that about 30% of the world holds the Judeo/Christian worldview, assumed as fact in AA literature. Another 23% of the world are Muslims who neither use the “God” word nor a He-god. “Nones” are 16% of the world, having no relationship with supernatural beliefs. Of course, Pew and other researchers find that the irreligious ranks are even higher among the Millennial/Generation -Z crowd (38% of 18–29 year-olds are irreligious; and 29% of 30-39 year-olds), some of this age-group are now navigating their way through substance use disorder and recovery.

Compare today’s landscape to the 1939 USA from which AA’s earliest literature was written. 95% of America subscribed to the *Man-in-the-sky* worldview, 5% were atheists and less than ½ of one percent were from non-God religious traditions.

In 2019 we learned, “The religiously unaffiliated (including atheists, agnostics and people who don’t identify with any religion) were harassed by governments, private groups, or both in 23 countries, up from 14 from the previous year.” Psychology Today writer, Phil Zuckerman, PhD started using the term, “secularphobia,” to describe the measurable hatred or irrational fear Americans (and other believers) have for atheists. There are still some states where you can’t run for office as an atheist, statistically you’re less likely to win child custody as an atheist parent and Americans in a survey, irrationally equate atheist with immorality and being unpatriotic. Neither of which bear out in testing.<sup>iii</sup> AA’s

tend to view atheists as intellectual holdouts whose sobriety is on shaky ground until they come around to the “reality” of a supernatural power greater than ourselves.

Here’s some of the things many candid atheist/agnostics hear in AA:

- Why are you people so angry?
- Why don’t you keep an open mind?
- Keep coming back; you’ll get it, eventually.
- The only purpose of the Twelve Steps is to achieve God-consciousness.
- I once believed as you believe then I got over my resentment against God.
- Fake it until you make it.
- Why don’t you just go start your own fellowship if you don’t want to believe in God?

It could be that for some theist, asking why we are so angry might be projection. Studies show religious adherents are hostile towards the irreligious. Yes, spiritual giants sometimes disrespect their secular peers. At times of existential angst such as ... well a pandemic is a good example, all of us – be we of a scientific or a supernatural worldview – everyone doubles down. Nonbelieving minority members in AA are more likely to face microaggression (unconscious hostility) or more threatening behavior from the majority who live by God’s will – not their own. During the COVID-19 threat, both of us are likely to get snappier or sarcastic.

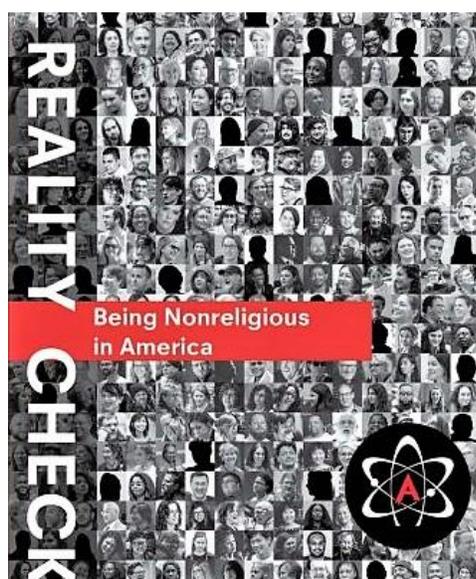
I might let out a “God could and would if He existed!” or “Isn’t this is a program of rigorous honesty? How can I cling to delusions of a man-in-the-sky? – That is just magical thinking... just the opposite of being returned to sanity.”

See, once I get going, I can go on a intolerant tangent, as well as anyone. Generally, I don’t bite when someone says, “I’ll pray for you, Joe,” or “But you must believe in God; who made that pretty flower over there?”, “Only God can keep you sober if you’re a real alcoholic,” or whatever the challenged logic might be. But, at times like these, everyone has thin skin.

So, if everyone can be mean or dismissive, regardless of their beliefs, isn’t it a level playing field? It would be if we had an equal number of faith-base and

reason-based AA members. Dependence on a higher power dominates the fellowship and literature, some of which, arguably could use a contemporary make-over. Systemic discrimination exists in AA rituals, readings, and predominant views.

The same systemic discrimination holds true for youth, women, and the LGBTQ+ community and this is why they all have their own special purpose groups, also. Dismissing underrepresented populations is baked into our writing and rituals.



*Reality Check: Being Nonreligious in America* (2019)

To whom and when do you conceal your irreligious worldview? The American Atheists conducted a 2019 U.S. Secular Survey. This revealed how we relate to the world as far as concealment of our nonreligious identity. This other A.A., survey posed a number of questions whereby respondents answered: Never, Rarely, Sometimes, Mostly, and/or Always.

When relating to friends and acquaintances, only a quarter of nonbelievers never concealed their worldview. 19% always or mostly keep their beliefs to themselves. When dealing with strangers, only 20% never conceal while 44% mostly or always conceal. Even to immediate family 31% of participants mostly or always conceal their worldview from their immediate family.

For secular people in recovery from addiction, this is a double stigma. We might not always feel free to mention our cocaine addiction in job interviews or even to family members. We have stigma that comes with substance and process addiction. Try sharing an insightful tid-bit you heard at Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous while you're at your PTA meeting; that will alter how your peers see you and treat you. So addiction brings about stigma and discrimination and it's a double whammy to be discriminated against in our AA meeting because we think the idea that God has a plan for us is crazy talk.

Stigma and discrimination of respondents to the U.S. Secular Survey varied widely from state to state. Being an atheist in Mississippi or Utah is a more troubled experience than a California or Connecticut atheist will experience. Negative experiences of secular Americans range from loneliness and the lack of a support network to threats or actual physical violence.

“To understand how minority stress affects nonreligious people, we analyzed how discrimination and stigmatization affects participants/loneliness and likelihood of depression. Our data shows that participants who experienced discrimination or high levels stigmatization because of their nonreligious identity were more likely to screen positive for depression and to experience greater loneliness.”

Microaggressions and stigmatization come in several forms for American society at large. Some of us can relate to this from our 12-Step room experiences.

Being asked to join in thanking God: Only 15% never experiences this; 35% frequently or almost always were in this uncomfortable position. Similar results came from questions about being asked or encouraged to pretend you hold religious (theistic) beliefs, going along with religious rituals so as to not stir up trouble, being talked about behind our backs for being irreligious, being excluded from social events and being ignored, isolated or rejected.<sup>iv</sup>

### *Liberal Mythology in AA?*

So, while AA has its own culture to some extent, more so, our groups are a microcosm of the society just outside our meeting doors. AA boasts what I call “liberal mythology.” Inclusive – never exclusive is our collective creed, true. But where the rubber hits the road, not every God-rejecting AA is treated equally to the conforming majority.

The second most popular pamphlet in AA is called, *A Newcomer Asks*.<sup>v</sup> In here, we find this relevant Q & A:

“There is a lot of talk about God, though, isn’t there?”

The majority of A.A. members belief that we have found the solution to our drinking problem not through individual willpower, but through a

power greater than ourselves. However, everyone defines this power as he or she wishes. Many people call it God, others think it is the A.A. group, still others don't believe in it at all. There is room in A.A. for people of all shades of belief and non-belief."

This is AA policy and practice but it's not the whole story. It doesn't mean AA's won't snipe at each other. AA doesn't transcend the world outside our meeting doors. We all hold biases, and everyone reacts to our biases – sometimes unconsciously. So, it's also true that AA is made up of all stripes – people who believe in a higher power, others that do not, people who work the 12-Steps, others that do not – we are human, we are tribal and like-minded people tend to collect into echo chambers more than our inclusive AA in a perfect and tolerant world, might suggest. Hence, like other special purpose meetings, there is a real need for secular AA meetings and these meetings serve a real and legitimate AA purpose.

So, this is the good news part of this welcome letter. AA without a prayer is more accessible than ever before. The first known AA for atheists and agnostics group formed in 1975 in Chicago. This zeitgeist quickly spread to Hollywood, New York City, and other places. By the turn of the century there were 40 worldwide secular meetings, some of them, 25 years old. Today there are over 500 secular meetings. For people too remote to find an irreligious AA meeting in an urban center or college town where liberal leaning meetings flourish, this pandemic transformation of most AA to zoom-meeting makes secular AA accessible to anyone with internet access or to lesser extent, a phone will get you in – still better than nothing.

So I just said that the secular meeting movement dates back to 1975 but it really goes back further. Every AA meeting governs itself, setting its own "primary purpose."

Twenty years before the first Quad-A meeting as the Chicago atheist/agnostics group are called, the second edition of *Alcoholics Anonymous* was published. Bill W was looking to make the book more bridge building. One third of the stories were from women, while only 25% of the 1955 AA population were women. This was a countermeasure to systemic discrimination although no one used that

language at the time. Another story appears for the first time. Dr. Earle M., authored, "Physician Heal Thyself!", now pg. 301 in *Alcoholics Anonymous* Fourth Edition (2001).

This man, and his fellows in the Forum Group of AA in San Francisco, would write a secular interpretation of the Twelve Step precepts. I read about this in his 1989 book, *Physician Heal Thyself: 35 Years of Adventure in Sobriety by an AA 'Old-Timer'*<sup>vi</sup> and in that book we see that the Forum group conscience was that AA as it stood was a barrier to the growing need of people suffering from broader addictions than booze only, as well as nontheists who were put off by the God-stuff.

Here are the Ten Steps of the Forum Group of AA (1965):

1. We realized deeply that we cannot handle mind-altering drugs safely ... our attempts to do so courts disaster.
2. As we commit ourselves to abstinence, we welcome nature's healing process into our lives.
3. In the group, we discuss our common problems in recovery; to do so hastens healing.
4. We find a friend, usually also recovering, with whom we can discuss our deepest, guarded secrets. Release and freedom become ours.
5. By making amends to ourselves and to others, we put to rest past injuries.
6. When we face our emotional problems squarely, we discover that change automatically happens. We do not seek change . . . It simply occurs.
7. Our lives are orderly and full of meaning as we live second for second.
8. Recovery together constitutes a fabric of unity. Each of us, however, follows a unique, personalized pattern of recovery.
9. We share our lives with those who are still drinking or using. Many of them decide to join us.
10. Our meeting doors are open to all users of mind-altering substances. The welcome mat is in full view.

So that was AA in 1965. In *AA Comes of Age*, Bill W writes about Buddhist AAs who said that they would like to replace the word "god" with "good" so that the practice of the Steps would be compatible with their atheistic belief. In 1957, Bill Wilson writes (page 81):

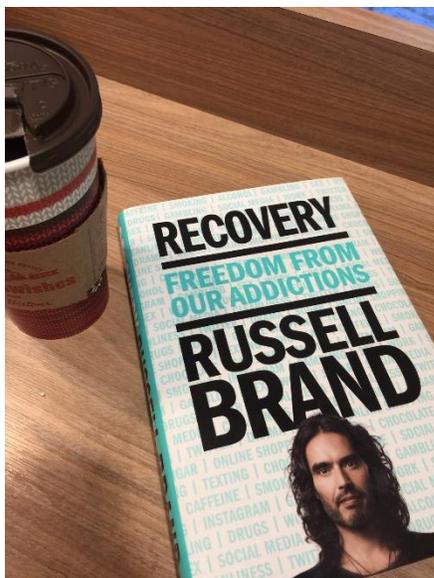
“To some of us, the idea of substituting ‘good’ for ‘God’ in the Twelve Steps will seem like a watering down of A.A.’s message. But here we must remember that A.A.’s Steps are suggestions only. A belief in them, as they stand, is not at all a requirement for membership among us. This liberty has made A.A. available to thousands who never would have tried at all had we insisted on the Twelve Steps just as written.”

Going back further some members were pretty put off at the 1953 General Service Conference as they were learning that members/groups were customizing the “sacred” Twelve Steps. These notes were once only available to *archive raiders* who got permission from GSO to visit New York City or Bedford Hills archives to review what was said or written about in our collective history. Now, a new AA book includes several Bill W speeches transcribed from the annual General Service Convention.<sup>vii</sup> Here’s what was going on at the third General Service Convention – this is transcribed from Bill W’s speech on the topic of groups and members creating and reading their own AA Steps:

“It amazes me how in distant lands this same pioneering story is being reenacted. Some years ago the Twelve Steps came to the attention of a Swede... he takes a look at this program and he thinks that we don’t need twelve steps. His idea was that you needed only seven. So in Sweden today, they have seven steps.

Do you think that we should write these Swedes and say you can’t belong to Alcoholics Anonymous unless you print those Twelve Steps the way we got them? No! They are merely going through the old pioneering process that we went through.

There is one of these Traditions that really guarantees every A.A. group the absolute right to violate all of them if they wish to. We say here, ‘Each group should be autonomous except in matters affecting other groups or A.A. as a whole.’ And you must remember that these are suggested Traditions. When we say each group is autonomous, that means in effect that it has a right to be wrong from the viewpoint of the rest of you. My feeling is that the more we insist on strict conformity with these Steps and Traditions, the more resistance against them we create. And if any improvements are to come, who knows: we may get them from anyone.”



Have you seen the Russell Brand 12-Steps? The first four are, “1. Admitted you are fucked, 2. Could you be un-fucked? 3. Are you, on your own, going to un-fuck yourself, 4. Make a list of people we fucked and who or what fucked us up ...” from *Recovery: Freedom from our Addictions*. Now I do not presume to be able to speak for a dead man, but everything I’ve seen or heard Bill Wilson, say or write, why wouldn’t he laugh and love this variation of his 12-Steps?

About the AA *suggested* Twelve Steps. They are suggested, i.e.: open to interpretation, i.e.: optional. Some secular AA groups read their

own interpretation of the AA Steps – *sans God* and a good number of secular AA groups don’t write, read or talk about the Steps at all. The 1973 AA Conference Approved book, *Living Sober* is a popular conversation starter for secular meetings and there are a host of other books by AA or non-conference approved literature written by AA members like you and me.

Since I first came to 12-Step rooms in the mid-1970s I’ve seen glorious examples of AA sobriety in people who never worked the 12-Steps, or they started them but thought it was kooky, or they didn’t come for therapy – just sobriety and comradery. Some of these people are dead now but never stumbled back to drinking. Some are forty or fifty years sober, both alcohol and 12-Step free. The best argument for a 12-Step-free life is John Lauritsen’s *A Freethinker in AA*. I worked the Steps in early AA and again in other 12-Step programs. I don’t know that this is why I am sober today because others are sober today who never did a personal inventory or any of the rest of it – not intentionally, anyway. Sure they accepted they were defeated by alcohol; they are willing to help other alcoholics and they try to be a better person. So, you might think, “Hey, they are shining examples of the Twelve Steps in action.” Think it; I wouldn’t tell them that... just saying. You might get an ear full.

In the 1990s secular AA literature was emerging. I don’t know, maybe because AA was growing more rigid in some neighborhoods and this was a re-action to fundamentalism. But in short order, three books I still recommend came out in no order of preference:

Philip Z's *A Skeptics Guide to the 12-Steps*.

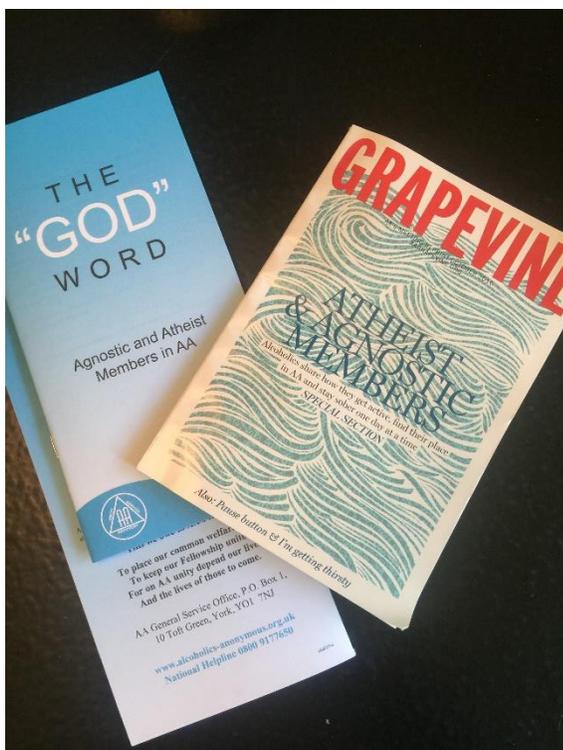
Charlotte Davis Kasl's *Many Roads, One Journey: Moving Beyond the Twelve Steps*

From Dr. Martha Cleveland and Arlys G., *The Alternative 12 Steps: A Secular Guide to Recovery*

If that is all too so last century for you, there's more. They are great. If you like reading, you will like reading these. There are memoirs and "how to-agnostically," more books about the Twelve Steps not for atheists/agnostics but by atheists and agnostics. The *Big Book* explained by Archer Voxx, Alex M. or Dale K, for don't throw the baby out with the bathwater folks. If you have a relationship with this 1939 legend, these books could be therapeutic. Roger C has some great books at AAagnostica. Marya Hornbacher's 2011, *Waiting: A Nonbelievers Higher Power*, Vince Hawking has a series of books, Jeffrey Munn and Bill W ( a different Bill W) have the newest secular 12-step books, there are proactive approaches, humanist approaches, I wrote a 2013, *Beyond Belief: Agnostic Musings for 12 Step Life* which was the first secular daily reflection book. I'm happy to report there are more. If you're on your smart phone, or however you're consuming this, visit [Rebellion Dogs Publishing.com](http://Rebellion Dogs Publishing.com) and click on reading room. All these books and more are there. Steve K, Adam N, both authors of books I would and may read again.

I don't know about you, but my favorite books are like songs. Listening to great song just once is no good; I have to go back to it again. There are also some great history books and science books on our Reading Room page<sup>viii</sup>, all very sensible, all very secular.

AA has stepped up to the plate, too. If you haven't been to an AA meeting for a long time, the last few years has been promising and GSO reads the tea leaves. After devoting a whole magazine to stories of atheists and agnostics in AA, Grapevine, with the help of some of our constituents, scoured their archives and put together a collection called *One Big Tent: Atheist and Agnostic Members share their Experience, Strength and Hope*. This Grapevine Book holds the record of having the most pre-order collections including the LGBTQ+, Women's, Young Peoples, Oldtimers, Bill W collections, Newcomers, and every other collection they've published. The most anticipated of all was the atheist/agnostic book.



AA Word Services has had more than a couple of swing and miss attempts to put together an Agnostic/Atheists AA pamphlet. A noble effort was launched from 2010 to 2013 whereby many atheist and agnostic AA stories were gathered but because of a fundamentalist backlash that had political clout, for the eleventh time, the atheist/agnostic pamphlet was mothballed and the consolation prize was *Many Paths to Spirituality* (p-84). It tried to please everybody. I like it more than most. Believers and nonbelievers alike just hate it. Read it yourself and let me know what you think. One great thing that our friend Eric C from Michigan pointed out to me, anyway

was the crowning achievement of this pamphlet. It opens with a 1965 AA World Conference speech excerpt from Bill W, very friendly to liberal adapters of AA. And now, because it appears in AA print, this is officially conference approved AA literature:

From Maple Leaf Gardens in Toronto Canada and later in Grapevine, July 1965:

“Newcomers are approaching A.A. at the rate of tens of thousands yearly. They represent almost every belief and attitude imaginable. We have atheists and agnostics. We have people of nearly every race, culture, and religion. In A.A. we are supposed to be bound together in the kinship of a common suffering. Consequently, the full individual liberty to practice any creed or principle or therapy what-ever should be a first consideration for us all. Let us not, therefore, pressure anyone with our individual or even our collective views. Let us instead accord each other the respect and love that is due to every human being as he tries to make his way toward the light. Let us always try to be inclusive rather than exclusive; let us remember that each alcoholic among us is a member of A.A., so long as [they] so declare.”



#### AA evolution in 1965

In Toronto, AA is 30 years old and Bill W declares, "... the full individual liberty to practice any creed or principle or therapy what-ever should be a first consideration for us all. Let us not, therefore, pressure anyone with our individual or even our collective views."

In San Francisco, "Physician Heal Thyself" author Dr. Earle M opens the Forum Group of AA to welcome all addicts and people who don't believe in a Big Book type of higher power.



Read it and weep fundies. Call our AA "watered down AA" all you like. Tell whoever you like that we're killing newcomers. We will help who we can our way, you help who you can your way. For me, personally, you're *Big Book* repetitive strain disorder wouldn't have worked then, and it wouldn't work now. But we're happy to send your way anyone who wants the AA with the "God is doing for us what we could not do for ourselves," guarantee because honestly, if I could believe it—I would. I can't, so I won't. Reality isn't such a bad life.

So, the General Service Conference of USA & Canada couldn't/wouldn't create a collection of stories about AA nonbelievers who do AA without a conversion experience. But, as chance would have it, the General Service Conference of the United Kingdom crafted, voted on and approved *The "God" Word: Agnostics and Atheists in AA*. Thanks to the petitioning of many secular AA groups from Arizona and Kansas to New York, Toronto, and places in between, the 2018 General Service Conference by overwhelming substantial unanimity, voted to adopt *The "God" Word* and translate it into French and Spanish, as well as English. Not everyone in our community loves the pamphlet—it represents a certain candid, proud irreligious AA but it falls short of representing the wide range of secular views including the more radical, anti-establishment voice. Yes, that's a voice that ought to be heard, too. But hey, it's a start. Changing a pamphlet by adding stories ought to be a far easier accomplishment than writing a pamphlet in the first place.

Maybe that's the future job of you – who are new to secular AA. Your story needs to be told one day, about getting sober virtually in AA during a pandemic or how finding secular AA – just one click from home was the starting place for a more authentic, integral approach for you, to the AA process. I for one, would love to hear those stories.



So, there's your long-winded "Welcome". It is sometimes good for the rest of us to review how far we've come, how AA has adapted to a changing landscape of views, beliefs and experiences. Welcome to secular AA. I hope you like us.

Visit [SecularAA.org](https://secularaa.org)<sup>ix</sup>, [AAagnostica](https://aaagnostica.org)<sup>x</sup>, [AA Beyond Belief](https://aabeyondbelief.org)<sup>xi</sup>, you'll find archived stories from our International Conference of Secular AA, first in Santa Monica in 2014, Austin in 2016, Toronto in 2018 and scheduled but now COVID-cancelled for Washington DC for 2020, we hope to reconvene October 29-31<sup>st</sup> 2021. There's more tales to tell; we'll save that for another day. Our musical offering for Episode 53 is NOBRO with their song, "Don't Die"<sup>xii</sup>

<sup>i</sup> Sarah E. Zemore, Lee Anne Kaskutas et al. (2018)

[https://www.journalofsubstanceabusetreatment.com/article/S0740-5472\(17\)30490-7/fulltext](https://www.journalofsubstanceabusetreatment.com/article/S0740-5472(17)30490-7/fulltext)

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.cochrane.org/news/new-cochrane-review-finds-alcoholics-anonymous-and-12-step-facilitation-programs-help-people>

<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/blog/the-secular-life/201406/why-americans-hate-atheists>

<sup>iv</sup>

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5d824da4727dfb5bd9e59d0c/t/5eb0468b23f39b65de7ddb23/1588610795388/Reality+Check+-+Being+Nonreligious+in+America>

<sup>v</sup> [https://www.aa.org/assets/en\\_US/p-24\\_anewcomerask.pdf](https://www.aa.org/assets/en_US/p-24_anewcomerask.pdf)

<sup>vi</sup> More on Dr. Earle M: <https://rebelliondogspublishing.com/home/blog/musings-from-san-francisco-march-2019-rebellion-dogs-blog>

<sup>vii</sup> AAWS, *Our Great Responsibility: A Selection of Bill W.'s General Service Conference Talks 1951—1970*, New York: 2019

<sup>viii</sup> <https://rebelliondogspublishing.com/reading-room>

<sup>ix</sup> <https://secularaa.org>

<sup>x</sup> <https://aaagnostica.org/>

<sup>xi</sup> <https://aabeyondbelief.org>

<sup>xii</sup> <https://nobroband.com/>