



Rebellion Dogs Radio Episode 24 Transcript

Courage to change vs. fighting & inaction: A look at how an accommodating AA serves us in ways combativeness and apathy do not

A 1975 Hazelden pamphlet to help nonbelievers understand AA, a look at our membership statistics from 2015, eighty years into AA and how the centennial AAs of 2035 might look at today's stewardship—this is the focus of this month's blog and podcast. But first, from somewhere far away, in a time long ago, let's exercise our imagination...

“What was that about three jewels?”

“The three jewels of the Tao: compassion, moderation, and humility. Balthasar said that compassion leads to courage, moderation lead to generosity, and humility leads to leadership.”ⁱ *Lamb: The Gospel According to Biff, Christ's Childhood Pal*, Christopher Moore

The fictional humour, *Lamb*, was recommended to me by my friend, Peter N. So I'm reading it. Absurdist fiction is the genre used to describe Moore's books. Here's what Goodreads says about the author:

“Moore's novels typically involve conflicted everyman characters suddenly struggling through supernatural or extraordinary circumstances. Inheriting a humanism from his love of John Steinbeck and a sense of the absurd from Kurt Vonnegut, Moore is a best-selling author with major cult status.”

Lamb: The Gospel According to Biff is narrated through the character, Biff, a childhood friend of Joshua because, Jesus wasn't called Jesus 2000 years ago; his name was Joshua, don't you know?

Biff was dissed.

History would exclude him from chronicling the life of Jesus, the son of God—I mean Joshua, the son of God—instead, *Gospellers* Mark, Luke, John and Matthew got to do the storytelling.

It's a funny book but I don't really like the humor. I smile when I read “the funny bits” and I can picture my friend Peter laughing out loud. It's funny, I get it; it is not my kind of funny. I am 230 pages in and I wouldn't have gone this far if not for this book being recommended by a respected friend. And here's the other thing; I know there are kernels of truth in fiction that are always more profound than the *fact-tyranny* limitations of journalism.

Moore is a lapsed Catholic and why wouldn't he have an equal right to commentary about religious mythology as the devout adherent? I'll serve more "*Lamb with Biff*" later, in this blog, but let's reflect for a moment on the opening quote. So, Buddhism by the numbers has three jewels, four noble truths, five precepts and an eightfold path. Taoism isn't as numerical as AA or Buddhism but they have something from the *Tao Te Ching*, known as "sanbao" or the three qualities of **compassion**, **frugality** and **humility**.

Compassion, moderation and humility (as Moore states it)—here's three good qualities to live by and good mottos for stewardship of any Twelve & Twelve type fellowship. The opposite of these jewels might be a) intolerance, b) binging and purging, and c) arrogance; or false humility with I will get to. Sorry AA World Service, but you're, "What's a helpless trusted servant to do?" defense against recent human rights wrongdoings might be a free-pass on accountability.

Let's get to that issue, later.

In my recovery, compassion, moderation and humility are cornerstones or objectives of a life in balance or the opposite of a life in addictive behavior.

Contrarily, if I am narcissistic, I proselytize *my* view and advance *my* agenda. When I am intolerant of those whose views differ from mine, I am mal-nourished in *Vitamin-C* (*compassion*). When I am rigid or chaotic of flipping from chaotic to rigidity to chaos again, I am deficient in moderation (frugality). Humility is another type of moderation or "life in balance," too. Humility is like blood-sugar levels. Ego-driven is too high; self-contempt or lacking confidence is too low. Like low blood-sugar, being low—in a state of false-humility—is too low and just as unhealthy as having egomania. Too grandiose or too self-effacing—leadership is impossible without humility.

Under current events, I can't help but think of the Toronto Intergroup/AA World Service/Ontario Human Rights Tribunal matterⁱⁱ. How out of balance is this?

With an Intergroup that defends its right to govern groups or to pit a majority worldview against a minority, where is the humility, tolerance and moderation? By defining AA as conditional or making obedience to any wording or creed (belief in God) a second requirement, this actually destroys the very AA they say they are defending; *it* is no longer *it* anymore. In other words, when you put rules and restrictions on the groups and members (that's no longer Alcoholics Anonymous).

Is Intergroup demonstrating leadership or arrogance when they claim the right and then defend that decision to excommunicate a member/group?

We know that if the groups voted to burn down the hall they meet in, that mission from God "as he expresses Himself through our group conscious" couldn't be used as a defense from violating the law, now could it? It doesn't matter how large a majority they had, Intergroup consensus isn't beyond the law.

Here's the reason why Intergroup doesn't have an unconditional right to do as it wishes. This issue is over the right of groups and members to serve and participate. Where do these rights come from?

Groups rights and direction come from the membership of that group—only. The right to form a group and declare yourself an AA group is an inalienable right—or a God given right as some Intergroup-types might prefer. “What therefore God has joined together, let no man put asunder.” Or going back to AA lore, we in the service structure, are “trusted servants—we do not govern”.

Intergroup can’t take away rights because they didn’t grant the right. AA is designed with no tyranny of the majority.

And AAWS sticks to the position that, “AAWS did nothing and have no power to do anything, so we did nothing wrong.” This is dysfunctional; claiming impotence isn’t necessarily a winning defense against a human rights violation. Is this self-proclaimed impotence, instead, a tragic case of false-humility?

If these three jewels of Taoism lead to courage, generosity and leadership, where is AAWS’s leadership or Intergroup’s for that matter? Courage, generosity and leadership are not foreign to AA creed. What does the Responsibility Declaration say? In so many worlds it says, “any way, any time, by removing any barrier, we are all responsible.” AAWS has become a slave to inaction and I’ll come back to that later.

But this just in...

Part 1 Annual membership data (@ January 1, 2016)

As is the season, if I may, I will visit AA’s annual membership survey as reported in the Summer Box 4-5-9. Let’s take inventory of current events and take AA’s pulse. While not all of us will be alive to see it, AA’s 100th anniversary is 19 years away. What are we doing right; what ought we alter or improve to ensure we have a centennial?

Here is AA’s own accounting of members at January 1, 2016

| Location | Members | Year over Year |
|----------------|-----------|----------------|
| World-wide: | 2,089,698 | +2.4% |
| USA: | 1,262,542 | -1.7% |
| Canada: | 85,530 | -5% |
| Non Can/USA: | 705,850 | +11.7% |
| Loners/others: | 66 | - |

From January 2014 to January 2015, we saw an overall drop in AA population of 5%. That year, USA membership limited the losses. This year, American membership is down 1.7%. This time last year we saw Canadians behaving about the same; this year’s 5% drop followed a 4% decline in Canuks in AA the previous year. Internationals have seen dramatic fluctuation; two years ago non-USA/Canada members were down 13% and this year Internationals are up almost 12%.

For perspective, by AA's own accounting, our membership exceeded two million for the first time in the early 1990s. We've been up and down since, sometimes dropping below two million and peaking at 2.2 million in 2002.

“Let us never Fear needed change. Certainly we have to discriminate between changes for the worse and changes for the better. But once a need becomes clearly apparent in an individual, in a group, or in AA as a whole, it has long since been found out that we cannot stand still and look the other way. The essence of all growth is a willingness to change for the better and then an unremitting willingness to shoulder whatever Responsibility this entails.” Bill W. A.A. Grapevine July 1965, As Bill Sees It p. 115

Rebellion Dogs has sometimes compared AA membership to the larger recover community. From DrugFree.org we heard this in 2012:ⁱⁱⁱ

“**New York, NY, March, 6 2012** – Survey data released today by [the Partnership for Drug-Free Kids](#) and [The New York State Office of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Services](#) (OASAS) show that 10 percent of all American adults, ages 18 and older, consider themselves to be in recovery from drug or alcohol abuse problems. These nationally representative findings indicate that there are 23.5 million American adults who are overcoming an involvement with drugs or alcohol that they once considered to be problematic.”

This survey of Americans in long-term recovery rose 15% (from 20 million to 23.5 million from their previous survey). [Last year, Rebellion Dogs looked at demographic data](#) from the turn-of-the-century book, *Bowling Alone: Collapse and Revival of American Community*. We saw that AA's trading water in population numbers is head-and-shoulders above other organizations ranging from religions losing adherents, professional associations not attracting their peers and even the American Bowling Congress members and bowling alley attendance. Information without context is

easy to misjudge but it's also hard to find exact apples to apples comparisons for AA.

If you buy the adage, “If you're not growing your dying,” AA's population dormancy is concerning. Maybe not today, but when we look at the road to AA's 100th birthday in 2035 will we be a viable, relevant society in 19 years? There are many, too, who dismiss the data as unreliable or having negligible predictive qualities.

At the time of composing this blog/podcast, June 2016, some USA political surveys show the democratic favorite, Hillary Clinton and the expected Republican nominee, Donald Trump neck-in-neck with each other. Others say that because this data is from surveys of people who still use a landline phone—which may indicate an older, more conservative population that the general electoral population—poles aren't reaching the younger mobile phone users.

The recent Canadian federal election outcome wasn't predicted by pollsters. While a tight three-way race between incumbent Conservatives, Liberals and New Democrats was billed for the 2015 election, the Liberal majority left prognosticators in damage-control mode. The polestars were wrong by a large margin.

What does this have to do with AA? This idea of a shrinking AA, at least in traditional face-to-face meetings, does not fly in the face of our everyday observations. I was just listening to Vic L. from New York City and John S. from Kansas City comparing notes on [aaBeyondBelief the Podcast](#)^{iv} and both NY and KC meetings aren't as populous as they once were. Here in Toronto, there was a time in the 1980s and 1990s that there were dozens of meetings that drew hundreds, downtown and in the burrows. These same groups that attracted hundreds, today draw dozens—not hundreds. So, like the bowling alleys and churches of years ago, at least from a casual gaze, AA isn't as big in the USA and Canada as it once was.



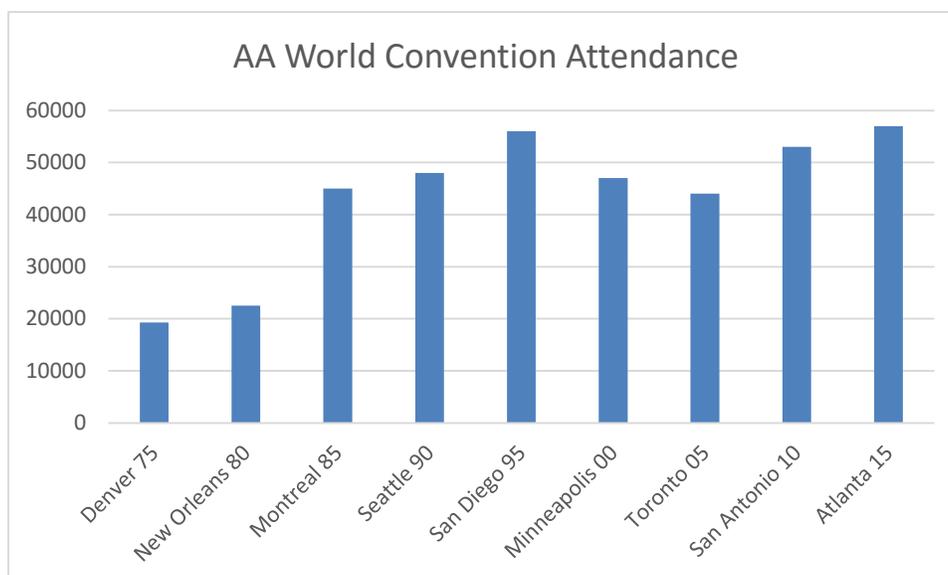
But like the polestars of elections maybe there are others who count themselves as part of AA but aren't included in our

meetings. I spend a lot more time listening to podcasts and reading memoirs and reading blogs written by AA members about addiction, recovery and AA life than I spend in meetings. How many others are spending more time sharing recovery online instead of going to community centres or church basements to get their AA fill? It's just something to think about.

So, it's an interesting question as to how well AA's annual polling systems captures the overall membership. The one thing that the annual survey affords us is a comparison between AA internal numbers one year with the same methodology of the next year. The actual numbers may not be 100% accurate but hopefully the up and/or down trending is an accurate depiction.

Here's another quasi means of measuring AA engagement. The Fall Box 4-5-9 reported over 57,000 AA's and Alanons were in attendance in Atlanta in 2015 for AA's 80th birthday. This marked an all-time high for AA convention attendance.

Back in '85 I attended my first in Montreal and 45,000 AAs were there. Ten years later, the numbers increased to 56,000 in Seattle (1995). Convention attendance dropped in 2000 in Minneapolis to 47,000 and dropped more in Toronto with 44,000. Then we climbed to 53,000 in San Antonio (2010) and we were on the increase again in Atlanta, again hitting 57,000+, a record. So is convention attendance indicative of AA's overall size? I am sure it's a clue. We do see that every 20 years when the convention moves from USA to Canada, there's a dip in attendance. Perhaps American members who don't have a passport or suffer from criminal records can't make it to Montreal, Toronto or Vancouver.



Going back to the annual numbers, what does the double digit increases and declines in the last two years mean for non-USA/Canada members? I am sure AA issues have a unique impact in India, which wouldn't be felt in the UK or vice versa. Germany compared to Japan, Australia vs Ethiopia, regional AA comes with its own issues with attraction rather than promotion.

But at least this year we see that—if more is better—International AA is carrying the load while Canada and the USA are declining in membership. And while AA is never on a membership drive, we want to meet the need. We want to eliminate barriers and build bridges.

Part 2 Our responsibility to accommodate: more bridges & less barriers

At District 10 in Area 83 of AA, I currently work in Access Ability. Our job is to build bridges and remove barriers between access to AA and those who seek our help. The committee has changed branding from Accessibility to Special Needs to this made up AAism, "Access Ability." The language and the mandate changes to accommodate a dynamic demographic. Years ago, meeting lists didn't indicate if the meeting room and facility were wheelchair accessible. The definition of "accessible" has altered to take into account turning radiuses in washrooms for electric scooters, automatic or electronically opening doors and easy access to elevators.

The argument, "we've always done things this way," doesn't wash in a liberal, inclusive society. Floodgate arguments—if we accommodate this need, then what if this happens and then that happens—these dark imaginings also have no place in a society that is progressive. Each case or request for accommodation has to be treated on it's own merit. Sometimes changes come from membership needs; sometimes it's societal changes.

Who remembers ashtrays and smoke-filled AA rooms (or airplanes for that matter)? Non-smoking sections started appearing. A few ahead-of-the-curve members started non-smokers AA meetings. Now AA is pretty much smoke-free in all of the meetings I go to. It

wasn't because AAs had a spiritual awakening. We were forced to follow societal values and conform to the law. It's fair to say that "but this is how it's always been" would have been the preferred inaction of many AA groups. But complying with local laws was not an option so we did what the law expected of us.

Scent-free or scent-consciousness is the next phase. Some people have allergies to perfumed hair and body products. A room with a few after-shave or perfume drenched members would be a barrier to AA for anyone with an allergy to these toiletries. Some AA groups are already asking people to be considerate of this factor in the secretary announcements. Some facilities that we rent rooms from will impose their scent-free guidelines on us as tenets in their school, place of worship or community center where our meetings are hosted.

If we mean what we say with our Responsibility Declaration, every conference, assembly and round-up ought to have wheelchair ramps to every stage or no stage at all. Gatherings ought to be scent-free. People with disabilities aren't asking for special treatment; they are entitled to equal treatment. If they can't get in a room or to a microphone, then we aren't a fellowship of equals.

All of the senses—sight, hearing, speech, smell and taste—have to be considered if AA is to keep pace with pluralist societies. Vegan food options, American Sign Language interpreters, brail literature, audio books, online or phone-in meetings are all ways we can ensure that whenever, wherever is our standard. We need literature in different languages and we find, more and more, a demand to have AA expressed in a secular—as well as theistic—language. Like the wheelchair ramp, neutral or inclusive language isn't special treatment; it's equal treatment.

Adaptation can't happen in a frightened society that views every change with suspicion. The Toronto hearing before the Human Rights Tribunal is just one more chapter of what pioneer, Clarence S articulated AA to be in a 1975 talk whereby he said, "AA started in riots; it will continue in riots."

And then, in the goodness of time, our conflicts are page-8 news. Schopenhauer looked at truth as an embryonic force that must overcome two difficult hurdles—ridicule first and then violent opposition—before reaching universal acceptance. An informed group conscience demands more than popular opinion. It demands asking, "Are we informed; are we right?" instead of simply, "What do we prefer?"

Picture two wolves and one sheep voting on what's for dinner. Is that democracy?

No, that's tyranny of the majority and it happened in Toronto Intergroup back in 2011, and it will continue to plague AA until we develop an attitude that tempers our will to preserve with a willingness to accommodate.

We read from Bill's writings that he saw AA as every changing? When we resist change in AA we destroy AA. AA has to breathe to survive; AA has to adapt to the changing times, not become a monument ode to the "good ol' days." Because we don't feel death from our

inaction immediately, it hits us when it's too late and we have long-since forgotten that we are the architect of our own misfortune.

The opening quote talks about how compassion fosters courage. Courage isn't rationalizing or decisions. Nor is courage defending ourselves from shifts in public opinion. In AA language, it's quite the opposite, we seek courage to change where needed—not merely defending the status quo.

How does moderation lead to generosity? When I am moderate, I don't see AA as a zero-sum-game. It isn't. "I can get what I want and you lose," or "I lose and you get what you want". Because I only want what I need when I'm right with the world—I don't place demands on others—I can be generous in the wish that others will get what they need in and from AA, too. It's never either/or, AA is my way and your way: equal/not the same, united/not uniformed. As for the relationship between humility and leadership, it's clear that if I am in a state of self-loathing or egomania who's going to follow me? No one of course.

Not all change is growth but the right to be wrong is built-in. Maybe it's not out of kindness that we've been granted this allowance, but maybe being wrong is a necessity for a thriving society of common suffering.

Part 3 More goodness from Lamb & Biff

Here's a telling story from Chapter 16 of *Lamb: The Gospel According to Biff, Christ's Childhood Pal*:

We were twelve days into our journey, following Balthasar's meticulously drawn map, when we came to the wall.

"So," I said, "what do you think of the wall?"

"It's great," said Joshua.

"It's not that great," I said.

There was a long line waiting to get through the giant gate, where scores of bureaucrats collected taxes from caravan masters as they passed through. The gatehouses alone were each as big as one of Herod's places, and soldiers rode horses atop the wall, patrolling far into the distance. We were a good league back from the gate and the line didn't seem to be moving.

"This is going to take all day," I said. "Why would they build such a thing? If you can build a wall like this, then you ought to be able to raise an army large enough to defeat any invaders."

"Lao-tzu built this wall," Joshua said.

"The old master who wrote the Tao? I don't think so."

"What does the Tao value above all else?"

"Compassion? Those other two jewel things?"

“No, inaction. Contemplation. Steadiness. Conservatism. A wall is the defense of a country that values inaction. But a wall imprisons the people of a country as much as it protects them. That’s why Balthasar had us go this way. He wanted me to see the error in the Tao. One can’t be free without action.”

“So he spent all that time teaching us the Tao so we could see that it was wrong.”

“No, not wrong. Not all of it. The compassion, humility moderation of the Tao, these are the qualities of a righteous man, but not inaction. These people are slaves to inaction.”

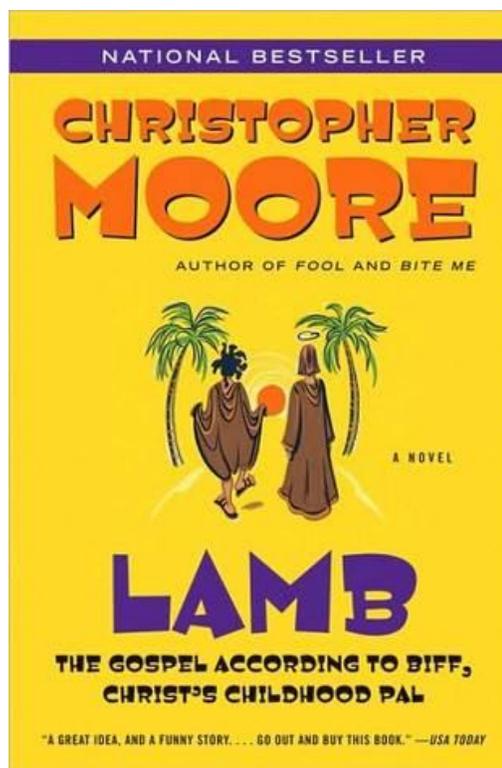
“The magus wasn’t teaching us about action in work, it was action as in change. That’s why we learned Confucius first—everything is like the Torah, rules to follow. And Loa-tzu is even more conservative, saying that if you do nothing won’t break any rules. You have to let tradition fall sometimes, you have to take action, you to eat bacon. That’s what Balthasar was trying to teach me.”

I’ve said it before, Josh—and you know I love bacon—but I don’t think that it is enough for the Messiah to bring bacon.”

“Change,” Joshua said. “A Messiah has to bring change. Change comes through action. Balthasar once told me, ‘There has never been a conservative hero.’ He was wise, that old man.”

How is this wall a metaphor that might resonate with present day AA history? Our service structure is designed to protect us but it’s not designed as a barrier. GSO feigns pseudo-humility by saying, “Hey, we’re the schleps at the bottom of the triangle; we can’t tell Intergroups what to do!”

But for me, real humility requires a personal relationship with reality; being humble is a right-sized view of my limits, my role and my possibilities. Neither leadership nor humility is playing the helpless bystander card. AA is growing more diverse. By our 100th anniversary—if we haven’t fucked it all up before then—our world will be and our fellowship will be more than the Judeo/Christian view of right living that our founders drew upon to articulated the AA way. The Tao means, “The Way.” In *Lamb* the Tao is portrayed as promoting true humility which fosters true leadership.



In the A.A. General Service Conference Inventory Compendium 2013 – 2015 (F-205), we read:

“Leadership’ is not a bad word in A.A.—there must be some for A.A. to function effectively at all levels; we should encourage each other to lead and be willing to follow as well. ... we should not fear challenging authority; leadership must listen to criticism.” p. 16

This is the language I’d like to hear from AAWS in Toronto right now instead of, “What can we do? We have no opinion.” Leadership is not tyranny. But neither is leadership a resignation of helplessness.

Yes, there is a service structure but this inverted triangle is not a hierarchy of worth; we are a fellowship of equals. Are we not, as intended, all responsible—at every level of the triangle? The Chapter 16 excerpt from *Lamb* warns of the tragic flaw of inaction. Is AAWS defending inaction as good stewardship? Could it be that AAWS has enslaved itself with inaction as described in the book? “One can’t be free without action,” as Christopher Moore writes.

AA liberty is nothing without AA responsibility—whenever, wherever. There is no freedom if we abdicate responsibility. All of us—members, groups, General Service Board trustees—have a responsibility.

What makes these essays in *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* so enduring is we don’t point the finger at other wrong-doers, we see our own flaws and our will to control. We are humored by our compulsion to guard against danger when no danger existed. Maybe that’s what is going on right now. Now, I suggest is a time for us to work together and see how everyone can get what they need. Now is not the time to point a finger at the faults of others. Our freedom always comes from admitting our own faults and imperfections and striving to be better. We don’t take other people’s inventory and certainly no peace or freedom can come from such a backward application of AA as inaction.

As Bill W wrote in July 1965, “in a group, or in AA as a whole, it has long since been found out that we cannot stand still and look the other way. The essence of all growth is a willingness to change for the better and then an unremitting willingness to shoulder whatever Responsibility this entails.”

AAWS, your tone is, “Don’t blame us, we didn’t do anything?” That is neither leadership nor servitude. Let’s forget about who’s to bless and who’s to blame. AA makes mistakes and we’re not perfect. We admit mistakes; we correct them. What can you offer in terms of leadership; is there more you can say and do that is solution-based and less based on self-justification?

We have talked about the Tao, the Human Rights Code and AA lore. AA values, tenets and Traditions are not at odds with either the Tao or the Ontario Human Rights Code. People are watching the goings on in Toronto. I believe they want us to work things out. They want AA to maintain its values and adapt to meet the changing needs of a

diversifying member and newcomer. No one wants change for change sake. But let's not be afraid. Let's not destroy AA with the lethargy of inaction.

I hope and trust that a solution can be mediated. Like our trials and tribulations of the past, we know that through surrender we find our freedom. Through self-reflection we find our capacity for love and service.

And back to AA growth and population. In 2009 there were zero atheist/agnostic groups in Canada according to the world directory hosted by New York City agnostics. Today there are 25 meeting nights for secular (atheist/agnostic/freethinker) AA in Canada in 15 towns/cities. I assure you this population of AA is growing steadily. There are now agnostic/atheist meetings listed on www.agnosticanyc.org from Russia, Japan, England, France, Columbia and Australia. Agnostic/Atheist groups in the USA are also growing, bucking the otherwise sagging trend. Of the 300+ meeting nights for atheists/agnostics posted on AgnosticAAnc, 200 of them started in the last four years.

Part 4 Dogma in theism, dogma in science dogma dogs our every step.

I suppose I come across as an advocate for a cause and maybe I am, but it's not the rights of secular AAs that I advocate for above all else. It's the right to free thought and free expression. Theists aren't the only population prone to dogmatism. Even in the scientific community, questioning pet theories isn't always well received.

I saw a Ted-talk recently by a biologist that I would consider a freethinker. According to Dr. Rupert Sheldrake, author of *The Science Delusion: Freeing the Spirit of Enquiry* (In USA, *Science Set Free: 10 Paths to New Discovery*), the delusion or dogma of current science is, "the belief that science already understands the nature of reality. The fundamental questions are answered, leaving only the details to be filled in."

Like their religious counterparts, some modern secularists practice their own tyranny from the pulpit of reason, dismissing such concepts as the exploration of consciousness or a purposefulness to nature. These ideas that rub against science's status quo are written off as superstitious woo-woo, backward ideas that threaten progress. In both his book and a controversial Ted talk, Dr Sheldrake says this:

"The science delusion is the belief that science already understands the nature of reality, in principle, leaving only the details to be filled in. This is a very widely spread belief in our society. It's the kind of belief system of people who say, "I don't believe in God; I believe in science." It's a belief system which has now been spread to the entire world. But there's a conflict in the heart of science between science as a method of inquire—based on reason, evidence, hypothesis and collective investigation—and science as a belief system or a worldview. And unfortunately, the worldview aspect of science has come to inhibit and constrict the free enquiry that is the very lifeblood of the scientific endeavor.

Since the late nineteenth century, science has been conducted under the aspect of a belief system or worldview that is essentially that of materialism—philosophical materialism. And the sciences are now wholly owned subsidiaries of the materialist worldview. I think that as we break out of it, the sciences will be regenerated”^v

His book points to ten dogmas of science and he challenges them. This offends some. While you can still see this TEDx talk on line it’s been suspended from the Ted official lineup. I get that this is a controversial stance and binary materials roll their eyes at any book endorsed by Deepak Chopra. Here’s what Rupert Sheldrake had to say about his talk been quarantined.

“This discussion is taking place because the militant atheist bloggers Jerry Coyne and P.Z. Myers denounced me, and attacked TED for giving my talk a platform. I was invited to give my talk as part of a TEDx event in Whitechapel, London, called ‘Challenging Existing Paradigms.’ That’s where the problem lies: my talk explicitly challenges the materialist belief system. It summarized some of the main themes of my recent book *Science Set Free* (in the UK called *The Science Delusion*).”^{vi}

I don’t bring this up because I have a man-crush on Dr. Sheldrake. I don’t think that a creative possibility has the same merit as tested scientific theory. It’s just that I don’t think science ought to be in the resting-on-our-laurels business. The list of widely held and completely mistaken scientific views throughout history is legion. Again, even science will serve us better if it remembers the three jewels: In order to generously and courageously lead us, compassion, moderation, and humility ought to be brought to challenging dogmas scientifically.

Part 5 AA: An Interpretation For the Nonbeliever (Hazelden)

Jackie B of Recovery Works Theater from San Francisco was one of last episode’s guests: Rebellion Dogs Radio #23. This just in: She asked for my mailing address and I gave it to her and what came of it? I got this out-of-print Hazelden pamphlet, *AA: An Interpretation For the Nonbeliever* by Dr. John R. Weinberg. How great can friends be? Thank you Jackie B.

So, I did some research on it because I wasn’t to recommend it to you all. I’ll keep looking but I think it’s been mothballed. I did find and buy *The Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous: Interpreted by the Hazelden Foundation* and I hoped it would include psychologist, Jon Weinberg. Sadly, the 1993 publication passes on the earlier contributions of Weinberg’s secular view including his 1975 pamphlet about AA and directed to both the medical community and prospective 12-Step members.

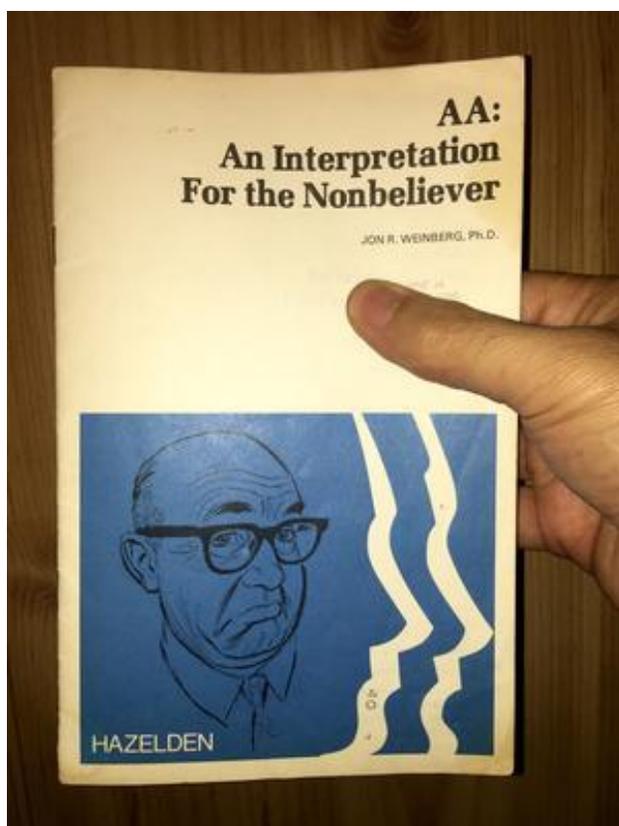
Here’s something from the Hazelden interpretations that I could buy online. It’s by Karen Elliott, Former Director of Hazelden Educational Material who is best known to our community by the pen-name Karen Casey who wrote *Every Day a New Beginning*, *Worthy of Love* and coauthor of *The Promise of a New Day*. So here’s what she says in the 1993 introduction:

“Hazelden has intentionally selected several voices to share their interpretation for the Steps, because a guiding principle of the Fellowship is that we should ‘take what fits and leave the rest.’ In other words, no individual speaks for a group or the organization as a whole. Each of us, in our search for spiritual, emotional, and mental health, must decide for ourselves how to apply the principles of *the program* in our lives. The application of a Step for one may differ, significantly on occasion, from an application that is meaningful to someone else.”^{vii}

That’s from the 1993 Hazelden collection of interpretations which includes Mel B, and other AAs + a PhD in Pastoral Theology and chemical dependency professionals.

There is one especially poignant statement in the booklet Jackie sent me that is a shout out to everyone—Intergroup, GSO, you, me—everyone who wants AA to thrive in unity, service and recovery.

Ernie Kurtz would reference Jon Weinberg’s work in *Not God: A History of Alcoholics Anonymous* so if you’ve read Ernie, you know or at least have been influenced by Weinberg. So, here’s some samples from by Jon R. Weinberg PhD, Hazelden Foundation Inc., 1975^{viii} *AA: An Interpretation For the Nonbeliever*



“Contrary to what many professionals believe, the 12 Steps of AA are suggested, not mandatory. The only requirement is a desire to stop drinking. Individuals are free to interpret and practice the steps as they wish, if at all. However, since AA is basically a way of life rather than a social club, the 12 Steps serve as a framework upon which most successful members build their new existence. ... many of the reservations about AA from both professionals and new or prospective members center on the content of the steps. Therefore, each step will be briefly analyzed from the authors viewpoint, which is secular and psychological, with the hope that other professions may utilize the approach comfortably with their clients if it is acceptable to themselves.” (p4)

Step 3: “In simplest terms, Step 3 means doing we should do rather than what we want to do. While this approach may be highly desirable for all people, it is often a life-or-death matter for the alcoholic. There will be innumerable times during recovery when he or she will want to drink, and only a strong commitment to what should be done, i.e. abstain regardless of circumstances, can prevent a relapse. ...

To summarize the first three steps, then, the alcoholic accepts his problem, i.e. falling victim to an incurable disease which is severely impairing his functioning; believes there is a partial remedy, i.e. a recovery program which fosters sane living; and decides to follow the program, i.e. commits himself to doing as he should. We now turn to the mental health aspects as found in the other nine steps of the program.

Under Typical Criticisms of AA

- AA is a substitute dependency
- AA is too religious
- AA is too rigid
- AA members are fanatic, smug, outspoken or otherwise obnoxious
- AA is prejudiced against professionals

In all of these rebuttals to objections, Dr. Jon Weinberg makes sound counter arguments with a compassionate understanding as to how any professional or prospective AA member might draw these conclusions. Under “AA is prejudiced against professionals Weinberg articulates the plight of identity politics. In the mid-70s, for sure and maybe it’s the same today, alcoholics often faced condescension, moralizing and righteous indignation from both loved ones and professionals. What got the most visceral reaction from me in what Wienburg wrote in 1975, was this short discussion as to why AA’s or practicing alcoholics might feel fed up with the medical profession. As you’re reading this passage below, maybe you will see similarities, as I did, with the non-theist in AA today and the attitudes of what the Spiritual Appendix describes as “our more religious members,” as well as those in the service structure to which we’ve been asking for accommodation by means of a larger voice in AA literature whereby atheist/agnostic speaks to atheist/agnostic.”

Check this out from page 12 of *AA: An Interpretation For the Nonbeliever*:

Bigotry is almost invariably a two-way street. When some minority group is discriminated against, whether due to race, religion, ethnicity, age, or stigmatized illness, that group tends to become hostile in a biased fashion toward all those labelled, ‘oppressors’. Alcoholics have not been accorded dignity, respect, and competent treatment by society as a whole, but professions entrusted with their care bear a special burden of responsibility for the systematic maltreatment and non-treatment, overt and disguised rejection, that historically has been the rule rather than the exception. Even though the climate appears to be gradually changing as professionals become enlightened, it may be a long time before an alcoholic can be reasonably confident that any given professional understands the illness, accepts its victims, and is competent to participate in its treatment.

The booklet goes on to discuss why AA is effective with emphasis on the Fellowship, implications for professionals and Alanon are also discussed.

But that section of Bigotry really spoke to me; I read it several times. To replace secularists/humanists with the alcoholic in his essay and replace AAWS where he writes about professionals, this really rings true for me. Here's a slight artistic liberty:

“Atheists have not been accorded dignity, respect, and competent treatment by AA as a whole, but the General Service Conference, entrusted with their care bears a special burden of responsibility for the systematic maltreatment and non-treatment, overt and disguised rejection, that historically has been the rule rather than the exception.”

I am sometimes asked, “Why are atheists so angry or outspoken in AA or preoccupied with the god-talk.” It's like asking why feminists, people with disabilities or people of color have a chip on their shoulder. Well the answer is simple; it's a learned protective reaction to systemic discrimination, sometimes intentional sometimes unconscious but almost always ubiquitous for secularists engaged in 12-Step discussions.



WHY ARE YOU ATHEISTS SO ANGRY?

worries warranted? As for our “But we've always done it this way,” mentality may be a contributing factor on 40 years of stonewalling of an atheist/agnostic pamphlet, or Intergroups rigid God-only view of AA's Steps.

To get all Dr. Phil on us, “How is that working for us, so far?” Well, we're at a tribunal hearing, defending our right to bigotry (in the case of Toronto Intergroup) or standing idly by as our fellows are being discriminated against (in the case of AAWS). Thinking about that 100th birthday of AA and imagining those members looking back at the goings on of 2016, we see that they get to judge our actions—not us. Which side of history do you think you're on? Which side am I on? It's a question we all might ask.

On a lighter note, I was delighted to see my friend Kevin whom I and many others shared a stage together at the Toronto Young People's Conference talent stage back in the mid-1980s. The Theme was “Stark Raving Sober.” I was playing in a band called Skid Row with my son's mom, Pam and Cathy who wrote the song we played that night called “Rebellion Dogs” which inspired the name of this radio show/publishing company. John and Al and Harvey were in that year's version of Skid Row, too,

A secular view to AA or an atheist's translation of the Twelve Steps is no more a threat to AA as a whole than a Russian or Punjabi interpretation.

Love and tolerance, or compassion as Christopher Moore quotes from The Toa, leads us to courage. Only someone compelled by the love of others can have the courage to change; because change is scary. So inaction isn't stewardship.

Letting groups read what they want, write what they want and say what they want might seem scary but are these floodgate

performing at Jorgensen Hall of Ryerson University in downtown Toronto. Kevin that night, I remember did a version of Voodoo Child that blew us all away and he thought he choked. Oh, the artist's way. But Kevin is a noteworthy singer/songwriter and his new project is [The Kat Kings](#), and his 2016 CD is called *Swingin' in the Swamp*. It's a great blend of R&B, Rock-a-billy, Swing and Rock 'n' Roll. On the radio version of this blog/podcast, you can hear song #13, "Baby You Can't Drink."^{ix}

I just want to say – it sounds like I've been ragging on AAWS but give credit where credit is due. The October issue of *The Grapevine*, AA's meeting in Print, will focus on atheist/agnostic stories.

In October I'll be giving a talk at the NAADAC Annual Conference in Minneapolis – that's October 7th through 11th and I'll be re-joined by John McAndrew M.Div who co-hosted the Sedona retreat with me in 2015.

In November, from the 11th to 13th, in Austin Texas, the 2016 We Agnostics, Atheists & Freethinkers International AA Conference. I am so excited to be going. Hope to see some of you there.

ⁱ Moore, Christopher, *Lamb: The Gospel According to Biff, Christ's Childhood Pal* New York: Harper Collins Publisher, 2002 p. 195

ⁱⁱ Visit <http://rebelliondogspublishing.com> for details. There are several blogs on the ongoing matter before the Ontario Human Rights Tribunal naming AAWS and Toronto Intergroup as respondents in a discrimination complaint (@ June 2016)

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.drugfree.org/newsroom/survey-ten-percent-of-american-adults-report-being-in-recovery-from-substance-abuse-or-addiction/>

^{iv} <http://www.aabeyondbelief.com/2016/06/05/vic-l-and-secular-aa/>

^v <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1TerTgDEgUE>

^{vi} <http://consciouslifeneeds.com/rupert-sheldrakes-response-banned-ted-video-science-delusion-video-included/1152072/>

^{vii} Elliott, Karen, *The Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous: Interpreted by the Hazelden Foundation*, Center City: Hazelden Publishing, 1993

^{viii} Weinberg, Ph.D., Jon R, *AA: An Interpretation For the Nonbeliever*, Center City: Hazelden Foundation Inc., 1975

^{ix} <http://www.thekatkings.com/>