

RELIGION IN DEED:  
ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS AS A FUNCTIONAL EQUIVALENT OF RELIGION

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ABSTRACT

PHILLIP PIERCE

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The principles of humility, honesty, and service undergird the Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) organization. These principles are among the reasons for considering it a functional equivalent of religion. This is the sense in which I, as the author, have experienced AA over the course of 38 years as well. This dissertation examines the assertion that AA is the functional equivalent of a religion.

Besides my own experience, I have collected data from written documents, books, research papers, and stories other members have shared. I have used an interpretive-analytical autoethnographic method to describe and explain the AA phenomenon. I argue that AA is a functional equivalent of religion, although it lacks an ideational dogma or assurances of other-worldly salvation. The only promise offered is the ability to accept life on life's terms, granted on a daily basis and contingent upon a spiritual condition obtained through a connection with a "higher power" of the individual's understanding. The AA alcoholic has a Janus face; first: complete acceptance of responsibility for one's reality (accept everything, expect nothing), second: full surrender to a higher power to change one's reality.

Although the principles of AA are similar to many other religions, I demonstrate the sense in which AA "inverts" the constellation of elements that are operative in other religions. AA is actually not solely about alcohol. It is about a method of producing a spiritual awakening similar to traditional religions. Scholars of religion in various fields and scholars researching alcoholic addiction should take this phenomenon into account.

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CHAPTER I  
INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND

The fact that Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) has had success with some alcoholics has been demonstrated by its growth both domestically and internationally. AA has grown to an estimated 123,000 groups in 180 countries. Its literature has been translated into 100 languages, as of 2022 (AA 2022a). All of this has been done with no marketing strategy or profit motive. As stated in AA's published literature, "Our public relations policy is based on attraction rather than promotion" (AA 1976:564). To quote the shortest paragraph in the *Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous (Big Book)*, "It works; it really does" (AA 1976:88). AA has no concern about competition. If AA was not needed, the entire program would be grateful; that would mean that the world no longer had this life-crushing problem. However, AA is still attracting a steady stream of new members at its meetings and is still the first choice for many other organizations and agencies that are trying to help alcoholics to recover, including medical treatment centers, courts, and government legal systems. People approach AA for several reasons. Some are sentenced to attend meetings by a judge or magistrate as part of a parole or a probation agreement. Others have become aware of the harm their behavior may have caused partners, spouses, children, or friends. Then, there are those who look at themselves and realize they need to change and decide to do something about it. Some of these people are able to stop or greatly reduce their alcohol consumption by themselves or by using the methods of the AA program without joining it. Others may establish or reestablish a relationship with professional and religious groups. AA applauds those successes. In other words, it is perfectly content when people do not join AA and recover using other methods. As an old-timer said to me when I first approached AA: *If you don't get help from us, please get help somewhere.*

The above introduction dispels the notion that AA is effective with anyone with an addiction problem. It, indeed, is efficacious for a certain “profile” among alcoholics, which I define as: AA alcoholic. This section explains who an AA alcoholic is and how she or he is separate from other alcoholics. It also explains that AA has a non-competitive agenda and does not strive against other recovery programs. Remarkably, AA does not attempt to cure excessive drinking and does not consider alcohol the problem. The problem is defined as the individual’s inability to live life on life’s terms: a “spiritual malady” (AA 1976:24-29).

Recovery from addiction to alcohol is often described as sobriety. Sobriety can be defined as not being drunk, but also, as intelligence, understanding, and empathy (Merriam-Webster 2004:682). AA’s function and purpose extend beyond the elimination of the use of alcohol. AA is a program designed to allow a change, not just in one’s lifestyle, but also, in one’s social role. It is about being “a part of, instead of, apart from” the society (C. 1984). The AA program is based on the principle of accepting responsibility for personal actions while surrendering the ability to change behaviors to a “higher power” (AA 1976:44-57).

AA starts with the premise that the responsibility for the member’s problems is solely on their own shoulders. However, the solution to the problem is not within their human ability to achieve (AA 1976). The difference between the AA program and other psychological or religious programs is perhaps the acceptance of the higher power’s role in this process. AA believes that “our problems are of our own making” driven by our own “selfishness, self-centeredness and self-pity” (AA 1976:62). Various religions and psychological programs may have different concepts of recovery or “cure.” However, members of AA are never considered cured, “We are not cured of alcoholism. What we really have is a daily reprieve based on our spiritual condition” (AA 1976:85).

AA was not developed to cure addictions; in fact, the program readily admits it does not achieve that goal. Nevertheless, the AA program in no way discounts the ability of both scientific and religious

programs to limit, and even eliminate, some people's addictions. AA supports any method that helps people live a better, more successful life.

Contributing to society and helping others is a central purpose of the program of AA. Indeed, the final step of the program's 12 steps is to extend AA' society into a universal society of love and tolerance for all. The co-founder of AA, Bill Wilson, pointedly asked: "Can we love the whole pattern of living as eagerly as we do the small segment of it we discovered when we try to help other alcoholics achieve sobriety? Can we meet our newly recognized responsibilities to the world at large?" (AA 1953:112). His belief was that not only was it possible, it had been accomplished by thousands of AA alcoholics by acceptance of and surrendering to, a spirituality-based program which gives back to society.

#### PROBLEM STATEMENT

The purpose of this dissertation is to examine the assertion that AA is the functional equivalent of a religion. This is done by systematic comparisons using an Interpretive-analytical auto ethnographic method. The AA program is based on the principle of accepting responsibility for personal actions while surrendering the ability to change behaviors to a "higher power." The difference between the AA program and other psychological programs is perhaps the acceptance of the higher power's role. AA believes that "our problems are of our own making" driven by our own "selfishness, self-centeredness and self-pity" (AA 1976:62).

AA maintains a spiritual rather than a religious identity but this research examines if AA matches Emile Durkheim's definition of religion in *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, as "A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices" (Durkheim 1915:62). If it does, then it would be a functional equivalent of religion.

#### RATIONALE

This study contributes to the sociology of religion. I suggest that AA can be best understood if it can be plausibly shown to be a functional equivalent of religion. Nevertheless, AA is unique in several

respects. It allows members to join without abandoning any other religious or cultural affiliation. It relies on its original “12 steps” and “12 traditions” to accomplish its goals, which are largely misunderstood by outside observers (Nealon-Woods et al. 1995; Kelly and Greene 2013). AA believes that alcohol is a “symptom” of a larger problem, identified as a “spiritual malady” (AA 1976:30). AA alcoholics are, according to AA, “bodily and mentally different”(AA 1976:30) As such, AA is a specific self-identified group (Arjono 2015). This unique and often incorrectly understood organization needs to be systematically studied.

#### STRUCTURE OF DISSERTATION

Chapter 2 presents the origins and the history of AA. Chapter 3 summarizes the relevant literature and outlines the theoretical framework of the study. It concludes by stating the research questions. Chapter 4 outlines the autoethnographic methodology. Chapter 5 is a detailed analysis of the 12 steps of AA and my own struggle with them. Chapter 6 includes my personal experiences with AA. Chapter 7 analyzes AA using Durkheim's perspective on religion. Chapter 8 summarizes the key findings, discusses implications of the findings, discusses limitations, and outlines future research. Chapter 9 is an epilogue that crystalizes my four decades of experiences with AA.

## CHAPTER II

### ORIGINS, PRINCIPLES, AND EVOLUTION OF ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS

This chapter addresses the historical evolution and structures of the AA organization since 1934. The 12 steps of the AA program and the 12 traditions are explained. Individual groups, types of meetings, and administrative duties are described. The notion of “sponsorship” and its importance is addressed as well.

AA originates in an earlier organization known as The Oxford Group (Kurtz 1979a). Bill Wilson (hereinafter, Bill W.) who would be a co-founder of AA, had a meeting with a friend of his who was part of the Oxford Group, a Christian organization, which was not directly connected to alcoholism, but believed in identifying and making amends for wrongs done to others and providing service to others. This experience familiarized Bill W. with the idea of a “higher power” and facilitated Bill W.'s “spiritual experience” while he was in the alcoholic ward of a hospital in New York City in 1934 (AA 1976:12). During the meeting between Bill W. and Dr. Bob (the other co-founder of AA) in 1935, they discussed concepts that came from the Oxford Group such as making amends to people they had hurt and service to others (AA 1976:154). AA did not exist at that time. It would be 1939 before AA would start to exist as an organization after the *Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous* was published (AA 1957).

The early years of AA were rife with spectacular growth along with confusion and disappointment. There were a plethora of divergent and – at times contradictory -- ideas about how to help alcoholics. Various groups had different understandings of them, and the co-founders of AA were at pains to forge a working consensus about “How AA can best function and stay whole and so survive” (AA 1976:563).

The story -- or perhaps legend -- I like about this period is when one group developed a way to serve alcoholics by establishing a clinic that provided three services: treating alcoholics' physical problems, implementing the AA program, and helping them with jobs, places to live, and financial aid.

This clinic had a lot of rules. It failed miserably. The leader, an anonymous member of the group, ended up publicizing a pamphlet called “Rule 64.” It was entirely blank except for the center page with this inscription: “Don’t take yourself so damn seriously.” I have been unable to find a copy of this supposed pamphlet, but the story is often told by old-timers to newcomers they feel are getting too obsessed with details.

#### STANDARD PRINCIPLES 12 AND 12

The procedures of AA are approved primarily from conference-approved literature. This is overseen by AA's World Services Organization Inc, which is managed by members who are selected by other members who have chosen to serve the groups by attending conferences and group conscious meetings.

All AA groups are autonomous and may function however the group prefers, “Except in matters affecting other groups or AA as a whole” (AA 1976:564). The traditions serve as suggested rules, interpreted by what AA calls “trusted servants.” They are not leaders and have no governing power over individual members. “The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking” (AA 1976:564). However, the members who are elected to manage the administration (the trusted servants) discuss issues and then ask AA World Services to make suggestions that are felt to be in the best interest of AA (AA 1976). The basic text of AA is the *Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous*.

The basic text consisting of the first 164 pages of the *Big Book* is the basis for the program. It is reputed to have been written by the founders: Bill W. and Dr. Bob, along with around 70 of the first members (no one is sure of the exact number; it is an anonymously composed text). These pages have never been revised since the publication of the book. The iconic “12 steps” of the program are listed in the 5<sup>th</sup> chapter of the *Big Book*:

Here are the steps we took, which are suggested as a program of recovery:

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives were unmanageable.

2. Came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God *as we understood him*.
4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory.
5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being, the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. Humbly ask Him to remove our shortcomings.
8. Made a list of all Persons we had harmed and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God *as we understood Him*, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.
12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the results of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs. (AA 1976:59-60)

The publication of the *Big Book* in 1939 is thought by many to be the beginning of AA. Processes involved with the suggestions made by the above steps have changed. For example, Bill W. who was a major contributor to the *Big Book* revealed further details about this process in a book published 16 years later, entitled: *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* (hereafter 12 and 12; AA 1953). Of course, the steps remained exactly as they were but his perception of them evolved. The 12 traditions followed in the wake of the 12 steps. In 1950 the first annual convention of AA created a body known as the World Services organization and adapted the 12 traditions (AA 1957).

This was an important event. The 12 traditions unified various AA groups into a coherent association. AA became a much larger international society. Groups representing different races, genders, nationalities, and religions joined in one society with uniformity and yet the flexibility to

incorporate various mottos, rituals, and symbols. Some groups require a close friend or family member to accompany the alcoholic. Others (in Iran, for example) require a white robe to be worn by the attendants. The variations are practically innumerable, but the commitment to the 12 steps and 12 traditions remain constant.

The 12 traditions of AA are the following:

One-- Our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends upon AA unity.

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.

Three—The only requirement for AA membership is a desire to stop drinking.

Four—Each group should be autonomous except in matters affecting other groups or AA as a whole.

Five—Each group has but one primary purpose—to carry its message to the alcoholic who still suffers.

Six—An AA group ought never endorse, finance or lend the AA name to any related facility or outside enterprise, lest problems of money, property and prestige divert us from our primary purpose.

Seven—Every AA group ought to be fully self-supporting, declining outside contributions.

Eight—AA should remain forever nonprofessional, but our service centers may employ special workers.

Nine—AA as such, ought never to be organized; but we may create services boards or committees directly responsible to those they serve.

Ten—AA has no opinion on outside issues, hence the AA name ought never to be drawn into public controversy.

Eleven—Our public relations policy is based on attraction rather than promotion; we need always maintain personal anonymity at the level of press, radio and films.

Twelve—Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our traditions, ever reminding us to place principles before personalities. (AA 1976:564)

The 12 traditions are restated in “long form.” Because of the significance of these principles for this dissertation, I am quoting them as well:

#### Long Form

1. Each member of AA is but a small part of a great whole. AA must continue to live or most of us will surely die. Hence our common welfare comes first. But individual welfare follows close afterward.
2. For our group purpose there is but one ultimate authority—a loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience.
3. Our membership ought to include all who suffer from alcoholism. Hence we may refuse none who wish to recover. Nor ought AA membership ever depend upon money or conformity. Any two or three alcoholics gathered together for sobriety may call themselves an AA group, provided that, as a group, they have no other affiliation.
4. With respect to its own affairs, each AA group should be responsible to no other authority than its own conscience. But when its plans concern the welfare of neighboring groups also, those groups ought to be consulted. And no group, regional committee, or individual should ever take any action that might greatly affect AA as a whole without conferring with the Trustees of the General Service Board. On such issues our common welfare is paramount.
5. Each AA group ought to be a spiritual entity having but one primary purpose—that of carrying its message to the alcoholic who still suffers.

6. Problems of money, property, and authority may easily divert us from our primary spiritual aim. We think, therefore, that any considerable property of genuine use to AA should be separately incorporated and managed, thus dividing the material from the spiritual. An AA group, as such, should never go into business. Secondary aids to AA, such as clubs or hospitals which require much property or administration, ought to be incorporated and so set apart that, if necessary, they can be freely discarded by the groups. Hence such facilities ought not to use the AA name. Their management should be the sole responsibility of those people who financially support them. For clubs, AA managers are usually preferred. But hospitals, as well as other places of recuperation, ought to be well outside AA- and medically supervised. While an AA group may cooperate with anyone, such cooperation ought never go so far as affiliation or endorsement, actual or implied. An AA group can bind itself to no one.

7. The AA groups themselves ought to be fully supported by the voluntary contributions of their own members. We think that each group should soon achieve this ideal; that any public solicitation of funds using the name of AA is highly dangerous, whether by groups, clubs, hospitals, or other 2 outside agencies; that acceptance of large gifts from any source, or of contributions carrying any obligation whatever, is unwise. Then too, we view with much concern those AA treasuries which continue, beyond prudent reserves, to accumulate funds for no stated AA purpose. Experience has often warned us that nothing can so surely destroy our spiritual heritage as futile disputes over property, money, and authority.

8. AA should remain forever non-professional. We define professionalism as the occupation of counseling alcoholics for fees or hire. But we may employ alcoholics where they are going to perform those services for which we may otherwise have to engage nonalcoholics. Such special services may be well recompensed. But our usual AA "12th Step" work is never to be paid for.

9. Each AA group needs the least possible organization. Rotating leadership is the best. The small group may elect its secretary, the large group its rotating committee, and the groups of a large metropolitan area their central or intergroup committee, which often employs a full-time secretary. The trustees of the General Service Board are, in effect, our AA General Service Committee. They are the custodians of our AA Tradition and the receivers of voluntary AA contributions by which we maintain our AA General Service Office at New York. They are authorized by the groups to handle our over-all public relations and they guarantee the integrity of our principle newspaper, the AA Grapevine. All such representatives are to be guided in the spirit of service, for true leaders in AA are but trusted and experienced servants of the whole. They derive no real authority from their titles; they do not govern. Universal respect is the key to their usefulness.

10. No AA group or member should ever, in such a way as to implicate AA, express any opinion on outside controversial issues—particularly those of politics, alcohol reform, or sectarian religion. The AA groups oppose no one. Concerning such matters they can express no views whatever.

11. Our relations with the general public should be characterized by personal anonymity. We think AA ought to avoid sensational advertising. Our names and pictures as AA members ought not be broadcast, filmed, or publicly printed. Our public relations should be guided by the principle of attraction rather than promotion. There is never need to praise ourselves. We feel it better to let our friends recommend us.

12. And finally, we of AA believe that the principle of anonymity has an immense spiritual significance. It reminds us that we are to place principles before personalities; that we are actually to practice a genuine humility. This to the end that our great blessings may never spoil

us; that we shall forever live in thankful contemplation of Him who presides over us all (AA 1976:565).

I believe the above-mentioned (probably apocryphal) pamphlet entitled “Rule 64” contains an important realization by AA, as an organization. The pamphlet (or the myth of it) serves as a reminder that we cannot exhaustively figure out all aspects of the alcoholics’ lives. We are reliant on a higher power for taking care of alcoholics. Indeed, if we could fix things, we would not need AA. An honest look at our failures brings us back to the principles articulated in the 12 steps and 12 traditions.

#### GROUP STRUCTURE

Although AA is an international organization, its structure is uniquely decentralized. On July 2, 2010, marking the 75th anniversary of AA, Nate Rawlings of the *Times* described it in the following way:

Unlike most nonprofit organizations, AA does not have a president. It keeps no formal membership rolls, requires no dues or fees and does not actively fundraise. AA calls itself “a fellowship of men and women” who unite to “solve their common problem and help others to recover from alcoholism. The only requirement for membership is the desire to stop drinking.” The group's central office in New York has about 85 workers who keep in touch with localized groups throughout the world. The Organization has two operating corporations, which report to a general-service board composed of 14 AA members and seven “nonalcoholic friends of the fellowship.” AA publishes literature about alcoholism and its approach to sobriety in a monthly international journal, books and information pamphlets. (Rawlings 2010)

AA maintains a well-developed and updated website (aa.org) with detailed information about its history, doctrine, resources, and procedures. There, it features an “inverted triangle” concerning its structure. In it, the innumerable “AA groups” are, tellingly, at the top and the “General Services Board” is at the bottom (AA 2022b).

This brings up the question, what is an “AA group?” When several members of AA get together to help each other they form a group, as the long form of the third tradition specifies. AA, as a whole, is an anonymous entity controlled solely by its members and their groups. There are various types of meetings. They include “open meetings” accessible to anyone interested in AA, and “closed meetings” attended only by AA members and devoted to subject matters that members are uncomfortable sharing in open meetings.

There are also “men’s meetings” and “women’s meetings” requested for similar reasons. Additionally, there are “speaker meetings” in which a specific member is asked to tell his or her story of recovery. Occasionally, there are “discussion meetings” in which a topic is chosen and all who wish to share may do so. Another type of meeting worth mentioning, is the type attended both by the old timers and new members and chaired by a member with longer sobriety, in order to help newcomers to approach people who have more experience, known as “Sponsors.”

Of course, the above typology is not exhaustive and it cannot be, given the wide discretion various AA groups have. Most meetings, however, have a chairperson (with a minimum of 30 days or one year of sobriety) who may attempt to limit meeting time to one hour, and to cover the areas the group has decided to discuss such as new meetings, and to attend to issues of interest to the group such as holiday parties, or even games.

The meeting typically starts with a prayer, usually the “serenity prayer” (author unknown)<sup>1</sup> and a reading from the *Big Book*, usually part of the 5<sup>th</sup> chapter: “How It Works” (AA 1976), which includes the 12 steps. The chairperson then usually asks everyone to introduce themselves. The formula for the beginning of the introduction is: “Hi, I am ... and I am an alcoholic” to which the group responds in unison: “Hi ....” Members sometimes – but not always – share the last date of their drinking as they

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<sup>1</sup>“God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”

introduce themselves. In order to maintain anonymity, usually only first names are given but that is up to the member. After the introductions, the chairperson proceeds, as the meeting type requires.

Meetings generally end by a reminder that what is heard in an AA meeting should remain confidential.

At the end of the meetings the group may stand and close with another prayer. But, again, various meetings have very different formats.

Sponsorship is an important part of AA. And, although it is not mentioned in the *Big Book* as such, it is certainly part of service to others. Helping others is a large part of how AA alcoholics find sobriety. Being a sponsor is not a matter of explaining what a newcomer should do. The sponsor is likely to benefit far more than the newcomer (“sponsee” or “pigeon” as the novices used to be called in my day). Being willing to help others is part of the 12<sup>th</sup> step and is covered in the basic texts, the *Big Book* and the *12 and 12*. Helping others is how Bill W. and Dr. Bob found sobriety and it still works (AA 1976:84-85).

#### FROM MICRO TO MACRO, AND BACK

Each AA group has a position known as trusted servants who are elected by the members. They are the ones who do the necessary administrative work such as paying the bills, ordering the necessary literature (journals, pamphlets and books published by the World Services Organization, authored anonymously, and made available to AA groups), and taking care of other details. The only income comes from member donations, made in each meeting.

I have to admit, the inverted triangle structure of AA does not make sense for an organization as large as it is; but it somehow works. My sponsor once told me that it is a “God thing.” I know that is not an explanation, just an impression.

My personal involvement with the AA structure may be illuminating in this respect. I had been sober, or at least not drinking, for about six years. I decided it was time for me to be the group service representative, responsible for the planning and coordination between the different groups. At the

time, it seemed a prestigious appointment. I had a lot to learn. The members of my home group elected me, and I became the G.S.R. trusted servant. I was proud of my new appointment and felt important and powerful. I thought I was in charge. Actually, being a trusted servant is good for newer members because it shows them how powerless an individual, any individual in AA, is. I wanted to make things better and had big plans, but my bosses, the group members, mostly just laughed at me and said no.

So, I thought the way to demonstrate my ability and importance to AA was to take a higher (actually lower) position, as a “District Services Representative” and I was again elected by the group for the position. I was now in charge of the state conference. All of the groups in the state were involved. I was one of the discussion-makers for the entire state. I thought my time had come; this was power. In fact, instead of being laughed at and told off by one group, now I had the members of every group in the state doing the same thing. This crushed my ego, which of course was very good for me. It showed me that I was a servant not a leader.

#### AA DEVELOPMENT

The most accurate and complete history of AA came not from AA or even an alcoholic member of AA but rather from a scholar, Ernest Kurtz. Kurtz’s study of AA started as his dissertation but expanded into a lifetime project that extended from 1978 to 2015. Before Kurtz completed his dissertation, he became a priest and served at the Our Lady of Good Counsel parish in Rochester, New York from 1961 to 1966. The three main books of Ernest Kurtz on AA are: *Not-God: A History of AA* (1979a); *The Collected Ernie Kurtz* (2008); and *A.A. The Story* (1979b).

According to Kurtz, a meeting in New York City in 1934 between Bill W. a stockbroker, and Edwin T. (Ebby) a businessman and a member of the Oxford Group (who would three years later die a tragic alcoholic death) marks the beginning of AA. While this meeting was definitely important, the principles and concepts from which AA grew started in 1931 by another alcoholic, Rowland H., who had attempted everything at his disposal to control his drinking. He had the resources to travel to Zurich, Switzerland,

and to be treated by the world-famous Dr. Carl Gustav Jung for over a year. Dr. Jung eventually told him that he was unable to treat him; he said that he had never seen an alcoholic of this kind recover. Rowland asked if that meant he was to die drunk. Jung told him that some people had recovered by a “spiritual experience” (AA 1976). Jung told him that he had been trying to awaken such a sentiment in Rowland but had not been successful. Rowland went back to America and became involved with a Christian Evangelical organization, the Oxford Group. Although the Oxford Group was not specifically concerned with alcohol, its principles of confession of sins (or wrongs), making amends, and service to others were inspirational to Rowland. Consequently, when he heard a friend of his, Edwin T. (Ebby), was about to be permanently incarcerated because of his drinking, Rowland had him released to his care. Edwin T. was the person who met Bill W. and told him about Jung, Rowland, and the Oxford Group. It was the latter meeting that persuaded Bill W. to seek spiritual help (Kurtz 1979a).

Bill W. went on to contact Dr. Jung who would have a genuine influence on the development of the program of AA. As mentioned before, Bill W., trying to understand how this God of Ebby’s could possibly help him, checked himself into the drunk ward of a hospital under the care of Dr. William D. Silkworth, the author of *The Doctor’s Opinion* (AA 1976). Silkworth had no great hope for Bill W., as his previous attempts to sober this chronic alcoholic had failed; but he admitted him again. It was in this hospital bed, under the influence of sedatives, that Bill W. had his spiritual experience. His story is that he suddenly realized, “who was he to believe there is no God. And a calmness and serenity flowed over him” (AA 1976:12).

As Bill W. was in the hospital Ebby brought him a copy of William James’ (1951) *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, which Bill W. claimed was what allowed him to accept a God of his own understanding. After his spiritual experience and the freedom to choose his own concept of God, or higher power, Bill W. would never drink again. Unfortunately, Ebby, as stated above, would be unable to stop drinking and would die in about three years. Bill W. would meet with a medical doctor from Akron,

Ohio in 1935. He was Bob Smith known to AA as Dr. Bob. Bill W. was in Akron on a business trip that ended in failure, and he was tempted to drink so he called a minister whose phone number was listed in the hotel lobby. The minister was unable to help him but introduced him to another person who was involved with the Oxford Group and who knew someone in the same situation. Bill W. called and went to see Dr. Bob in Akron. Their common experience with the Oxford Group helped them articulate the principles of AA (Kurtz 1979a).

Dr. Bob was not at all sure that this man from New York had anything that could help him, but he agreed to listen, and Bill W. shared his experiences. The meeting was intended to be 15 minutes, but Dr. Bob wanted to hear more from this New Yorker. This began three weeks of Oxford Group-type of telling stories, trying to admit the wreckage of their past and making plans to help others. At this time Dr. Bob said that it was time for the annual medical conference, and it was his intention to attend and try to stay sober. He went but got drunk. Bill W. and Dr. Bob's wife picked him up at the train station, took him home, and put him to bed. It was discovered that Dr. Bob had surgery planned in a few days, and Bill W. stayed with him until the morning of the surgery. Bill W. gave Dr. Bob a beer to settle his nerves before the surgery, which he drank. Bill and Dr. Bob's wife went back to his house to wait and see what happened. It was late afternoon when Dr. Bob called them and said the surgery had been a success and that he finished early and spent the day trying to practice straightening out his past and trying to help others. He would never drink again (Kurtz 1979a).

Kurtz states: "The sources of AA's core ideas were complexly mingled in the founding moments" (Kurtz 1979b:42-43). What Kurtz felt sure about was that the spiritual direction provided by Carl Jung, along with the idea of validity of multiple variations of religious experiences proposed by William James were both essential in the founding of AA. The belief in the hopelessness of alcoholism as a mental condition and a physical "allergy" was suggested to Bill W. by Dr. Silkworth and was instrumental in the founding of AA. Finally, the realization of failure of ego and, in AA parlance, the necessity of "surrender"

to a higher power and a lifestyle based on helping others completes the main principles of AA (AA 1976:13; Kurtz 1979a:27).

Kurtz believed AA is about the alcoholic and not about alcoholism (Kurtz 1979a). It is important to remember that at the first meeting of Bill W. and Dr. Bob, AA did not exist, but the Oxford Group, which was not committed to alcohol recovery, did. Bill W. was not comfortable being directly connected to a religion, but it was the only home they had available. In 1937, the Oxford Group, unhappy with Bill spending time and resources on "hopeless drunks" instead of witnessing to a more affluent society, ended its support for Bill's alcoholic recovery efforts and the unnamed fellowship separated from the Oxford Group.

The name AA was not coined until 1939. A story I was told at a meeting in 1984 about where the name AA came from is worth mentioning. The story is that a mentally disturbed alcoholic attended the meetings and all he did was sit and rock back and forth in a chair, repeating again and again, "alcoholics anonymous" then "anonymous alcoholics." I have not been able to further support this story; but it seems plausible to me because the *Big Book* was published in 1939 under the name of Alcoholics Anonymous, with no other reason for the name that I am aware of.

Needless to say, the history of AA is not marked with calmness and serenity. Remember, we are dealing with alcoholics and, as a friend of mine said in a meeting, no one I know got here on a winning streak. We, as others before us, including Bill W. and Dr. Bob, are here because we had to be, as there was nowhere else to go. Kurtz addresses this turbulent history as well as a non-alcoholic possibly could. Groups expanded from Akron to New York, Cleveland, St. Louis, Chicago, Detroit, and everywhere members went. People became aware of the program by word of mouth or articles published in the media about the program's success. Local leaders and members had different opinions and beliefs about how we could best help suffering alcoholics. It became, for a time, Bill W.'s role in life to be a mediator between them. This need would be eliminated by the addition of the AA's 12 traditions, and later the

formation of AA World Services (AA 1957). However, during this time Bill W. went through periods of emotional depression and spiritual darkness. Kurtz described what was documented at the time and the people who were involved, including a Jesuit priest from St. Louis, Father Edward Dowling. Bill W. would use the steps of the program for self-evaluation and for examining his character defects of pride, selfishness, and self-pity. All this is detailed in the first 164 pages of the *Big Book*. Kurtz demonstrated that the AA program involves a change in lifestyle not the observing of a list of requirements. Bill W. was able to recover not from alcohol (he was no longer drinking) but from darkness and self-pity by connecting to a higher power made available by honest self-evaluation and communication with others like him. As the *Big Book* says:

That feeling of uselessness and self-pity will disappear. We will lose interest in selfish things and gain interest in our fellows. Self-seeking will slip away. Our whole attitude and outlook upon life will change. Fear of people and economic insecurity will leave us. (AA 1976:84)

This relationship between Bill W. and Father Downing is an important example of how the program was actually used for recovery. It illustrates the way in which accepting personal limitations, doing an honest self-evaluation, and surrendering to a spiritual power larger than one's self could relieve the alcoholic of his emotional darkness. As a priest, Kurtz was probably aware of the role of confession in spiritual life. However, the emotional distress, the fear and anger, the darkness Bill W. was addressing must be experienced in order to be understood.

As an old-timer, my sponsor Chuck, told me in 1984, as we were discussing the differences in AA's higher power and other concepts of god. He said, and I paraphrase:

I don't know or even care about heaven, cause right now is all I can handle. But Hell doesn't scare me at all, cause I've been there, and AA gave me the way out. I'll take what I got right now, be grateful for it, and see what I can add to the mainstream of life. (C. pers. comm)

That is the most important thing Kurtz's history demonstrates: the ability of alcoholics who were unable to recover in any other way, medical, religious, or psychological, to join together and to find a solution none of them were able to find by themselves.

The establishment of the 12 traditions in 1952 was not just a method of maintaining a permanent structure for all groups to work together but was also to protect AA from outside agencies who wanted to join. AA has and will share its methods with any individuals or groups who wish to implement them, but it has always refused to be aligned with any other organization. This protects individual members or groups from being forced to change beliefs or structures that they felt were successful for their purposes. Changes in AA have been based on the needs and experiences of its members.

Kurtz examined the spiritual versus religious concepts of AA based on what was believed and how it was exemplified and conveyed. Kurtz likened the first three steps of AA to an "American expression of Evangelical Pietism" (Kurtz 1979b:182). He argues that it involved *salvation* attained through *conversion*, the precondition of which was the act of *surrender* (Kurtz 1979b).

Kurtz's background as both a clergyman and a historian helped him understand AA. However, his lack of experience as an alcoholic and certainly an AA alcoholic means his comprehension of the phenomenon is limited. Salvation from alcohol is not the goal. In fact, an AA alcoholic is never saved from anything. He only receives a "daily reprieve" (AA 1976:85). The other point Kurtz overlooked in the first three steps (and indeed all 12 steps) is the lack of emphasis on alcohol. Alcohol is only mentioned once in step 1 and never repeated in the remaining 11 steps. The ideas of lay religiosity and the anti-intellectual attitude are misunderstood to various degrees as well. But the AA's statement that only an alcoholic can understand another alcoholic is based on experience not presumption (Kurtz 1979b).

The relationship between AA and any chosen understanding of a higher power, be it Christian or otherwise, is central to the program of AA. AA supports all beliefs and they all are supported as personal

experiences. This includes American Evangelical Christianity but no more than any other creed. This is one reason why AA is different. It has no religious dogma. It has a forbidden realm symbolized by alcohol, collective (minimal) rituals, and an equivalent of a religious congregation: the open and closed meetings. That is where its similarity to religion ends. The recovery is not a salvation, but more of a willingness to participate and be a part of the AA community, with honesty, humility, and willingness to serve.

Kurtz tells us that a majority of research into AA was conducted by sociologists. The intent being to get “accurate, exact data.” He goes on to say that the issues being examined by the sociologists are different from the issue AA deems central: “self-centeredness as the root of our problems” (Kurtz 2008:3).

Kurtz illustrates various false starts by recounting the experience he had with an AA member: “I went to a meeting listed, in Akron itself, [where AA originated] for God’s sake, and they began by suggesting we go around the table and tell how we had nurtured our inner child today. I thought: “Hell! I’m a drunk, so I left” (Kurtz 2008:3). AA groups can meet and discuss anything they feel is of value. Many different methods have been tried by groups and individuals to achieve recovery. As long as they do not interfere with AA general principles, stated below, they may continue calling themselves AA (AA 1976).

AA practices vary but certain principles are constant. The principles of acceptance of life on life’s terms, accepting sole responsibility for one’s actions, being candid and honest about one’s motives and deeds, being willing to be of service to other alcoholics, and surrendering to a higher power have not changed ever since AA came into existence in 1939. AA changes to accommodate particulars, but the principles of AA remain the same.

One of the most interesting experiments took place when the co-founder of AA Bill W., in 1956 into the early part of the 1960s, experimented with LSD. Of course, at the time it was legal. Bill W. was,

in all good faith, trying to help more people find a recovery through greater awareness of their mental capabilities, particularly in the area of spiritual contact. Kurtz writes about Bill W.'s use of the drug: "AA's own telling of this story in the book *Pass It On* describes Bill W. as 'enthusiastic' about his experience; he felt it helped him eliminate many barriers erected by the self, or ego, that stands in the way of one's direct experience of the cosmos and of God" (Kurtz 2008:40). The main point of Bill W.'s use of LSD is the fact that the use of the drug was never part of AA. This should serve as a good example of personal experiences and their relationship to AA's spiritual practices.

Kurtz contends changes brought about by Bill W. and others were attempts to "melt the intellectual mountain in whose shadow [they] lived" (Kurtz 2008:43). Kurtz compares religious dogmas to a mountain in the shadow of which the faithful live. As such, AA has no intellectual shadow and thinking is not restricted. Members are recommended to "add to the mainstream of life" (AA 1976:86), rather than indulging in selfish and self-centered pursuits.

An important aspect of self as the problem, even without the presence of addiction, was introduced in 1939 by the co-founder's wife who had no drinking problems whatsoever.

One Sunday, Bill asked me if I was ready to go to the meeting with him. To my astonishment as well as his, I burst forth with, "Damn your old meetings!" and threw a shoe as hard as I could. This surprising display of temper over nothing pulled me up short and made me start to analyze my own attitudes. By degrees I saw that I had been wallowing in self-pity, that I resented the fact that ... I was left alone while he was off somewhere scouting up new drunks or working with old ones. I felt on the outside of a very tight little clique of alcoholics that no mere wife could enter." She notes, "My life's purpose of sobering up Bill, which made me feel desperately needed, had vanished. ... I decided to strive for my own spiritual growth. (Al-Anon Family Groups n.d.)

The shoe-throwing episode above is the start of one of the many 12-step programs that have developed after AA became an organization. Groups such as: Overeaters Anonymous, Gamblers Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous (best known as NA), and others, use the 12-step program and have established themselves as anonymous organizations. None are directly associated with AA but the closest affiliation is probably with Al-anon (support programs for those whose lives have been affected by an alcoholic) which was founded by the AA co-founder, Bill W.'s wife Lois, in 1939. The organization was originally for the wives of alcoholics (notice the gender biases). Lois became aware of her need to identify herself and find an individual spiritual experience and growth. The principles are the same and even the symbol alcohol is used as a gathering point. As explained above, the resentments that Lois identified were based on Bill's alcoholic drinking but were still her own.

To sum up this chapter, the AA belief system includes two paradoxical elements: total responsibility and total surrender. The organization, as I shall examine in greater detail, has a set of interrelated and intertwined practices. First, and foremost, it requires self examination with utmost "honesty" and "humility" unencumbered by rationalizations or judgements. The self as it actually exists must be examined as it is, (not as it should, could, might or would be) is the focus of this examination. Second, the member must be willing to be of service to others in whatever way one can.

## CHAPTER III

### LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter reviews and evaluates the research in three areas related to AA: the role of religion in alcohol recovery, the role of psychology in the treatment of the addict, and the historical evolution of AA. The chapter examines the contributions and limitations of each area. The discussion illustrates the fact that none of the research areas addresses AA's exclusive focus on individual responsibility, the autonomous reality of the social world, and the alcoholic's need for the support of a higher power. This is followed by a discussion of the theoretical framework. The chapter concludes with a presentation of the research questions.

Recovery from addiction offers a broad spectrum of opinions according to the research literature. The first section focuses on three types of literature that specifically relate to the AA program: religious doctrine, psychological improvement, and historical research.

#### RELIGION AND RECOVERY

Religion is sometimes listed as part of the program of AA (Apanovitch 1997). AA has no requirements for any type of vernacular religious beliefs but recommends tolerance for any believers. A spiritual connection is stated in the basic text of the AA program as necessary for this type of alcoholic (AA 1976; Arjono 2015; Finlay 2000; Laudet et al. 2006; Steiker 2011). But, the only measure used by AA to define success is the success of the individual as it relates to successful social involvement, on a daily basis.

Allen and Lo (2010) examined the influence religiosity had on substance abuse. The effects of spirituality were found to be limited. Their research found that recovery by AA depended on a submission to a divine being and caused a suppression of individualism. However, AA (1976) has absolutely no requirements for religious beliefs and the only personal requirement is a desire to stop drinking and a belief in a higher power that can be anything greater than self, either secular or divine.

Hatch et al. (1998) studied the validation of spirituality in the science of health and wellness and addressed spiritual condition with the use of a belief scale. A questionnaire containing 26 questions in a modified Likert type format allowed individual spirituality to be measured and empirical data collected to relate spirituality and drug and alcohol usage. This study helped identify the influence of spirituality on drug and alcohol addiction for some types of addiction. While the information may be valuable for recovery programs where alcohol and drug usage was measured, it is less helpful in a program relying on lifestyle measurements as a gauge of its success.

Zimmerman (2002) studied the debate on alcohol addiction being a religious “sin” or a disease created by drinking. The research underlines the effect of different beliefs about alcohol dependence on the recovery from it. It supports multiple addiction models for different types of recovery methods.

Fagin (1987) examined mission programs with religious beliefs that use a 12-step program to work with skid row environments using AA concepts and attendance at AA meetings. Of course, any program attempting to help alcoholics is welcome but these are other organizations, not associated with AA, even if their organizers are. Anderson (2006) researched the difficulty of finding empirical evidence to support this type of spirituality because of the lack of access to membership information kept anonymous by AA, which limits accurate member information and experience-based data.

The effect of religion on AA is discussed in *Drugs and Alcohol: A Philosophic Analysis* (Walker, Godlaski, and Staton-Tindall 2013). This study identifies areas unexplored by the existing literature such as how spirituality is defined and practiced by AA members. This research is critical of the claims about AA spirituality being a variety of Christianity. It simply views it as a method for alcoholic recovery seemingly unrelated to social religious experiences.

A much earlier study, Rudolf Otto's *The Idea of The Holy*, addressed the validity of non-rational experiences as a source of religious beliefs. While the discussion is accurate, it may be argued that AA posits a kind of spirituality measured by lifestyle success. It may also be proposed that AA's notion of a

higher power, as understood by the individual, is compatible with Otto's notions of what is holy or spiritual (Otto 1923).

#### PSYCHOLOGICAL VIEWS OF ALCOHOL RECOVERY

Association with AA's 12 steps and self-improvement are areas that have been largely misunderstood by researchers. Kelly and Greene (2013) used psychometric measures to validate the 12 steps and behavioral change. The study shows a positive behavioral change and decreased remission of drug and alcohol use in recovery studies. These studies are based on alcohol and drug usage. Research by Nealon-Wood et al. (1995) similarly found social interaction with the group and spiritual involvement to be helpful to curtailing alcohol consumption. Room and Greenfield (1990) researched multiple 12-step programs stemming from AA. They identified various 12-step programs using self-help consciousness in American human services. Orford et al. (2005) analyzed individual change after alcohol treatment. The study found evidence that increased interaction with family and other social societies after treatment could be related to a change in behavior of the recovering participant.

Methodologies based on statistical analysis of alcohol or drug uses, the number of relapses, or the amount of time elapsed since the last drink are not considered viable measures of recovery by the AA organization (AA 1976). AA alcoholics cannot be judged by abstinence alone. In research conducted by Drobin (2014) and Sandoz (2005), recovery is measured on the scale of "life meaning." These researchers started from the perspective that alcoholic recovery, for some alcoholics, may need to be more than not drinking. However, they still support the argument that alcohol is the problem, which is different from the perspective of AA, which argues that the individual is the problem, not the alcohol. The AA perspective about alcohol is that abstinence from alcohol is necessary but not sufficient to live life on life's terms (AA 1976). The development and historical success of the AA program began with individuals wanting freedom from addiction and being unable to use methods that had been successfully used by others (Sandoz 2005).

Norman Denzin in his book, *The Alcoholic Society: Addiction & Recovery of Self*, examined AA through the psychology of an alcoholic. His research examines alcoholism from the perspective of both his un-specified personal experiences, the experience of AA members who were newcomers to the program, and members with somewhat longer periods of participation in the AA program (Denzin 2009). However, his reflections reduce AA “spirituality” to the AA group membership helping the individual improve through self-understanding and knowledge, with no other social or transcendent spiritual references. Whereas, to AA, acceptance of the group is recommended as a starting place for “newcomers” when they are having problems accepting the concept of a higher power. But the growth of the spiritual condition is seen as being of paramount importance and a higher power beyond any individual human ability. This spiritual growth continues throughout the life of the member, and through the member’s involvement with other groups and service to society (AA 1976).

Denzin’s concepts of the AA “spiritual experience” seem to be structured around the philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre’s existentialism, which ignores the notion of individual spirituality (Denzin, 2009:1). In other words, Denzin seemed to reduce the inter-subjective reality of AA that is based on a defined notion of “spirituality” to a kind of subjective individual accomplishment. I surmise that AA’s higher power is more explicitly related to the existential philosophy of Karl Jaspers (1932) and his belief in spirituality as a transcendent source. Denzin provided empirical evidence of AA’s success with different alcoholics. However, he is not inclined to seek an explanation of this success through “understanding” the AA alcoholic as he understands him or herself; in other words, with a method Max Weber calls “verstehen” (Weber 2013 Vol. 1:57). To wit, in his book *Interpretive Autoethnography*, Denzin states: “I did [not] attempt to discover the “real” person behind the AA stories that were told (Denzin 2014:48). However, for AA the point of eliminating drinking is not self-improvement; the reason AA alcoholics stop drinking is the reduction of self-centeredness in order to become part of a larger society. However, this very accomplishment, for AA alcoholics, is inextricably connected with their

relationship with a higher power. Other observers (James 1956; Jaspers 1955; Jung 2006) take this self-understanding of AA alcoholics at face value, which is the approach Weber would have preferred as well.

#### HISTORICAL VIEWS OF AA

Ernest Kurtz in his magisterial work: *Not God* (1979a) has better researched the history of AA than anyone else I have encountered. His books first started as his dissertation at Harvard and then grew into what may be the finest history of AA ever written. Kurtz's history is accurate, but he lacks personal experience. He was a historian, a psychologist, and a priest but never an alcoholic. However, Kurtz explained AA's spiritual experience as well as a non-alcoholic could (AA 1980). Another limitation of the book is that it is based on the experience of one of AAs founders and does not convey a complete overview of the program.

Kelly, Magill, and Stout (2009) explored the effectiveness of AA and other 12-step programs. They found that individual recovery comes from processes and mechanisms associated with self-efficacy, coping skills, and facilitating adaptive social network changes. Little support was found for spiritual mechanisms. The keywords listed for the paper are self-help, mutual help groups, addiction, alcoholism, recovery. The study does not include lifestyle change or personal identification.

Cain (1991) studied the actual experiences of alcoholics trying to quit drinking. He described alcoholic addiction and the transformation from drinking to non-drinking. It addressed the need for alcoholics to have a new understanding of self and describes what typical alcoholics are like. However, the study is based on the drinking or not drinking of alcohol as the only issue of recovery.

#### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework for the study is rooted in pragmatism and social constructionism. These perspectives allow comparing stories to other stories and to past experiences and realities. The combination of pragmatism, which asserts that truth may be interpreted by its usefulness to the user,

and constructivism which is based on reality being created by self, in relation to the social environment, provides a more complete view of the subject involved (Saven-Baden and Howell Major 2013). This allows an experienced listener and narrator to consider the value of the stories based on the actuality of personal experience.

Pragmatism was developed by Charles Sanders Peirce and William James. In his book *Pragmatism* (2003), James stated that the term pragmatism was first coined by "Charles Peirce in 1878 in an article entitled 'How To Make Our Ideas Clear' in the 'Popular Science Monthly' for January of that year" (James 2003:24). James also claimed that the theory dates back much further. He wrote that it has been used by Socrates, Aristotle, Berkeley, and Hume (James 2003). But it was James who actually developed pragmatism into a useful theory for social sciences. His pragmatism argues that by tracking the consequences of an action it can be defined as good or bad, based on the outcome. In that vein, James addresses the concept of God.

In short, she [pragmatism] widens the field of search for God. Rationalism sticks to logic and empiryean. Empiricism sticks to the external senses. Pragmatism is willing to take anything, to follow either logic or the senses and to count the humblest and most personal experiences. She will count mystical experiences if they have practical consequences. She will take a God who lives in the very dirt of private fact—if that should seem a likely place to find him. (James 2003:41)

Pragmatism is used to frame how AA's higher power works for AA alcoholics, by addressing their personal experiences with their higher power and comparing it to their social success and lifestyle happiness. Can it help them live life on life's terms? (AA 1976).

Social constructionism, as interpreted by Berger and Luckmann seeks to understand how reality is created by past and present situations and personal as well as group interpretations. They specify: "In

the face-to-face situation the other is fully real. This reality is part of the overall reality of everyday life, and as such massive and compelling” (Berger and Luckmann 1967:23).

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Two key questions are explored in this study. They are premised on the curious reality that the AA program is remarkably effective for a certain segment of the alcoholic population, which we have termed AA alcoholic, which it actually does not claim to ever cure.

Question 1: Why has AA endured and continues to expand?

Question 2: Why is it necessary for non-drinking AA alcoholics to continue attending AA meetings after they have stopped drinking?

In trying to answer these questions I examine AA’s success, not from the perspective of drug or alcohol use or non-use, but rather, from the perspective of partaking in a lifestyle change based on what AA calls “authentic self-awareness” and acceptance of a power greater than oneself (AA 1976:59). I explore the proposition that AA may have endured and may have sustained membership because it contains a type of religious outlook. Following Durkheim (1915), I call AA a “functional equivalent of religion.”

## CHAPTER IV

### METHODOLOGY

This chapter presents the methods used in the dissertation. Pragmatism and constructionism frame the interpretive approach used by this dissertation. I utilize interpretive and analytic autoethnography to gain access to data that remains inaccessible in other methods.

I use the autoethnographic method to explore AA as an organization and as lived experience. My intent is to describe, explain, and bring understanding to the program of AA using historical and textual resources and personal experiences.

To understand alcoholics, at least the ones who are using AA, it is necessary to listen to them and understand each story in depth. Life experiences are felt; the question is how to understand what is felt; using an autoethnographic approach to the recovery program of AA allows an insight that cannot be achieved through other methods (Anderson 2006; Denzin 2014).

Autoethnography is occasionally described as a non-traditional post constructionist form of research (Anderson 2006) used in evocative writings “that draw upon postmodern sensibilities and whose advocates distance themselves from realists and analytical ethnography traditions” (Anderson 2006:377). As such, it has advantages and also limitations. It is a research tool, and like all tools, it needs to be used for the proper purpose by a trained (or educated) researcher in order to bring about a desired result. Autoethnography can be used to accomplish tasks beyond traditional methods.

Intellectual trends that have added to the development of autoethnography are:

- (1) a recognition of the limits of scientific knowledge and a growing appreciation for qualitative research;
- (2) a heightened concern about the ethics and politics of research;
- (3) a greater recognition of and appreciation for narrative, the literary and aesthetic, emotions and the body;
- and (4) the importance of social identities and identity politics. (Holman-Jones et al. 2013)

Linking individual experiences to social phenomena can be traced back to the middle of the 20th century, to a book entitled: *The Sociological Imagination* (Mills 1959). In the same era, the symbolic interactionist tradition derived meaning from individual experiences (Berger 1967; Berger and Luckmann 1967; Mead 1967). Ever since, social scientists have been attempting to incorporate personal experience in sociological analyses.

As mentioned earlier, this study is primarily based on a combination of two autoethnographic methods: The interpretive autoethnography and analytic autoethnography used here is based on the works of Norman Denzin and is described as life experiences “that begins with the biography of the writer and moves outward to culture, discourse, history, and ideology” (Denzin 2014:37). *The Alcoholic Society: Addiction & Recovery of Self* (Denzin, 2009) and *Hollywood Shot By Shot* (Denzin 2007) have helped identify autoethnography as a workable research method. I use Denzin and also Strauss’ (Strauss 1997) concepts of “turning points” and “turning points of identity” and “epiphanies” to identify those areas and times that have changed and restructured my life.

I also use Anderson’s (2006) analytic autoethnography, which reflects more traditional ethnographic practices for research in which the researcher is a full member of the group being researched. In analytical autoethnography reflexivity, narrative visibility of the researcher’s self, dialog with informants beyond the self, and commitment to developing theoretical understandings of broader social phenomena are prominent (Anderson 2006). My decades of experience with AA guarantee my full membership, visibility of self, and dialogs with informants beyond self. The insight I have developed about AA over the last four decades (38 years without the use of alcohol or drugs) has come to me from either directly through personal meetings and conversations, or indirectly through writings, movies, paintings, plays, songs, or third-party stories. Individual privacy is protected by the autoethnographic method (AA 1976; Anderson 2006; Denzin 2007, 2009, 2014).

Autoethnography allows the study to be a moving picture of different experiences Denzin says: "Stories are like pictures that have been painted over, and, when paint is scraped off an old picture, something new becomes visible. What is new is what was previously covered up" (Denzin 2014:1). For studying AA, being able to tell if an old painting should be scraped in order to reveal the new is important. Not all paintings have been painted over and having experience in when and why to scrape is crucial.

I have no experience scraping paintings, but I have spent many years being scraped by my AA sponsor and scraping many other alcoholics that I have sponsored, in my ongoing journey through recovery. AA is not a spectator sport, it must be experienced. Interpretive and analytic autoethnography allow my experience to translate life stories into narrative reality. The stories in an Interpretive-analytic autoethnography gives meaning to individual life experiences. The experiences gathered from others through their stories can be reflexively analyzed for a more reliable understanding of actuality. Autoethnography creates an anonymous and closed environment, like AA.

Actual communication depends on more than words or text. Real people address each other through gestures, spoken and unspoken dialogs, and many other "significant gestures" and "significant symbols" (Mead 1967:13). An autoethnographic interpretation of communication relies on experiences with the symbolic gestures that represent what is actually being communicated. Without personal experience, any attempt at understanding is at best a conclusion based on partial information. Autoethnography is, by definition, a methodology based on the experiences of the writer with the subject matter.

## CHAPTER V

### TWELVE STEPS IN MY SHOES: WHAT ALCOHOLISM MEANS TO ME

This chapter contains a detailed analysis of the 12-step program of AA and the detailed way in which its spiritual principles impact individual lives. It also is a personal story about how I found my own spiritual experience within it. This chapter explains how each of the 12 steps work (at least in my case) and how they allow the AA alcoholic to find the power necessary to live life on life's terms.

AA is the story of AA alcoholics. And since I am a recovering AA alcoholic, it is also a story about me. The program of AA was born out of human failure and has grown based on our acceptance of that reality. This is not the history or an analysis of alcohol and drug addiction, but a story of AA alcoholism told by an AA alcoholic.

#### FINDING AA

My AA experience begins sometime in 1976 with a trajectory of failure extending through April 1<sup>st</sup> 1984. It was at that time that I had hurt myself enough emotionally, mentally, and physically to allow my surrender and to accept my failure. Not that my failure was a negative thing. My surrendering and admission of total failure allowed the most important change in my life to take place. AA is not a tool set for fixing a problem. It is a lifestyle that requires changes.

In 1976 I had no idea what AA was and assumed it was one of the methods used to stop people from drinking, by people who did not understand drinking. But I have always been a pragmatist and believed what worked should be used if it accomplished the goal. I had no long-term goal, but I knew that while I was drinking, I was a happier person than when I was not drinking. Others around me disagreed but, as I said before, they did not understand drinking. The practical thing for me to do was to allow these people to try to save me from a problem I was sure did not exist. So, I freely admitted I was an alcoholic and told them I needed help and was going to go to AA so they could fix me and return me to the wonderful person they knew I should and would be.

I went to AA meetings so people would quit complaining about my drinking, and it worked. I still drank, but when someone seemed to be getting angry, I would hang my head and tell them, I am trying, I am going to meetings, but it is hard. At this point they almost always said, "I know," "keep trying," "you'll make it." And everything was forgiven and forgotten. AA became my forgiveness drug: absolutely no change required, just keep going to the meetings and talk about the changes I will make someday; that was enough for almost everyone. But not quite everyone. I had been using AA as my excuse to drink for about 3 months, I think, I am not sure because I was drinking a lot and had lost track of time, but that seems right. I had noticed that there were some people, mostly older members who had been in the program for a long time, who did not find my drinking apologetics acceptable. One of these people told me if I wanted to drink, I should go drink. He said he knew I wanted to drink, and I should go do it and quit wasting everyone's time. He even offered to give me some money if I needed it, but "don't come back till you want to stop drinking, then you would be welcome." That really made me angry, and I told him I would leave, and he said, "good idea!" My encounter with that crusty, seemingly uncaring and cruel, old man was, as Denzin puts it, one of the turning points in my life.

I now understand that he was helping me much more than all of the understanding people because he actually understood. He understood that until I accepted the reality of my complete failure in life, I would never accept the lifestyle of AA. It would take me about 6 or 7 years of emotional, mental, and physical anguish, to be prepared to surrender. During those years I tried many different methods to fix whatever it was that I felt was causing my problems. I tried different geographical areas that might be less involved with drinking; I felt that part of the reason I drank was being around people who drank all the time, so I moved to different areas looking for a better, safer environment. I became involved with church groups and even started working on becoming a minister. I felt that a better relationship with God would relieve me of this "Demon" that possessed me and made me to do and be this—obviously—different person. I looked at medical providers both physically and emotionally and, besides some

temporary sedation and people who would listen, I felt little recovery. I moved to a small town in Wyoming, hoping to escape or at least hide from whatever this thing was, that was destroying me. I think this was the first time I realized I needed to drink. I could not stop drinking, and it was no longer helping me escape the fear. I no longer wanted to live but I was too afraid to die.

One of the most amazing things AA gave me was the understanding I could always come back when I wanted to stop. That is about the only thing I remember about my early experiences with AA. I could always come back, so I did. The experiences this time were totally different. I had no expectations, just a desire to not be afraid. I cannot describe what I was afraid of. Nothing was chasing me, and I was not in trouble that I knew of. I went into that meeting with nothing to offer anyone, I had nothing left I could have given them. I was completely crushed. Whatever AA had, and I did not know what it was, I was willing to trade for what I was. And I did. I was a total failure ready to surrender to a different lifestyle, with absolutely no hesitation. Many people have tried to explain it, but the moment when there is a surrender to AA and the relief it gives, or at least the relief it gave me, is like nothing I have ever felt. I had no awareness of any change except a realization that everything is going to be alright. An absolute certainty of, not safety exactly, but more belonging and being part of something greater than me. It was an immediate revelation, an "epiphany," as Denzin calls it.

I remember nothing about the proceedings of that meeting that was impressive in any way. No one said anything memorable, but for me, it was a momentous meeting. I remember it was in a shabby second floor one-bedroom apartment with an attached kitchen with paint peeling and vinyl flooring on the main street in Riverton, Wyoming. There were around 8 people on folding chairs and a worn-out old couch sitting around the room. All were new members, but I was amazed some had been sober for 9 months and they were still happy. I took a seat against the wall and away from the others. I do not remember much else, but I walked out of there a changed man. This was, to follow Norman Denzin, a

“turning point” of identity. I went back to my apartment. My wife (at the time) asked me how it went and I said I am not sure but I know for sure that I belong there, that I was part of it.

## THE CONTINUALLY CHANGING WORLD OF AA'S 12 STEPS

### *Realize and Surrender: Steps 1, 2, and 3*

AA's basic text (*The Big Book*) describes the first step or Step 1 as the admission that one is powerless over alcohol. That was easy. I had absolutely assured myself that I was unable not to drink. The only solution I had to the problems of my life, alcohol, no longer worked. It had worked so well for a very long time, but now it just made me feel numb, silly, and ashamed of both my need to drink and my complete loss of the power to stop. I became aware of that in 1984 after the Wyoming meeting, and I am still convinced of it today. The second part of the first step requires an admission that my life was unmanageable. I had to surrender to that reality of failure. I could not manage my own life. Again, I had no problem admitting that I could not manage my life when my entire life was based on alcohol. That was my entire life and as long as my life was devoted to not drinking I could surrender it to AA. For me, this was a wonderful time, my life was devoted to working the steps of the program and going to meetings and doing the things other alcoholics said I should do. I have heard it is called “the Pink Cloud period.” I belonged somewhere, and it belonged to me.

My Pink Cloud period lasted for about three years. Most of that time I was ecstatically happy. I worked all of the steps with my sponsor. I was able to work and play without alcohol. Life was good. It was toward the end of this time that I began to notice that I was discontented and did not know why. I was a successful member of the community. I was still very involved with AA but now my involvement consisted of leadership roles and decisions for the group, keeping everything on track and moving forward properly. My financial problems had gone away, and I was a good employee. I had been promoted several times and was now a Vice President of Sales. I was sponsoring many newcomers to AA and I was hiring new employees for the company. Life was successful, but something seemed missing. I

remember how angry other members were making me when they disagreed with my directions. They did not understand how necessary and important it was to do it right. I had not drunk alcohol for several years and I knew what was best for the group. I was also starting to be irritated at my employer. I made a good salary, but it was not as large as I desired. My car was nice but not brand new; same problem with the size of my house. Things were not as I wanted them, and I was unhappy. I did not understand; I had worked the steps perfectly; had gone to more meetings than most of the other people, I was helping others, even when I thought they were stupid and helpless. I was not drinking. So I thought I should be able to get what made me happy, but I was not happy.

I had not had a drink of alcohol for about five years at that point. Notice I did not say I was sober. My company had opened a new facility in a different city, and I was driving over to have a training session with the new employees. It was the late 1980s and cassette tapes were the thing. AA has meetings in different parts of the country where some of the more popular and appreciated members shared their experience, strength, and hope with other members in what they called “speaker meetings.” At the time a lot of them were recorded and distributed to other members in different parts of the country.

My sponsor had seen that I was having problems and gave me one of these tapes with the instruction to listen to it. I still have the cassette and still listen to it, but I resented his telling me I needed to listen to it then. The same story is now available on Youtube (H., Johnny n.d). I resented my sponsor telling me what to do, but I had surrendered my will to something greater than myself and I knew he was part of that entity. To refuse was to turn my back on the power that had brought me this far and I had no intention of going back to where I came from. He represented that power and would remain a representation of my surrender until he died after sponsoring me for 27 years.

The cassette tape he gave me was the story of one of the more notable California speakers and the first thing I remember hearing him say, after he introduced himself, was, to paraphrase, that alcohol

is not now nor ever has been my problem. I am the only problem I have, and alcohol for many years was my only solution, and it still would be, except for one reason: it quit working (H., Johnny n.d)

This was the second epiphany or turning point of identity for me. I was never the same after that moment. I started to cry. I was given a view of myself by an AA speaker on a cassette recording while driving through a Wyoming night in the snow. I saw the problem: Me! I saw my selfishness, and self-pity operating exactly like the *Big Book* describes it (AA 1976) and I also realized I not only could not stop drinking but that my entire life was unmanageable by myself, and I never would be able to manage it alone. That was a pivotal moment in my life. The moment when I truly accepted my powerlessness. Only then I could see that this is what it meant to take Step 1 in its entirety. I still often try to manage my life but always with the same result; I am the problem, but I will never be the solution. That is a part of step one that I work, over and over again, nearly, every day.

Step 2 of the AA program states: “*We came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity*” (AA 1976:59). This step signified a new awareness for me after I truly understood Step 1. I had believed that drinking alcohol was an insane action and that after that problem was resolved, I would automatically become sane and normal. I now realized that alcohol did not make me insane. I was insane and, without help I would continue to be. Alcohol had just ceased helping me get by in my insane condition. I now surrendered to something greater than me and I realized that power, I would remain me, and being me is the problem, and I must never believe it is a solution.

The insanity does not, or at least has not, disappeared. I do not mean that I run around wearing mouse ears and swinging a machete. No, for the most part I am socially acceptable, depending on the society of course; I have frightened the more sensitive types just trying to be humorous. But the old insanity is still there at a much deeper level that is harder for me to find and easy for me to lie to myself about. My recovery is an ongoing and never-ending process.

Step 3 is about making a decision “to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God *as we understood him*” (AA 1976:59). I had been very careful about taking Step 3. I wanted to be certain that I was completely ready to have the power, the God of my understanding, remove my alcohol problem. That is how I saw it at the time. Something to do with my drinking life, which, for a long time, was all of my life; but after I had been without the need to drink for a while, it was different, I did not drink. I had not drunk for many years. Then I started to realize what Step 3 in the *Big Book* actually demanded, that being “selfishness and self-centeredness” is the AA alcoholic’s problem, which the *Big Book* describes as “the root of our troubles” (AA 1976:62).

For me, that was a difficult time. My entire life has been, and unless I am very careful still is, based on my ability to accomplish whatever I was willing to work hard enough to attain. This realization was another of those turning point moments in my life. It was a new and difficult concept for me to understand. I had been taught my entire life that you could achieve and be anything if you were willing to work hard enough for it. I believed in maxims like: God loves those who try; to quit is wrong; to give up is cowardly. I told myself that I am in charge and responsible for my life. I would take this refusal to surrender right to the brink of drinking again many times before I was forced into accepting the reality of my situation. The anger and fear would just almost consume me. My family and friends wanted to help and that would just make me angrier. I thought how dare they tell me what I should do? I know what I should do, I told myself, but I did not know. It frightened me, this not knowing. When it got bad enough, and I hurt enough, I went back to the beginning. I went to an AA meeting. I again surrendered, but this time I was truly surrendering myself: all of me!

I worked continually to keep surrendering. I had to surrender all; everything needed to be turned over to this power. That was quite a blow to the ego: the reality that I would never be able to manage my life. That is exactly what the first three steps of the AA program imparted to me, it was not something that came to me easily, and I have never been completely able to accept and be totally

committed to it. But the closer I get to it the happier I am or maybe not happy but more serene. I discovered that the power I surrendered to (and made the decision I would turn my life over to) in Step 3, was a dynamic and on-going process, not an event fixed in the past.

*Know Thyself: Steps 4 and 5<sup>2</sup>*

Steps 4 and 5 focus on self-awareness and honesty. We are to make a moral inventory of ourselves and admit the nature of our wrongs. Nearly every AA meeting I have been to in the last 38 plus years starts with a reading from the *Big Book*, Chapter 5: "How It Works." It is most often the reading that starts at the first page of the fifth chapter on page 58 and goes on to the end of the third paragraph of page 60. I am not sure how often I have read and heard that part, certainly thousands of times. But it was not until I had been hearing it for almost 10 years in different meetings that I noticed the part about being fearlessly honest. I truly believed when I was taking my personal inventory with the help of my sponsor, that the goal was to not lie to him. I remember him telling me it had nothing to do with him, but I could not understand that. The only honesty I could perceive was honesty as in telling the truth to other people. So, I did. I was as honest about my resentments and who I had hurt and stolen from, or other forms of my deviant behavior, as I could be. That was how I wrote my first version of the fourth step personal inventory. But what I had not realized up to that point was that honesty starts with me. I had to be honest with myself before I could be honest with others about the exact nature of my wrongs. Making a searching and fearless inventory of myself and writing it down to admit it to another person, not only all of the things I really did not want anyone else to know, but all of the things that I was unwilling to admit to myself, was very frightening indeed; but I did it. And this is how it happened.

I only did this because my sponsor had told me to. The surrender that happened at the beginning, at my first meeting in 1984 was part of this but this surrender would remain very important

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<sup>2</sup> Step 4: Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.

Step 5: Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.

to me. I felt genuine relief when I completed my first iterations of Steps 4 and 5. I spilled out all the garbage I had hidden away. I felt free and relieved of my burden. This was all of the honesty I think I could have handled at the time, but I would discover there was a different, harder type of honesty to realize yet.

The *Big Book* and my sponsor said I should continue to take personal inventories, so I did. I discovered that this was a great way for me to identify those times when I was angry and fearful. I also discovered they are basically the same thing. For me, anger is just a response to fear. I learned that fact by taking my own inventory. I also learned from my sponsor that my fear was always based on just two things: I was afraid I would lose something I had or that I would not get something I wanted. It allowed me to see a lot about myself, but most importantly, it let me start to actually see myself. I have heard people in AA meetings, mostly newcomers, say, "I looked in the mirror and did not like what I saw." In my case, it went further: When I looked in the mirror, I had no idea who I was. I had lied so much and so often, that I thought now I could be anybody. Because that is what I was: whatever I needed to be at the time, place and situation. Maybe that is why I liked acting. I was an actor in high school and did community theater, dinner theater and some summer stock. I was a natural. I had no idea who I was, but I could certainly play a character. I could also lie with a completely straight face whenever I needed to. Astonishingly, I sometimes believed the lies I told myself. Let me provide a personal experience to demonstrate.

I remember telling a story to a newcomer after I had been in the program for probably 20 or more years. It was a "war story" (a story about the old timers, a drinking story). It was a story I had told many times about the time I got drunk in a topless bar and went to leave and got into a fight which left me with a broken jaw and nose, plus one arm and some ribs. The story was partly true. I had suffered the injuries and I had been left lying in a parking lot. The lying had started when I told my wife what happened to me; and my brothers were in the room. I told them how I had confronted some bikers,

knocked some of them out but there were just too many for me to handle. That became the story as I remembered it. As I said, I had told this story many times but when I told a newcomer about the bikers, I suddenly realized that that was not what had really happened. I suddenly recalled what happened: I was in the bar, and I went to leave when a quite small young man was coming in. He started to step aside and said excuse me. I pushed him and said there is no excuse for you. This one man invited me to step out and caused all of my damage and I was unable to touch him other than the push that started it all. I realized I was lying to this newcomer and to all the others before him. For the first time, I told him the real story. But my point is, the lie had become a truth for many years.

This is not the only time I discovered I had believed my own lies. And it took my willingness to look at myself, as I really am, for me to start seeing who I actually am. I had to reconsider my personal inventories. I started to see that although I was being honest about my fear and anger and my actions and reactions to other people, the anger was still there. I had done nothing to change anything, and I never really intended to stop doing anything. I was being honest with others, but I was still actually lying to myself. I was using my honesty to gain support for my actions. This was very similar to my admission of being an alcoholic when I was drinking, because if I admitted it, I did not need to do anything about it. It had the same results. This moment of clarity, this “turning point” changed how I looked at myself. I started to become unhappy again and the only thing I knew how to do was to surrender to AA, so I did. I started to look at myself in what is called a reflexive manner. What I mean is, I looked at myself not based on the outward action but from the inward reason for the action. I did not like a lot of what I saw, and I still do not. But that is the way I can be truly honest as AA tells me I must be. I must be honest with myself. I pretty much do an inventory whenever I feel unhappy with life, because I believe the only problem I have is me.

*A Power Greater than Myself: Steps 6 and 7<sup>3</sup>*

Steps 6 and 7 are where we become “ready” to let God (in whatever form) remove all of our defects and then humbly “ask” that they be removed. I spent almost no time with those steps for many years. I did not think they were necessary; and I was busy getting myself better. That is how I viewed it. I did not know at the time that nothing had changed. I would always be the scared crushed little mess that surrendered to AA. But the power that let me act and live happily as part of the universe would remain unavailable as long as I was unwilling to do the things that were necessary. For me this was to get out of the way and accept the change. That is exactly what Steps 6 and 7 impart: expect nothing and accept everything. It would be after over 25 years of not drinking that Steps 6 and 7 became truly important in my life.

It was during a time that I was the most financially successful. I owned a very nice home, worked for another great company, had nice cars and took care of my family in a manner I felt was proper. I say I “felt” because my wife would leave me in about six or seven years, but I think it is fair to say I was a good provider. I did not go to as many meetings as I had gone to in the past. I had no real AA relationships although I repeatedly saw some people at meetings, they were not what I would have called close friends. I had friends but almost none of them were in any way involved in AA.

I started to notice how wrong most of the meetings were. I tried to correct them, but they paid little attention to my suggestions. This was so irritating. I thought, "Didn't they realize I had been sober over 25 years?" That is what I always said, I have been sober 25 plus years, so you should realize how much I know. I would say that, at this point, but now I realize that I was certainly not sober; I had not drunk but I was a long way from being sober. My ego had obviously run amuck again, but I was unable to see it, and I was starting to be unhappy with life again. I had lost the connection to the power that let

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<sup>3</sup>Step 6: were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.  
Step 7: Humbly ask Him to remove our shortcomings.

me be happy. I was just an unhappy “me” and I knew I needed to surrender. But I was not drinking, I had friends, and I was meeting my obligations as a husband and a father. I was not happy but I was not hurting too badly either. This sort of surreal existence would go on for about three or four more years when my wife of about 28 years said she did not want to be with me and wanted to end our marriage. Some years before it had been discovered I had throat cancer which I survived. And a few months before her declaration of separation I had fallen off my motorcycle and remained in a coma for 27 days. My wife had stayed there to help but in retrospect I can now see she had been dissatisfied for a long time. At this time, I was at a very low point. It felt like everything had turned black and I no longer saw any point in going on. I do not mean I contemplated suicide; I mean I saw no benefit in “trying” anymore. But all I had for the pain was AA, so I went to a meeting. I sat around a table and said nothing. I had no plan and no understanding. There was a newcomer at the meeting. This may well have been her first or second meeting, but she was crying, and she shouted “I don’t know what to do. I was told that I needed to surrender, and I should expect nothing and accept everything just as it is.” This frightened young lady reminded me of how broken I was when I first came to AA. This was another “turning point,” another “epiphany,” the moment when I realized all I could do and ever would be able to do is exactly that—expect nothing, surrender, and accept everything. It was then that I truly made a decision to turn my will and my life over to a higher power and accept the results.

My old sponsor had died, and I had tried to find another but I was looking too hard to let the new sponsor show up. I needed to get out of the way, but my ego was refusing to allow it. This is a true example of me being my only problem. I remember asking my higher power to relieve me from my bondage of self. It is a prayer in the *Big Book* for Step 3.<sup>4</sup> I had to go back to the start with Step 1 and surrender. I did, all of me and I was hurt and scared enough that I was completely willing to have this

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<sup>4</sup> Third step prayer: God I offer myself to thee—to build with me and do with me as thou wilt. Relieve me of my bondage of self, that I may better do Thy Will. Take away my difficulties, that victory over them may bear witness to those I would help of Thy Power, Thy Love, and Thy way of life. May I do thou will always.

power do to me whatever it wanted. I had nothing to suggest. I wrote another fourth step. This time looking at my selfish behavior. I found the sponsor I still have. He has fewer years in the program than I have but it doesn't seem to matter. I go to meetings now to learn and serve, not straighten out the group. I started to feel happy again. The life I have today is the most amazing thing I could have ever imagined. So, I would say, with a new depth of realization: in order for me to find happiness I must expect nothing and accept everything. Either my higher power, who some call God, is nothing or it is everything; I choose everything (AA 1976:44-57).

*Personal Relationships: Steps 8 and 9<sup>5</sup>*

Steps 8 and 9 are about making amends. People have to make a list of people whom they have harmed and then make direct amends to them where possible. I had to make amends to the people I had harmed. This required a lot of thought. I mean, who was harmed? Me or them? That is the way it started as I went ahead to "Make a list of all the people I had harmed and became willing to make amends to them all" (AA 1976:59). I remember thinking this was the really important step. I also remember my sponsor telling me not to contact anyone until I had finished my list and gone over it with him to make sure I understood what I was making amends for. But I was in a hurry to get this over with and start my life as the wonderful person I was; just like my mother had always told me I was. Mom was a wonderful woman but sometimes she also lied to herself, or at least, to me.

In the beginning, making amends was about not being afraid. I did not want to spend my life needing to look over my shoulder to see who was coming to get me. I thought that if I paid my debts to everyone, said I was sorry, and really meant it, all the fear would go away. I also thought I could fix my relationships with my willingness to pay back my debts; that would make everything okay. That was not my experience, however. For the most part, the people who cared about me had never been chasing

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<sup>5</sup> Step 8: Made a list of all people we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.

Step 9: Made direct amends to such people whenever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.

me; they were just worried. The people who did not like me, mostly wanted me to just stay away. There were some who felt I needed to repay a debt and to those, I made amends to the best of my ability and awareness. In retrospect, I see that a great deal of my fear had to do with my incredible ego. It was necessary for me to be important. I do not believe it mattered to me if other people thought I was good or bad, I was just afraid to be thought of as average. I needed to be special. If it was not possible for me to be the best, I was completely satisfied to be the worst. I just could not allow myself to be average, one among many. This belief of people chasing me was part of my need to be special. I needed to believe that people hated me because I was so outstandingly bad. It would be many years until I was able to see how unimportant I was to most people.

Initially, part of making amends (Steps 8 and 9) for me was to witness how proud people were of me for not drinking. It made me feel like a rock star, and again, I was important. I would go to someone to tell them I was sorry for past deeds and that I was willing to do whatever I needed to do to make amends to them. And many times, they would say something along the lines of, "we are so proud of what you have done, your staying sober is enough for us." I always told them it was not me; that it was the program, but I felt very proud of myself. I had learned to act humble but as with other things in my life, it would be a long time before I was honest enough to actually be humble.

It was much later, after I first took the steps with my sponsor that I understood what was truly happening. While it is true that trying to fix the damage I had caused in the past was helpful, and helped keep me from drinking, that is not what the steps are actually about. I cannot fix anything; if I could, I would have done it a long time ago and would have been finished with these silly steps.

No, it was not about what I was doing. It was about what, like most of the steps, I was willing to surrender. The real purpose for Steps 8 and 9 came to me after I had gone without drinking and, being involved with the program of AA for close to 30 years. It was at this time that my wife of many years decided she no longer wanted to be around me. Our marriage had not been the best, but I did not

realize she felt it was that bad, or so I told myself. Although in fact there had been many signs I had refused to see, that awareness was part of my present, more truthful understanding of the steps. All of the steps are part of the whole. The pain lasted until I was willing to do something about it. I started on Steps 1, 2, and 3, wrote the inventory in Step 4, called my sponsor and told him -- like it says to do -- in Step 5. Then I asked my higher power for the will to do what is necessary (Steps 6 and 7). That process allowed me to see that I owed my wife a serious "amend." Following along the lines of "turning points," it was at that time that I saw that I had never really given myself to anyone. I was not ever truly a part of anything because I had never honestly shared myself, just small pieces that I thought would be safe to let others have.

That was the real power of Steps 8 and 9. It gave me access to the willingness to belong to others. This is the first time I actually practiced the principles of the program and was able to experience the consequences. As I am able to get myself, my selfishness and self-centeredness, out of the road and surrender whatever is there to others I find that I belong, I am merely a part of the whole; not just emotionally or mentally; but materially and totally. Still, my arrogance and conceit often keep me blocked but when I am able to step aside, I no longer am alone, any more than my hand is alone, I feel I am part of a whole much larger than I am.

#### *Looking In the Mirror: Step 10<sup>6</sup>*

Step 10 is about taking a personal inventory. This step, like the other steps, requires more honesty than I generally want to provide. It says I am to continually take a personal inventory and, when wrong, I must admit it. When I first took this step, I thought that meant when I made a mistake or did something I thought was wrong, I should admit my mistake. I did that and I still do but, after actually experiencing Steps 8 and 9, I realized it had very little to do with others and everything to do with me. This step is about looking at myself as I actually am. The instructions are to consider my day in a manner

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<sup>6</sup> Step 10: Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.

that allows me to live in the “world of the spirit” (AA 1976:85). For many years this meant to me that I needed to make sure no one was mad at me. I lived my life trying to honestly be aware when I was being unfair or mean to others. I still try to help others, but my motivation is different. Today I try to look at myself not as others see me but rather as I see myself. If I hurt others or I am unkind to them, I am not just making amends to them, I am trying to be willing to be changed so I can be better for them. I become more a part of the whole we all share. An example of this is my anger, some version of “road rage” I express to other drivers. I have been aware of this and “working on it” for several years. When I become angry, I am honest about it and write it down and tell another person. Sometimes I share it at a meeting and ask that it be removed just like in Steps 4, 5, 6, and 7. I did all of these things, but I still got furious at other drivers. I eventually became aware that my motives for asking my higher power to remove these defects of my character have not been completely honest. I did not really care about the person I was angry at, I just wanted to be forgiven for my action and feel better about myself. My inventory was just about me feeling good, not about how I could support and help another person. I am not very good at it, but as I try, I feel better. Now it is easier to look at and actually see myself in the mirror.

#### *Learning How to Use the Power: Step 11<sup>7</sup>*

Step 11 was a step that meant pretty close to nothing when I first started, but has over the years become as necessary as breathing. It asks us to seek through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understand Him, praying only for His will for us and the power to carry that out. When I read Step 11 now it seems to be about something completely different than it was in 1984. As I have said, I was completely broken when I got to AA. Whatever I had been asked to do I would have done it. I had no place else to go and nothing else to do. I was told--mostly by my sponsor--

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<sup>7</sup> Step 11: Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God *as we understood Him*, praying only for His will for us and the power to carry that out.

that I needed to meditate and pray every morning, and I did. I really wanted to get better and be happier and not be afraid. I wanted to change. But I thought that was something I would be given the power to do myself. I started out, again, thinking it was about me being improved, being better. Even my higher power was just a tool I could use to add to my ego and to improve my status. As I look back, my perception of a higher power was not surrendering to the power, but like hiring a better housekeeper. Just make everything look good without me needing to do anything. I wanted to receive knowledge of what I needed to do, to get the power that I would need, in order to get what I thought I wanted, which was what I believed I should have. I did not realize that accepting the power required a profound change. I would remain me. This realization of the true meaning of surrendering to the higher power had not dawned on me and when it finally did, it was a very important “turning point.”

I had a very hard time seeing that the lifestyle I have been craving all my life did not require me to be different; it required that I be a part of a whole. That was, and sometimes still is, hard to accept. I am exactly what I am supposed to be as long as I am surrendered to a higher power and remain part of the whole. What is the higher power of the “whole?” I have absolutely no idea. It is like my sponsor told me when I told him I was concerned about the nature of the higher power: “All you need to know is two things: first, there is a god, and, second: it is not you.” And that is what I have learned in the 38 years I have believed in the higher power. The only way I connect with it, this power, is through my relationship with the other people and, maybe, things that I encounter as I go about my daily life “one day at a time” (AA 1976:86).

My prayers have changed. Now my prayer is that I can be freed from my bondage of self and that my thinking be divorced from selfish motives. Both prayers come directly from the *AA Big Book*. I am not as “original” as I used to be, and I think that is good. I now rely on what the *Big Book* calls dependence on a higher power. It also tells me I am given intuitive thoughts and I have found this to be true in my daily life (AA 1976). All I know is that my life is much happier and more serene since I

surrendered to whatever this power is. I have no reason to change now. I am certain that as I add to my life experiences changes will happen, but I do not believe I will make them; based on my past experiences, I will accept them.

*Learning to be Part of the Whole: Step 12<sup>8</sup>*

It took a long time for me to be able to read and understand Step 12. Step 12 is simply a restatement of the other steps. It is about practicing these principles in all of our affairs. That is not how I first saw it though. I saw Step 12 as the way I could prove myself. It was my method of impressing others with my ability to change myself and demonstrate how important I was to the society I helped. I did all this while still being completely humble. It allowed me to show people that when it came to being humble, I was the greatest. My attitude was identical to the punchline of the famous joke: “I had to be humble; otherwise, I wouldn’t be perfect!”

I started being a sponsor after I had been in the program for about a year. Before that, I had asked my sponsor if I should be trying to help newcomers and Chuck said: “no you are a newcomer yourself and all you have is the disease [alcoholism] you don’t have the solution yet” (Chuck, pers. comm). He told me that although I was not able to carry the message I could engage in other forms of service such as bringing alcoholics to meetings so qualified members could help them. So, I picked up and dropped off a lot of alcoholics at different meetings. As I said, after about a year I sponsored my first newcomer (or pigeon).

I believed my job as sponsor was to make him a better person. I believed I could do that because I was a better person. I was a better person because I had not drunk alcohol in over a year. However, the 12 steps is a process not an event, although I did not see that at the time. I was diligent in my perceived duties and contacted the people I was sponsoring. I would go over to where they were living

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<sup>8</sup> Step 12: Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

and check on them to see if they had been drinking. As I look at it now, to me, how good a job I was doing as a sponsor was much more important to me than how they were doing as human beings. All that really mattered to me was that they were sober. I lied to myself about that. I believed that if I could keep them from drinking that would prove my importance to the group. Looking back at this period of time, it seems all I had surrendered was my drinking problem so that was all I could give to newcomers.

Then I started to realize that there was much more to AA than alcohol. Here is the story of how that realization dawned on me: I had been working with one man for a few weeks, picking him up nightly for meetings and checking on him during the day to see if he was all right; by that, I meant if he had been drinking. One day I went by his apartment, and no one answered the door. Later I was in our group coffee shop and my sponsor came in and said he needed to talk to me. He told me that this man had shot himself and was dead. I was crushed. I had no idea what to do, I felt completely responsible for this man's death. I had talked to my sponsor about suicides; this was not the first one; although it was the first one where I was the sponsor. My sponsor had told me that he thought we needed to be careful about trying to remove and eliminate someone's solution until they had found another. I did not understand that at the time but what he meant, I later discovered, was that alcohol was not the problem, it was the solution. This was certainly another "turning point" for me. Until you have something else, like a higher power of some kind, you need the solution of alcohol in order to survive.

As I said, I was completely devastated and felt it was all my fault. I told my sponsor that in a fit of teary, stumbling, self-pity. He started laughing and told me to stop being so self-important. He asks me if I really thought I was important enough and powerful enough for someone to kill themselves over! He said, maybe I thought I was that important, but he did not. It would take about three more years for me to totally understand what he was saying. I would need to understand that alcohol was not the problem, and I was not the solution. I was the problem, never the solution. The only thing I can give a newcomer or anyone else, was my experience, my strength, and my hope. Step 12 is not really about what I can

give; it is like all of the steps. It is about surrendering myself and becoming willing to be a part of the whole. Step 12 is not about giving. It is about accepting what I am getting. Our power comes from our willingness to belong. Only by reaching out to others do I receive. It has taken me a long time to accept what the twelfth step says it gives, "Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps" (AA 1976:60). It does not say a spiritual awakening is a result, it says it is the only result. But I would add, it has been my experience over many years that when I am willing to accept it and do what is necessary to get myself out of the way, it is more than enough for me, to receive the spiritual awakening of Step 12.

#### NO ONE SPEAKS FOR AA

AA is an experience that has been brought together by failure and surrender. I can only share my own experiences. As others have shared their experiences with me, I have made them my own and now share them with you. I have been as honest as I can be at this moment but, as you have seen, honesty has an evolving dynamic, at least for me. I have tried to share, as accurately as I could, what AA's 12 Steps have meant to me and how they have shaped the last four decades of my life as a surrendering alcoholic. The autoethnographic method has enabled me to articulate my experience in terms of a series of augmenting epiphanies and "turning points" of identity. However, AA as a conglomeration of historical and global assemblies, cannot be identified by any one member's experience.

## CHAPTER VI

### PERSONAL EXPERIENCES

Chapter 6 is a personal story of my travels through different methods of finding relative serenity and happiness. I used alcohol and drugs until they no longer worked. I attempted to become a religious leader and superstar; it did not work. I attempted geographical cures, trying to separate myself from bad influences, this also did not work. Chapter 6 is about accepting myself as the problem, and the awareness that I could never solve the problem myself. AA would show me a method to find the power I had been searching for all my life that allowed me to find happiness: to be able to live life exactly as it was. The AA program taught me that a life lived for one's own self was lonely and empty, and only by accepting exactly who I really am do I become part of a whole and attached to unlimited universal power. I will always be the problem, never the solution.

#### HOW I EXPLAIN THE POWER

I am writing about my experiences as an alcoholic. This is not just my memories but also a reflexive understanding of what I think and why. What makes me believe what I believe? Where do my thoughts and beliefs come from? My experiences are more than lists of events and thoughts. They come from a reality, but a reality I help create, in part. I am reducing an infinitely complex reality into the actuality of my social interactions. Obviously, this actuality is never absolute. Rather, it is a growing thing, part of a "communal" social experience (Durkheim 2014:185) and replete with "value" and "instrumental" rationalities (Weber 2013:41). However, where Durkheim just observed the vicissitudes of collective effervescence and Weber only identified and typologized motives for social action, I am looking at my experiences from an autobiographical and personal perspective. I observe the individual's effect on the society and the way the individual is affected by participation in, and acceptance of the society.

### *A Brief Personal History*

In 1984 I found myself in a situation of not wanting to live, but afraid to die. You see, I am an alcoholic and, unless you are, too, that statement would probably be impossible to truly comprehend. My recovery was, as has been explained, based on an involvement with the program, AA. I certainly did not intend to end up broken, defeated, and desperately seeking help in an AA meeting.

Looking back at my life, it was not what is generally portrayed as that of a potential alcoholic. My family was not abnormal. I saw my mother drink less than a dozen times in her 98 years of life. My father drank but usually in moderation. I saw dad drink too much maybe, three or four times in his life. The thought of alcoholism just never occurred to them, I think. I know of no genetic disposition in the family. Some drank too much, a DWI or two but not what I would think of as chronic problems. Some of the family members drank very little and had no problems concerning alcohol. I was brought up in a loving family. There was no abuse. Although, by today's standards being spanked across the bottom might seem abuse. I am certain that my family was not the cause of my alcoholism. No, I am not an alcoholic because of my family's, or anyone else's, treatment of me. As has already been addressed several times, I am the only problem I have, although it took time and experiences for me to understand that.

The way I was treated was never a problem, but no matter how I tried, I never felt like I fit in. I always felt lacking, like I needed to change, become different. Again, it was not because of the way I was treated. It was because of who I was—I was never enough. I had the same amount of successes and failures as other people had, but in my eyes my failures were more complete and my successes less important. I just did not fit into the world, as I saw it. Alcohol was around; it was not a taboo that I rebelled against. Even as a teenager I tried a few drinks at holidays and such, but I never really cared for the taste; not that I ever admitted that; real men drank. You didn't see John Wayne squinting his face and saying yuck when he drank. No, alcohol was part of the male role and the role was very important

to me. Being a man required things that now I realize frightened me. Of course, being scared or frightened was not allowed just like being able to drink was expected. There was also the need for a man to stand up for himself and fight anyone who threatened his masculinity.

There were other requirements to achieve this masculine role that I had fashioned from the cultural fabric around me—but you get the point, I felt unworthy. It would take me a long time to start being honest with myself. I found it unacceptable to be scared and told myself I was not, and I believed it. But the truth is I spent a great deal of my life very much afraid of everything. This fear would cause untold amounts of anguish and anger, but the anger could always be justified as someone else's fault. Then I discovered the role of alcohol. As I said, I did not really like the taste but after a few drinks the fear went away. For me alcohol was a miracle drug. It would take away the fear. A few more drinks and I was smarter, stronger, tougher, and richer, it would even make me more handsome, more attractive to the opposite sex. It may have been a false reality, but it was my reality and I fit there.

I spent many years happily living in that world. As long as I was able to drink. I would later need to add other drugs in order to maintain my reality, but I was able to exist in my world and mostly function in society. The problem was keeping the right level of drunkenness to sustain that "reality." Being too drunk would eliminate the ability to cognitively create my world; it would lead to being just drunk and helpless, which was definitely not wanted. But even though I would go past the point of happiness, I was still able to reach it for a little while. The periods of contentment got shorter and shorter and my ability to adjust to and live in society began to fray around the edges. It created problems with authorities and even my friends. I was becoming just a loudmouth drunk, not the cool amazing person I wanted to be. So, I decided I would just quit drinking, enough was enough. I tried; at first, I felt it would be enough to just limit my drinking. I would only drink when I wanted to, such as at parties and social gatherings with my friends. I would have a drink or two then quit and do something else or go home. I was never able to do that. I would start with total commitment to have one or two

and would end up as drunk as I ever had been. Parts of this have been stated before but the details of the experience may be enlightening.

I had no success limiting my drinking. I was ashamed of not being able to “handle my liquor” (that is what we said, with a smirk, about lightweights). I knew I needed to stop, so I decided I would quit. I would just stop drinking. And I tried; sometimes I would not even make it through the day without drinking, and hardly ever did a week go by that I was not drunk at some point. I could not stop drinking no matter how much I wanted to. That went on for several years. I tried moving, changing my diet, exercising, and finding different friends. It was then that I decided I would become a minister and get closer to God. This was quite an experience. I saw people who were fearless and willing to help others and I wanted to be like them. I had learned a lot about the Christian God from my mother who (although she did not participate in any particular denomination) read a great deal from the King James Version of a large bible by her bed. I would spend about 2 years trying to learn all the rules in order to be the top religious person, so God would love me. Looking back, I see that it was what I was trying to do. I was trying to be at the top. It really had nothing to do with helping others or even being close to God.

It was me creating another reality, just like I tried to do by my drinking. I had no problem with God being on top but from God’s mouth to my ears, and I would straighten the people out. Remember my mother, the person who taught me about the Christian God? Well, I decided her beliefs were totally wrong and if she did not change some of her unworthy, sinful behaviors, I would be forced to condemn her to hell in the afterlife. The amazing thing is I believed I could. I believed that what I thought was that important. I believed I was that powerful. I had not been drinking or using drugs for about a year at this time, but I was behaving very much like an alcoholic. I was, to use a vernacular term, a “dry alcoholic.” Fortunately, my mother loved me enough to ignore my rantings and that even made me angrier. Anger was again part of my life and, I now realize, so was fear. What I perceived as being a soldier of God, was actually being a very frightened, very angry person.

I behaved very much as I had in my drunken debaucheries except now I was fighting a different demon. I was no longer being persecuted by alcohol, now my problems were all caused by another adversary: Satan, but anything that I could use to justify and rationalize my fear and anger would have been fine. I truly believed that I needed to continue fighting, work harder, and study more, in order to protect myself from fear and achieve serenity. I cannot remember any time in my life, drunk or sober, when I was more judgmental and inconsiderate, or less supportive and accepting of the people around me.

As you might imagine, it was unsuccessful, and I ended up drinking. This was the beginning of the darkest period of my life. I had nowhere to go. I was terrified that someone or something was going to get me, though no one was looking for me or, for the most part, cared to do so. That might have been the problem, I felt completely alone. My only source of comfort, alcohol, no longer worked. I was just a drunk, sitting alone and scared. Alcoholics often talk about their bottoms—that place as far down as they could go. That was my bottom. I remember I was in a tiny office and drinking a bottle of whisky, not because I wanted it, but because I had to. I remember asking God, the one I had tried so hard to impress, why He would not just kill me, let me die. I have told this story many times over the past years, and I always wonder if people believe me; it does not matter, but I wonder. As I have said before, I had been to some AA meetings in order to get out of trouble and an old timer had told me to quit wasting his time and come back to AA when I wanted to quit. Well, I still see this grouchy old man's face saying, come back when you're ready.

The rest of the story of my first real AA meeting is unremarkable. The phone book (this was before smartphones) was already open to the local AA number, I had not opened it, but there it was. I called the number; someone came over and took me to a meeting. I do not remember what the meeting was about, but I knew it was different this time. Before, I had tried to demonstrate what I knew and how I was different. This time I went in knowing nothing. I was completely ready to trade whatever I had for

whatever they had. I was crushed. I just wanted the fear and pain to go away. It made sense that complete surrender was necessary for me. From that meeting to this point, my life has been based on the AA principles of attempting to know myself and surrendering that self to a higher power.

A necessary step in the program is to be honest and completely examine oneself. That meant not a quick review of wrongs and rights but an intense recounting of who I was, how I felt, why I felt that way, and how I had affected other people. This self-evaluation is a rigorous examination, written down, and then shared with another person. For some, that is the hardest part. Fortunately, AA had anticipated that. I had someone who had already been through the process; he was my “sponsor” and remained my sponsor until he died 27 years later. Anyway, that was not a pleasant experience. It was the first time I had ever looked at myself without a justification of my behavior or an attempt to blame someone else. I had never heard of the word reflexive at that point but that is what it was. Beyond examining my innermost self, it was also necessary to take the next step: a rigorous self-evaluation of daily thoughts and actions. Ever since, morning meditation and self-evaluation have become part of my life. Nearly every morning, I spend about an hour first reading one of my many meditation books. I like the *Meditations of Marcus Aurelius* a lot, but there are many others. Then, I attempt to not think for a few minutes. You may be thinking, what that could have to do with reflexivity. Well, I find that before I am able to look at myself, I need to get out of the way, so I can see inside, and try to understand. In the words of the stoic Emperor Marcus Aurelius:

I am composed of the formal and the material; and neither of them will perish into non-existence, as neither of them came into existence out of non-existence. Every part of me will then be reduced by change into some part of the Universe, and that again will change into another part of the Universe, and so on forever. And by consequence of such change I, too, exist and those who begot me, and so on forever in the other direction. For nothing hinders us from

saying so, even if the Universe is administered according to definite periods [of revelation].

(Aurelius 2006)

My philosophical stance has changed a lot over the years. My reality, my thinking, allowed me to know a lot about what should and should not be thought, said, and done. The whole thing of the good and the evil used to be, generally, an easy call. Now, not so much. I have found that the truth of a situation may vary a great deal based on the awareness of what I am thinking and why. Let me give you another personal example.

I had been involved with AA for many years but about a year before AA I married a woman who would continue to be my wife for very close to 28 years. Our marriage was very similar to wedding vows, you know, rich and poor, better or worse, sick and well. I think you get the idea; some years were better than others. In 2003 I was diagnosed with throat cancer; yes, I was a smoker, and no one was sure I would be curable, I was, and she stayed with me. As I mentioned before, in 2010 I fell off my motorcycle and spent 27 days in a coma, again she was there for me, although our relationship was changing. Anyway, my point is that my wife of 28 years eventually announced that she had found someone else, was involved with them and intended to continue the relationship. I was crushed, how she dared do this to someone who provided for her, stayed loyal to her, etc. I was hurt and furious for months. As I mentioned before, part of the recovery program is self-examination.

When I took a very close look at who I was, I realized, what I was angry about was that she had hurt my ego. Upon careful examination, I realized it really had nothing to do with her leaving. It had been a very long time since we actually had cared about each other; it was more of a habit than love that kept us together. Contemplation revealed that I did not care about her being with another person either. What hurt me was my ego. Becoming aware of me, the real me, made a difference. Then I was able to not only forgive, but also thank her for being brave enough to do what we both wanted, but I wouldn't accept. Another meditation book by Anthony De Mello, a Jesuit priest and psychologist who

has written a great deal on self-awareness, describes looking inward. Meditative readings like this helped me see myself. Or maybe I should say: see me.

Ideas actually fragment the vision, intuition, or experiences of reality as a whole. This is what the mystics are perpetually telling us. Words cannot give you reality. They only point, they only indicate. You use them as pointers to get to reality. But once you get there, your concepts are useless. A Hindu priest once had a dispute with a philosopher who claimed that the final barrier to God was the word "God," the concept of God. The priest was quite shocked by this, but the philosopher said, the ass that you mount and that you use to travel to a house is not the means by which you enter the house. You use the concept to get there; then you dismount, you go beyond it. (De Mello 1992:66)

For years, I have also had the responsibility of sponsoring other alcoholics. Sponsoring newcomers to the program provides me with the opportunity to give back what has been so generously given to me. Working with alcoholics, and drug addicts, is important for me to be able to look at myself, and be reflexive. For instance, it is difficult to remember the pain and fear new people are going through, and very important that I see my reactions to their—sometimes-unacceptable—behavior. I have found that my reaction can be a reflexive reaction to my behavior in the past. I criticize them when actually I am just angry at myself, I forget where I came from. My point is that after over 38 years of looking at myself, you would think I understand the process, and maybe I do, but I certainly am prone to forget.

After that long, the mental action of reflexive thought should be completely automatically driven, like breathing, and it is anything but. Self-evaluation, at least honest self-evaluation, is something that seems to require a great deal from humans, at least this human. It is not a matter of looking inward for the truth. It requires truth to be found, verified, compared, judged, and continually changed in every situation where it is felt self-evaluation or reflexive thinking is necessary. Seeing me is part of my

responses to situations; how I view my experiences has added a great deal to how I think and what I believe. One of my favorite American philosopher/scientist's, John Dewey, says: "The way in which individuals experience the world directly influences the way in which they think about it" (Dewey 2013:59). Looking at myself and accepting who I am not, what I wish I was, or who I think I should be, has provided the serenity that I was trying to get from alcohol but never could.

Hopefully this history elucidates the fact that the shape of my identity has changed through the years. My experiences, although not all good, or even relatable, have formed me, and added value to my ability to participate in the society that has accepted me. I found a quote by the founder of sociology Auguste Comte that, in many ways, describes my philosophical orientation, "Everything is relative; this is the only absolute principle" Comte (1998:72). I think another way to say that is, everything changes. Continuous change is part of reality. This is best explained by Berger and Luckmann:

Among the multiple realities there is one that presents itself as the reality par excellence. This is the reality of everyday life. Its privileged position entitles it to the designation of paramount reality. The tension of consciousness is highest in everyday life, that is, the latter imposes itself upon consciousness in the most massive, urgent manner. It is impossible to ignore, difficult even to weaken in its imperative present. Consequently, it forces me to be attentive in the fullest way. (Berger and Luckmann 1967:29)

They are explaining that, of all the realities I may believe to be real, only the one I am seeing, at this moment, is reality; and the structure of that reality is based on what I construct in my mind. This construction continues to change and requires that I am constantly aware of it. Awareness comes from continually examining myself.

I realize that the more I am involved with other people the better I feel. My experience has taught me that, as far as being a part of society is concerned, more is indeed better. This is where I get

connected to my higher power, whatever that is. I do not know what it is, and I do not care as long as the power is available for me.

This awareness does not come to me solely from AA. It is also based on my experiences as an academic. From my first class in literary analysis through my doctoral program, I discovered that the story I am experiencing may have different meanings depending on which perspective I am viewing it from. I have been very fortunate to have had, for the most part, educators who understood that understanding and belief can change depending on the individual's perspective.

## CHAPTER VII

### UNDERSTANDING AA AS A FUNCTIONAL EQUIVALENT OF RELIGION:

#### A COMPARATIVE APPROACH

In this "explanatory" chapter I attempt to argue that although AA (correctly) insists that it is not a religion, it is, nevertheless, a "functional" equivalent of religion (in the sense that I explain). Indeed, I believe AA represents a distillation of the religious attitudes and practices without the dogma and elaborate rituals that vernacular religions have. I begin with Durkheim's definition of religion and argue AA meets all its constituent components. In the second section I will examine the differences between AA and religion, in terms of their relative priorities. The third section examines what AA's higher power is and how it is achieved.

#### DEFINITION OF RELIGION

Durkheim's definition of religion, which is my reference point for what religion states: "A Religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them" (Durkheim 2014:44).

Notice that Durkheim's definition does not stipulate "self-identification" or "self-definition" as a condition for the definition of religion. This might pose problems from a strictly logical point of view. What if baseball, for example, is analyzed and proves to meet all the Durkheimian conditions for being a religion: having a coherent system of "beliefs and rituals," a notion of "sacred," and a community of believers? Would that make baseball a religion? How about a rock and roll band (say, Grateful Dead) and its fans: (in this case, "dead heads")? The question could be posed: why did Durkheim neglect to add a condition of "self-identification" as a religion to his well-known definition?

Whatever the answer to that question, the lack of "self-identification" opens the door to research in phenomena that are functional equivalents of religion but do not identify themselves as

religions. AA is a case in point. It adamantly denies that it is religion, but it functions as one. It requires belief in a higher power but it leaves the nature and name of that power to the member. Besides, although it rejects a particular religious identification, it features an interwoven system of beliefs and rituals, a notion of holy, and a community of believers who regularly meet around the world, and use uniform "collective representations."

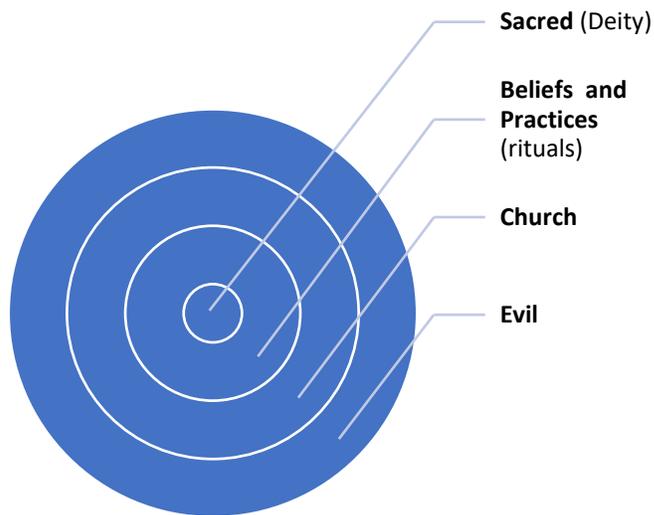
I argue that AA inverts the order of priorities familiar to vernacular religions. In doing so, it preserves, (one could argue refines and intensifies) religion's various components. I demonstrate this difference in two graphs formed as concentric circles.

In most world religions, there is a notion of deity, endowed with the characteristics of "the sacred" category, which could be placed at the center. Religions present themselves as the manifestation of that deity and introduce ritual, doctrinal, and moral systems that aim to embody and celebrate their respective religious truths. Religion (as truth and doctrine) is engaged in a contest with ignorance, indifference and sin; things "other" than religion and its revealed truths and practices. The part of the world which is indifferent or hostile to religion is sometimes identified as a manifestation of evil.

The figures below demonstrate the concentric circles of priority in vernacular religions and the way these priorities are rearranged (inverted) in AA, as a functional equivalent of religion.

Figure 1 below simply translates the Durkheimian definition of religion into concentric circles of priority. The notion of the sacred higher power is in the center. Beliefs and practices pertaining to it surround it, in the context of a religious "congregation." The whole constellation turns away from the world indifferent or hostile to the religious truth, practices and believers: the outermost circle.

As Figure 2 demonstrates, the elements of a Durkheimian definition of religion are present in AA. However, they are layered in a different manner.



**Figure 1.** Definition Of Religion

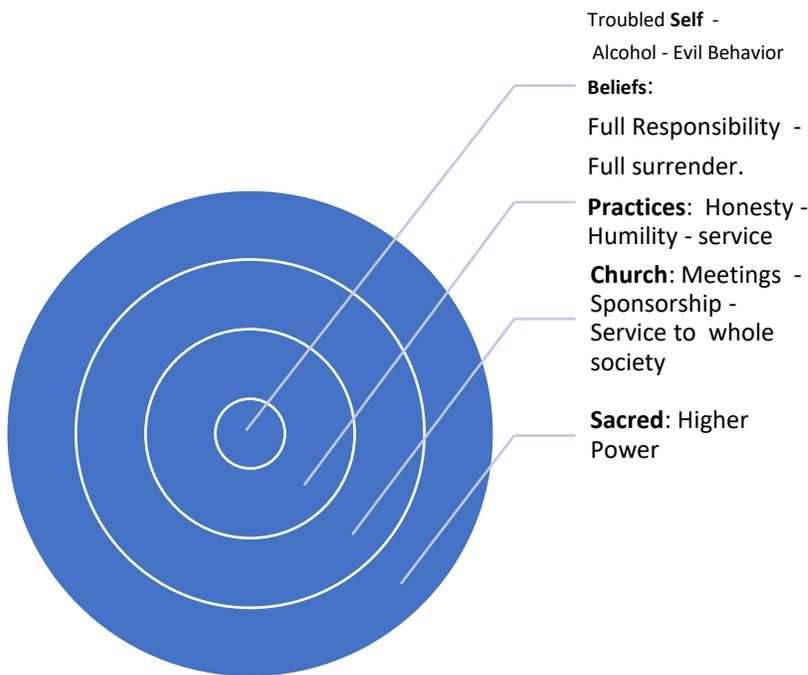
#### LAYERS OF AA CREED

##### *Troubled Self: Beliefs (Total Responsibility and Total Surrender)*

Until an AA alcoholic can accept that the problem does not come from outside issues, beings, or substances, no real help is available. This self is troubled, marred, interrupted by an "evil" embodied in alcohol, against which the AA alcoholic has no power to avoid. However, the problem is not alcohol; it is the self, it-self. The alcoholic's posture toward this innermost personal problem would have to be the paradoxical (dialectical) task of assuming full responsibility for one's life, and being prepared for total surrender.

Examples of this practice have been covered in previous chapters, in the context of the 12-step program, and in personal stories. Honesty is critical to AA recovery and cannot be overstated. The inability to be honest is underlined at the start of most meetings as the reason people fail in AA. The honesty that is required is more than telling the truth to others. It is telling the truth to one's own! Can I honestly see myself? Can I confront who I actually am? Will I accept that truth? Without this type of

honesty, it is impossible for people to identify their selfishness, self-centeredness and self-pity as required by the program. Being “relieved from our burden of self” (AA 1976:63) is necessary because self is the only problem that blocks the individual from the higher power. The power that allows life to be lived on life's terms. The honest examination of self is a lifetime journey and perhaps, will never be fully attained.



**Figure 2.** Layers of AA Creed

Second, the program requires humility to admit being a total failure and to accept the truth of one’s inability to fix the “spiritual malady” of alcoholism (AA 1976:24-29). The pain required to accept total defeat and to be humble enough to surrender one’s self is the way AA alcoholics start her/his journey. I have covered the details of this posture in the chapters on the 12 steps and in the course of relating to my personal journey.

Third, the program requires willingness to be of service to others is the only way the founders discovered they could remove this burden. It is by helping others that we make the connection to our

higher power. This is a primary principle in AA (AA 1976). Thus, it is through humility, honesty, and service that AA alcoholics find the power and perseverance they require to live life on life's terms. Other than these, no other dogma or doctrines exist in AA; only suggestions for recovery (AA 1976).

#### *Community of Believers or "Church"*

Honesty and humility of the AA alcoholic is not merely a private exercise. It is embodied in ritual and communicative actions performed in the company of fellow sufferers, the congregation of believers or, in Durkheim's shorthand term: "church." I have detailed the procedural components of the "meetings" before. It bears repeating that there are two kinds of meetings: open meetings that are public and welcoming to whoever is curious in AA. Closed meetings are devoted to regular AA members, with usually more heart-wrenching stories that they are reluctant to relate in public. There are daily and weekly meetings. Each meeting has a "chairperson." Over time, traditions such as awarding tokens of recognition for members who have been sober for the first 11 months and, after that, every year of sobriety have evolved but none of these are required by the *Big Book*. The usual procedures of meetings are detailed in Chapter 2. The point I would like to underline at this juncture is that although AA meetings never designate themselves as religious congregations and, indeed, diligently avoid such a designation, they are for all sociological intents and purposes, a "church."

#### *Higher Power (God)*

Finally, all of the above becomes possible by a sincere belief in a higher power, to whom the AA alcoholic surrenders him or herself unconditionally. It is featured in the diagram above as the last circle of the model because, although omnipresent, it has no defined form or substance. It is left to the individual's personal spiritual domain. The inclusion of the concept of "God," also defined as higher power as the AA member understands it can be at first glance confusing; particularly since AA has only one requirement for membership: a desire to stop drinking (AA 1976).

The word “God” is cited frequently—142 times to be exact—in the *Big Book* and 173 times in the *12 and 12*. The term “higher power” is also stated dozens of times in the *Big Book*, and in the *12 and 12*. No other “theology” is attached to this basic belief. So long as the member has faith in a higher power or “God as he or she understands” (AA 1976:59), it suffices. Although the alcoholic is fully responsible for her or his behavior, she or he is fully reliant on this higher power to lift her or him from the predicament of alcoholism.

AA has no opinion on the nature of spiritual past or future happening; only what is required to function today, at the moment: “After all, our problems are our own making. Bottles are only a symbol. Besides, we have quit fighting anybody or anything. We have to!” (AA 1976:103). It is only necessary for an individual to accept and find a relationship with a higher power or God, of their “own understanding” (AA 1976:59). AA is very clear that everyone has or develops their own perceptions of this spiritual connection or higher power. However, it only stipulates that the thoughts of an individual should be “divorced from self-pity, dishonest, or self-seeking motives” (AA 1976:86). Individual thoughts are akin to inspirations. The *Big Book* states: “... [W]e find that our thinking will, as time passes, be more and more on the plane of inspiration. We come to rely upon it” (AA 1976:87).

This higher power requires no effort, other than the willingness to honestly attempt an identification of self and then the surrendering of that self to a higher power. This surrender is demonstrated by service for the society and willingness to help others (AA 1976). The identification of self is the tool that allows individuals to observe their participation in society as a whole. Willingness to put others before one’s own self is the barometer of an individual’s spiritual condition. No further theological understanding is needed; just an identification and acceptance of self and its relation to society.

## CHAPTER VIII

### CONCLUSION

The first section of this chapter summarizes and discusses key findings with reference to the research questions. The second section discusses implications of the findings. The third section outlines limitations of this study. The final section offers suggestions for future research.

#### SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this dissertation was to explain AA as a functional equivalent of religion. This proposition was examined through the use of historical data and the experience of the author according to interpretive and analytical auto ethnographic methods (Anderson 2006; Denzin 2014). These findings would be impossible to obtain through other methods.

The first research question was: “why has AA endured and continues to expand?” The answer, as this study has shown, lies in the fact that AA functions as a religion. It continuously cultivates a self-selected group of believers (AA alcoholics) who partake of its beliefs about their troubled self and their need to surrender to a higher power in order to receive a "daily reprieve" through honest and humble utterances. The members also pledge to reach out to other alcoholics and people whose lives have been affected by alcohol and render any services they are capable of delivering. Ultimately, an awareness of a flawed self (rather than alcohol) as a problem that is never solved but that is always susceptible to amelioration through a continuous and deepening “spiritual experience” encourages members to continue their membership and advocacy.

AA has all the constituent components of religion, but they are arranged, more or less, in the reverse order in which they are found in vernacular religions. Without a dogma (as that notion is usually understood) and a doctrine of an other-worldly salvation, AA resembles a “pared down” religion reduced to its most essential Durkheimian functions.

The second research question was: why is it necessary for non-drinking AA alcoholics to continue attending AA meetings after they have stopped drinking? The findings show that once a troubled self, beset by a “spiritual malady” whose symbol is alcohol addiction takes the centerstage the stage is set to guarantee the member’s lifetime commitment. Additionally, the member’s predicament is considered incurable but eligible for a “daily reprieve.” A system of beliefs and practices come into play to monitor, interrogate, and improve it. The AA meetings serve as the public arena (church) in which most of these performances take place and radiate out of the group in words and deeds.

#### IMPLICATIONS

This study has remarkable implications for the future research on religion and its functional equivalents. It shows that an organization that does not define or understand itself as a religion can, nevertheless function as a religion in unifying members, addressing their individual problems and challenges, and channeling their efforts to “live life on life’s terms” as AA proposes. Making this research available to organizations and people trying to recover from other pathologies may provide additional options for them. It may give them concrete examples of “what works.”

#### LIMITATIONS

The limiting factors for this study are two-fold. First, AA is notorious for its refusal to provide any identifying information about its members or its accomplishments. Although courts of law routinely sentence individuals to attend AA meetings and have a form signed by a responsible member, no formal directory of members is available. Thus, the ability of generalization from the findings of this research is limited. This limitation has hampered sociological and psychological studies of AA, as detailed in the literature review section of this dissertation. The pronounced “anonymity” of the organization also limits the generalization scope of this study. Indeed, it was this very unremovable obstacle that guided the author to rely on an autobiographical method.

The second limitation, stemming from the first, is the un-generalizability of autoethnographic information. The findings are, by definition, individual, if systematic “narrations” that help illuminate social realities. However, the singularity of the source limits the gender, race, class, and cultural scope of the study.

Remarkably, subjective methods may be privileged in the study of an organization like AA. For example the subtle decoupling of “sobriety” and end of addiction that is one of the principal convictions of AA can only be explored by qualitative or autoethnographic methods.

#### FUTURE RESEARCH

A number of mainstream studies of AA have focused on such issues as treatment effectiveness. There is a need for additional research that attempts to better understand the lived experience of participants in AA is needed. Heretofore, much of the research on AA has been quantitative in nature and remains relatively limited. There is, thus, a need for continued social science research as well as for additional, well-designed qualitative studies that explore effectively the meaning of AA for the participants.

Further, it is essential for research to explore the lived experiences of members from other backgrounds. Research is needed to explore the experience of women, and people from different age groups, and members of racial and ethnic minorities. Cross-national research on AA members would also be useful.

Research could profitably employ additional qualitative techniques such as narrative analysis. A detailed analysis of the experiences of diverse members could shed light on additional aspects of the AA experience as perceived by members. Research may also benefit from informal qualitative interviews as well as systematic content analyses of books or other publications produced by members.

Additionally, future research may wish to examine the utility of typologies of members in research on AA. Given the fact that Durkheim’s definition keeps the possibility of studying functional

equivalents of reason open, I hope in the future, other collective phenomena will be studied in the manner I have studied AA as a "Religion In Deed." I also anticipate that the addiction literature will be guided by this study's focus on AA.

Hitherto, the sociological dimension of addiction has been overshadowed, not only by the above-mentioned quantitative inquiries within sociology but by the chemical and psychological approaches originating in other disciplines. AA's relative success with alcohol addiction, based on a sociological model (interaction and service-intensive approach) has seldom been explored. Future research can benefit from this perspective.

## Chapter IX

### EPILOGUE

I close by restating my acceptance of total failure upon which AA is built. It reaffirms the power of helping others and being part of society. AA exists because for me and millions of others like me, there was no other way to stop the pain. AA is predicated on failure. Without honest and humble acceptance of that reality the first two founders of AA would have never joined together.

I, too, have to remember that I am, forever, flawed. After many years I may have finally understood what I have read and heard thousands of times. During regular AA sessions, right after the reiteration of the 12 steps, the attendants are advised:

Do not be discouraged. No one among us has been able to maintain anything like perfect adherence to these principles. We are not saints. The point is, that we are willing to grow along spiritual lines. The principles we have set down are guides to progress. We claim spiritual progress rather than spiritual perfection.” (AA 1976:60)

This passage has a particular resonance for me. I am certainly not anywhere near perfect adherence, but I believe I am making progress towards being able to live life on life’s terms and be happy with the reality that is available to me. I may not be honest enough to always see the actuality of my reality, but I am more often able to accept what is happening as truth. Even when I do not like the results I do not (as often) try to rationalize and create a new, more enhanced version of reality that better meets my personal requirements.

AA’s only requirement is the realization that “I” am the only problem, and I am unable to fix this problem. In order to survive, I must accept full responsibility and, at the same time, surrender myself to the higher power. I need to join a society of fellow sufferers brought together by their common failure, embodied in the cypher named alcohol. Identifying who and what I am and surrendering that person to the higher power and dedicating it to the service of others is very simple to perceive but extremely hard

to practice. It is “Religion in deed” not in name. Most religions promise an otherworldly salvation but they all promise serenity in this world as well. AA suffices to the latter.

As mentioned before, acceptance of a universal power and service to others are the way the philosopher Karl Jaspers (Jaspers 1957) found a common creed among the four “paradigmatic individuals:” Jesus, Socrates, Buddha, and Confucius. The above prophets and sages all taught the principles of honesty, humility and service to others as conditions of felicity and/or spiritual fulfillment. I have argued AA is based on the same principles.

Above all, the AA alcoholic is sustained by the support from higher power. For me, that realization is born of over 14,000 one-day-at-a-time reprieves. This is my variety of religious experience, as William James would have put it.

As I reach the concluding passages of my dissertation I would like to return to the most sociological aspect of AA and my decades-long association with it: connection to fellow AA members and service to others. The principles set down in the Big Book begin with the concept that whenever anyone reaches out for help, I want the hand of AA to be there, and I am responsible for that (AA 1976). I try to fulfill that promise in my life. Despite my many flaws, I continue to realize the true meaning of such service. Let me illustrate (and conclude) with a personal anecdote.

My sponsor once told me my happiness in life, my sobriety, was based on my service to others. He told me that each day I must do three things for someone else that adds to their life, and they must never know I had done anything for them. If they found out I had done this for them it did not count, and I must do something for someone else that they were unaware of. I did this for a long time, not perfectly, and not always willingly, but I did it and it allowed me to experience, if not always happiness, at least hope. I discovered that the things I did for others were not even about them; my deeds were for me.

I received and still receive enormous benefits from helping others. One time when I was in what I considered a bad financial situation I went to my sponsor, Chuck, for help. I explained the problem to him and he asked me, who have you tried to help today? I told him no one because I was working on solving this problem. He laughed and told me you have already admitted you are the only problem you have, and you know you cannot fix that problem. But we have been shown that by helping others we receive what we need (Chuck, pers. comm). We talked about how I could help, and he suggested I go to the hospital drunk ward and see if they had a really sick person who I could help.

This was before alcoholic addiction was taken over by professionals. It has been a long time since a drunk ward will let an AA alcoholic talk to a patient unsupervised. Anyway, I went to the hospital and asked a nurse if they had someone who needed me. The nurse said they had one, and I was welcome to talk to him if I wanted to. I was taken back into the ward and there was a small old man, probably younger than I am right now but he seemed and looked very old. I am pretty sure he was white although his skin was as yellow as a lemon and his eyes looked orange; his liver was almost completely destroyed by cirrhosis, I was told later. I told him my story, which is, that I was an alcoholic and what it was like, what happened, and what it was like now. I told him it was my experience that he would never have to drink again if he did not want to. I also said I would be glad to share how this miracle had happened for me and I would be pleased to help him find the same relief. He thanked me for sharing with him, told me he thought we had a wonderful program and assured me if he ever felt he needed us he would immediately contact me. All I could think to say was thank you and I left.

I went back to my sponsor and told him about my experiences with the hospital and asked what I had done wrong and asked why it did not work? My sponsor laughed and told me I was an arrogant ass. He said, did you think you could fix him? Because we have already admitted we cannot fix him, ourselves, or anyone else for that matter. I remember screaming at him, if I can't help him then why did I bother trying? Chuck laughed at me again and said, "Well, by trying to help him you are no longer

worried about your finances” (Chuck, pers. comm). And he was right, the financial issues that had seemed so important no longer mattered, they lacked any real importance. The problem was not solved, it just disappeared as a problem, and my life continued to go on as a small part of a much more powerful whole. I know that whenever I lose contact with that greater whole (others, higher power) I lose what I require to be content. I am the only problem I have.

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